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## **Beyond Zimbabwe: the African Discourse on Dictatorship and Democracy**

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The recent failure to depose long-time Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe from power via the ballot box has been the subject of much discussion among African policy-makers, politicians and analysts. Attitudes regarding Mugabe himself were often ambivalent, reflecting both his past as an admired anti-colonial fighter who led Rhodesia to independence and his more recent incarnation as one of Africa's worst dictators. Through a series of reforms that were aimed at ending the monopoly of European farmers and Africanizing the Zimbabwean economy, Mugabe created utter economic and social chaos, including the highest inflation rate in the world, estimated at 2.2 million percent and an unemployment rate of over 80%. Yet, beyond the particular debate over Mugabe's personality and deeds, the lively African discourse on the events in Zimbabwe has brought to the fore a variety of views regarding larger issues related to democracy, democratization and the right of outside actors to interfere in the internal affairs of African states.

The wave of democratization that washed over Africa in the beginning of the 1990s was accompanied by the hope that the era of African great dictators (big men), such as Milton Obote and Idi Amin and from Uganda, Mengistu Haile Mariam from Ethiopia and Mobuto Sese Seko from Zaire, was over. Most of these hopes dissipated, following the establishment of various un-democratic regimes. Still, it seems that the dictatorship mode of governance and accompanying vocabulary had lost its legitimacy by the beginning of the 21st century. The establishment of the African Union in 2002, which replaced the former Organization of African Unity, generated hope that a new code of ethics regarding the meaning of 'right' and 'wrong' in African politics and governance would emerge. In this context, it is interesting to examine the different reactions to Mugabe's initial promise to leave politics if he was to lose the elections, followed by his insistence that

"only God" could remove him from his office after it became clear that he had indeed lost the March 29, 2008 elections.

More than two years earlier, the African Union's Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights had issued unprecedented criticism about the growing evidences of human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. The commission found the Zimbabwean President to be violating the African Union's charter and urged Mugabe to allow the entrance of an AU delegation to his country in order to investigate these abuses. Moreover, this call was not a solitary AU act against anti-democratic behaviors of African regimes during its first years of inception. AU forces were involved in a number of cases of intra-state conflict and had broken new ground in 2003 by actively supporting the replacement of what was deemed to be an illegitimate regime, in Burundi.

Concurrently, the debate over the criteria for defining the legitimacy of national regimes expanded, involving both regional organizations, such as the nine-member SADC (Southern African Development Community), and in academic circles. For example, Hussein Solomon from the Center for International Political Studies (CIPS) at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, emphasized the need to promote common values within the SADC regarding the crisis in Zimbabwe. Laurence Caromba, another CIPS researcher, even recommended a direct military intervention in Zimbabwe. Pointing to previous cases of military intervention in order to depose illegitimate regimes, such as the SADC's intervention in Lesotho in 1998 or the AU deployment to Anjouan, an island in the Comoros, in March 2008, he claimed that in the Zimbabwean case, there is a need to replace the traditional concept of "humanitarian intervention" with the concept of "legal government intervention". The illegality of Mugabe's government, he said, created legitimate grounds for a military intervention in Zimbabwe, one which would also be in the interest of South African to lead, through the SADC.

In light of this evolving discourse, it was perhaps reasonable to expect that the reaction in Africa to Mugabe's crackdown against his opponents in order to cling to power would be more decisive. The first round of the March elections had resulted in the main opposition candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), officially receiving 47.9% of the vote, while Mugabe, of the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), received 43.2%, forcing a runoff. Following a major campaign of violence and intimidation against both him and his supporters, Tsvangirai withdrew from the second round a week before the June 27, 2008 voting date, and Mugabe coasted to an easy victory. A day earlier, the *AllAfrica* columnist Faten Aggad had called upon the African Union to suspend Zimbabwe from membership, impose sanctions against it

and require new elections. However, the AU was both unwilling and unable to take any substantial steps to punish Mugabe for his actions. Although the AU's own election observers had concluded that the June vote "fell short" of the organization's standards, the 11th AU Summit Conference, held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt just a few days later, failed even to express displeasure with Mugabe's participation. What were the reasons for African leaders' inaction?

One possible explanation is the fear of some African leaders that clear-cut condemnation of Mugabe's behavior would result in the opening of a Pandora's box of similar criticism of their own anti-democratic conduct. Some AU "strongmen", such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Gabon's Omar Bongo, would undoubtedly reject the notion of AU intervention in their own countries' affairs. Another explanation centers on the mythological aura surrounding Mugabe's personality, stemming from his standing as an uncompromising freedom fighter against colonialism who had spent many years in prison and in exile. As such, he is widely viewed as the last remnant of the forefathers of independent Africa, and as such is at least partly shielded from criticism.

Nonetheless, recent developments also demonstrate that the newly emerging critical discourse regarding the right to intervene in cases of illegitimate actions by African regimes has not fallen on entirely deaf ears. In spite of the inability of the AU to condemn Mugabe, some of its prominent leaders, such as Kenya's Prime Minister Raila Odinga, Sierra Leone's President Ernest Koroma, Zambia's President Levy Mwanawasa, and Ghanaian President John Kuffour were openly critical of the AU's lack of firmness. For example, Kenya's Prime Minister Odinga declared: "They should suspend him and send peace forces to Zimbabwe to ensure free and fair elections." However, in light of South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki's unwillingness to take the lead among southern African states, the fashioning of a regional security regime which would include the forcible removal of Mugabe is a non-option.

In the aftermath of the AU summit, Mbeki agreed to mediate between Mugabe and Tsvangirai for the purpose of forming a unity government. Although the road to genuine cooperation between these bitter rivals is full of potential pitfalls, and although Mbeki's own credibility may be seriously tainted by his long-standing close relationship with Mugabe, it seems that the Mbeki initiative, based on quiet diplomacy, is currently the only hope for eventually easing Mugabe from power. As such, it could be concluded that although the current African discourse concerning dictatorship and democracy contains a far greater diversity of views than in past decades, the road to its effective adoption and implementation in the political climate of

contemporary Africa is still an extremely long one.

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