

Zimbabwe: The Sanctions of No Sanctions

Written by Stephen Chan

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STEPHEN CHAN, JUL 25 2012

The announcement in the second part of July that Europe would move to suspend most sanctions against Zimbabwe, provided a constitutional referendum was held with credible freeness and fairness, had been discussed and trailed for a long time. For the past two years, diplomatic and foreign policy personnel within Whitehall and Brussels had urged their suspension. Ambassadors of the United Kingdom to Zimbabwe had done likewise. Even junior Ministers in Whitehall had been persuaded of this change in policy and, certainly, the Movement for Democratic Change under Morgan Tsvangirai had long pointed out that sanctions simply hardened the resolve of Robert Mugabe's inner circle and gave them an excuse not to cooperate fully within the coalition government.

In Britain, Zimbabwe is an issue with domestic as well as foreign policy implications. The 'kith and kin' dimension – family linkages between the white populations of the two countries – has meant that foreign policy could not easily, by itself, dictate ways forward. The demonization of Robert Mugabe, and the personalisation of the Zimbabwean issue so that it seemed at times a campaign against him, reflected a public dimension in the UK that saw Zimbabwe as a stark case with a banally evil leadership. For many years since the farm invasions in 2000, UK policy towards Zimbabwe has been without great nuance. This has greatly frustrated SADC (Southern African Development Community) diplomatic efforts and certainly frustrated Britain's own diplomats.

The sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe had broad European support. The proposal to suspend or ameliorate them met German as well as British governmental opposition. Behind the scenes, British ministers would use German opposition as an excuse, although Germany would have softened its stance much earlier had the British led the way. That it has now done so is simply a belated expression that sanctions never worked and in fact made the situation worse.

They were never general sanctions as such. They were targeted against the free movement of the Zimbabwean political elite around Mugabe, and against the free movement of their capital. But they were hugely symbolic. What did massive damage to the Zimbabwean economy was the accompanying loss of global confidence in Zimbabwe. Developmental assistance, apart from humanitarian aid, dried up from both Europe and the United States. Most of all, investment flows were dramatically reduced. Without its former liquidity lines the damage Mugabe's government did to its own domestic economic base was amplified. There is a case to be made that there were two key actors in the degeneration of the Zimbabwean economy: Mugabe and ZANU-PF certainly; but Western withdrawal of capital and investment was a key nail in the coffin ZANU-PF laboriously crafted.

In July, the British finally moved within a species of coordinated diplomacy. They had won a European agreement. On the day a junior minister spoke in Parliament, in broad terms of what was to come, the Minister for Africa was touring SADC and alerting governments. SADC in turn had been nursing itself towards a far more robust posture on Zimbabwe. The referendum on the constitution had to be held. The election had to follow. That election had to be freer and fairer by a significant margin than its predecessor – although all actors, from Britain to South Africa, may be found using the term 'credible' more than 'free and fair'. There is a world of difference. But SADC had definitely changed: a democratically elected government in Zambia, the ascent to the presidency in Malawi of Joyce Banda with her clearly pro-Western views, and the sense within Jacob Zuma's South Africa that the running sore of Zimbabwe had to be staunch, all coincided at this moment of diplomatic orchestration.

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The announcement of a suspension of sanctions pending a credibly free and fair referendum was the announcement of a very low bar to cross. No one in Zimbabwe disputes the shape and content of the proposed constitution. It is essentially based on the Kariba draft agreed by the major parties some years ago. Everything else since then has been charade rather than proper consultation on Zimbabwe's constitutional future. There is no reason to cheat in a referendum on an already agreed constitution.

The real action lies in what is already going on behind the scenes. The proposed suspension of sanctions is that: a suspension. It will not be universal. Those who form the tight circle around Mugabe, and Mugabe himself, will still be under sanction. All this really means is that they cannot visit Europe, but the symbolism invested in what is a complex 'you are not welcome here' policy is still significant. Mugabe's circle will bridle at this, but the clandestine discussions have begun nonetheless over who will be still targeted and who will not. As with all major diplomatic breakthroughs, a heavy element of cynicism is the accompaniment.

Will investment return as a result of suspension? In a real way, it already has. The Europeans are, in a sense, simply paving the way to allow themselves to catch up. Non-European investment, the Chinese being a conspicuous example, has already meant some discernible return of low-level but measurable vibrancy in the Zimbabwean economy. That there are huge economic opportunities in the rebuilding of Zimbabwe has long been known. There is likely to be an unholy rush back to a country very recently excoriated in almost ritualistic terms.

This will not be accompanied by imagination in foreign policy. No one knows how confident they should feel about the possibility of a Tsvangirai presidency after 'credibly free and fair' elections. No one knows how to measure 'credible' anyway. Everyone is resigning themselves to the 'desirability' of a coalition government after the elections in which the best of both sides go forward together – although, again desirably, the coalition should in Western minds be led by Morgan Tsvangirai rather than Robert Mugabe. There will be a lot of rebuilding needed of something as simple as political good-will within Zimbabwe. Without it, progress will be scant. It is not a case that democracy, by itself, solves everything. As sanctions themselves solved nothing. Now they will pretty certainly fade away dramatically by the end of 2012, leaving the way open for elections in the first part of 2013.

Whether sanctions in the modern world, with that world's almost unstoppable inter-penetrations in a complex global society with many actors and many points of entry, can ever work is a huge question. Whether against Burma or Iran, they seem to reinforce the determination of the very regimes they are designed to weaken. Certainly, ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe remained fiercely determined throughout it all. And, of course, the entire episode raises the simple but important question: can Europe and the West ever learn to see Africa in complex terms? Or will it always be a question of the evil dictator, of broad euphemisms like 'the rogue state', and of name-calling that takes the place of policy? There will be much to learn from the Zimbabwean episode as reflection becomes possible in a future in which, in any case, Robert Mugabe will die. His legacy will not necessarily die. His party supported him throughout. But the simplification of European foreign policy towards the rest of the world had better change.

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Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair

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