

Zimbabwe & the Commonwealth: a brief historical overview

Upon Zimbabwe's withdrawal the Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Secretary General of the Commonwealth made the following statement:

“It is disappointing that the Government of Zimbabwe has taken this step. All members will be saddened by it. I hope that Zimbabwe will wish to return in due course, as have other members in the past. In line with the CHOGM statement on Zimbabwe earlier this week, members of the Commonwealth will continue to seek to engage Zimbabwe to promote national reconciliation and facilitate its return to the Commonwealth.”

Meanwhile in the light of Zimbabwe's withdrawal, Zimbabwe becomes a non-member state and is no longer eligible to receive Commonwealth assistance or to attend Commonwealth meetings. Commonwealth organisations should treat Zimbabwe as a non member state.”¹

Relations Prior to Independence

In 1965 Ian Smith, Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, made his Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Since 1923 Southern Rhodesia had been a so-called self-governing colony of Britain and as the Commonwealth evolved Southern Rhodesia fell under its remit but was not a full member in its own right. The international community (including South Africa) did not recognise the UDI since Southern Rhodesia was still legally a British responsibility, and in any case most countries did not believe the UDI to be representative of the views of the majority black population.

The UDI changed the course of Zimbabwe's history and had a lasting impact on the future of Zimbabwean politics. The main black nationalist parties, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), formed National liberation movements, which were recognised by international organisations including the Commonwealth. A bloody civil war ensued culminating in the Lancaster House Conference of 1979 and the drafting of the Lancaster House Constitution. This sought to facilitate democracy and contained specific guarantees safeguarding human rights and the redistribution of land.

Zimbabwe achieved its independence in 1980 following elections in which Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party was elected to power. On independence Zimbabwe became a member of the Commonwealth.

¹ Commonwealth News Release 03/86 12 December 2003

³ Abuja Agreement on Zimbabwe, Abuja 2001

Relations prior to Zimbabwe's withdrawal

The Lancaster House Constitution is now the subject of intense debate within civil society and between Zimbabwe's political parties – the outcome of which was the establishment of a constitutional reform commission of 350 members, in April 1999 and a referendum for a new constitution, in 2000, in which turnout was only 26 per cent.

The Referendum was lost by Zimbabwe's ruling party, the ZANU-PF and soon after farms were invaded by the veterans of Zimbabwe's independence struggle. The government did not move to prevent the invasions or the violence that ensued. Initial expectations were that the government's support for the invasions would end after the June 2000 Parliamentary Elections. However, government support continued and was coupled with the growing suppression of government opposition. The Government refused to compensate farmers who were losing their farms to the land invasions arguing that under the Lancaster House agreement the United Kingdom was under obligation to compensate. The 1998 International Donors Conference on Land Reform and Resettlement did little to resolve the dispute. At the Conference, donors, including the United Kingdom, stated that they were willing to support the proposed programme of land reform however, the programme embarked upon by the Zimbabwean government was inconsistent with that agreed at the Conference. The feeling among the international community was that it was better to wait and deal with a new leader because of the Zimbabwean government's actions.

In September 2001 a Zimbabwe delegation met members of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) in Abjua. Under an agreement³ the Zimbabwean Government was obliged to stop the violence on farms, prevent the invasion of further farms, stop the suppression of opposition and uphold human rights. Yet the violence persisted and the United Kingdom in turn refused to fulfil its renewed obligations to compensate farmers. It was in this environment that the 2002 Presidential Elections were held.

A Commonwealth Observer Mission reported that whilst the actual polling had been peaceful and the secrecy of the ballot assured, the elections were marred by the violence that had occurred in the run up to the elections⁴. The report expressed concern over the activities of paramilitary youth groups and accused the government of a systematic campaign of violence against known or perceived supporters of the opposition, particularly those of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the main opposition party. In paragraph 15, the report concludes that *'the elections did not adequately allow for a free expression of will by the electors'* and were in violation of fundamental Commonwealth values and principles, most notably those of the 1991 Harare Declaration

Commonwealth heads of government mandated a 'troika' of comprising the leaders of South Africa, Nigeria and Australia to act upon the Observer's report. On receipt of the report the Troika took the decision to suspend Zimbabwe from the Councils of the Commonwealth for one year pending the curbing of politically motivated violence, restoration of law and order and the holding of free and fair elections. The Troika's determinations also emphasised the Commonwealth's undertaking to assist Zimbabwe with its land reform programme and to promote national reconciliation particularly between the MDC and ZANU-PF.

⁴ Paragraph 7 of the Observer Mission's Preliminary Report

Talks between the Commonwealth and the government of Zimbabwe continued throughout 2002/2003. Robert Mugabe's attempts to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja in December 2003 were unsuccessful. Given the heated debate surrounding the Zimbabwe issue, the current Chair of the Commonwealth, President Obasanjo of Nigeria with the support of the Heads of Government, established a Group of Six, chaired by President Patterson of Jamaica. The group was mandated to decide upon appropriate action and the Group's decision to continue Zimbabwe's suspension from the Councils of the Commonwealth led to Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth on the 7th December 2003.