

Zimbabwe - Don't Give Up Now



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The Archbishop of York today writes in The Times about the situation in Zimbabwe, and the British Government's decision to relax sanctions against the Mugabe regime. His article follows....

On Sunday 9th December 2007, I took off my clerical collar and cut it up during an interview on the Andrew Marr Show on BBC1. I said I would not wear it again until Robert Mugabe had ceased to be in power in Zimbabwe.

I made this prophetic statement as Robert Mugabe had slowly but surely cut up the identity of the Zimbabwean people into tiny pieces.

It is fair to say that I did not expect still to be collarless five years on. I'm even asked occasionally why I have forgotten to wear one – but my answer remains that this corrupt and oppressive regime has simply been allowed to carry on for too long.

Whilst the British Government seem to be considering easing some sanctions against Mr Mugabe and his personal allies, I am not convinced that the time has come to weaken international opposition to the President of Zimbabwe's irresponsible, undemocratic, lawless, and at times brutal regime. I certainly won't be placing an order for a new clerical collar at Wippells just yet.

We cannot allow Robert Mugabe off the hook. When I cut up my clerical collar, I said I would not put it on again until Mr Mugabe had gone from office – we need to stand in solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe and not forget the abuses and exploitation they have suffered at the hands of that administration.

The reason given by Her Majesty's Government for this 'step change' in relations with Zimbabwe is the work going in to drafting a new constitution for that country. The recent meeting of European Union foreign ministers, which agreed to lift these restrictions on Mr Mugabe's colleagues, have made this decision dependent only upon whether a 'credible' referendum is held on the new constitution. Perhaps if they had read the draft constitution they might have taken a different view.

For example, amongst its many more reasonable provisions, the draft constitution cancels the right of Zimbabweans to appeal to a supreme legal body to protect their fundamental rights.

I am advised that, at this point, Zimbabwe's draft constitution has been signed off by both the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and President Robert Mugabe's ZANU PF.

Across the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region people are standing up for their rights, and for the freedom to make their countries and communities prosperous and successful.

Yet too often, they are undermined by governments and laws that attack the very foundations of the rule of law. Land clearances, broken contracts, bribery, extortion, dispossession and oppression are rife.

There is only one institution in Southern Africa that has the power to respond. The SADC Tribunal is the only place where individuals, companies and groups can take their governments to an independent court. The SADC's regional body began meeting yesterday and senior officials will be travelling to Harare in the next two weeks to assess the country's political progress following announcement of the draft constitution. Completion of Zimbabwe's draft constitution and other key developments in preparing for elections will come under scrutiny this week when the group resumes assessment of political improvements which include media reform.

Last year, following pressure from Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, the Tribunal was suspended then dissolved by the SADC Heads of State. This move has denied SADC citizens access to justice and the protection of human rights when legal systems in their own countries fail. By dissolving the SADC Tribunal, the leaders of these nations have colluded with Mr Mugabe in his denial of justice to the citizens of Zimbabwe.

It is now time for all communities and organisations within the Southern African region to stand together as one to petition their Heads of State to reinstate and strengthen the mandate of the SADC Tribunal regional court.

Furthermore, Zimbabwe's new draft constitution also rules out any compensation from the Zimbabwe Government for land that has been taken by the government from its legal owner, stating: "no compensation is payable in respect of its acquisition".

It directly prevents anyone applying to a court regarding compensation for land: "no person may apply to a court for the determination of any question relating to compensation".

The draft says that land can be acquired simply by a notice in the gazette: "whereupon the land vests in the state with full title with effect from the date of the publication of the notice".

Most alarmingly of all, it says in section 4.29(3)c that discrimination is now legal: "the acquisition may not be challenged on the grounds it was discriminatory".

Here, for the first time since apartheid was abolished in South Africa, we see a blatantly racist and tribalistic clause added to what may become the new constitution of Zimbabwe. Farmers and farm workers have much to fear from this move.

Douglas Mwonozora, spokesman for Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change, has welcomed the move because take-overs in the future will now be able to be done 'legally'! It would be tragic for Southern Africa if Mugabe's legacy to the region is a constitution which not only permits but actively promotes discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity.

The SADC states stood together successfully to defeat apartheid in South Africa. They must now stand together to stop human rights abuses and bring an end to government-sponsored violence within member states which has led to deaths, shocking injuries and mass scale displacements.

Mr Mugabe's regime has been propped up these past three years due to the discovery of a huge diamond deposit. It is being exploited at the expense of the ordinary citizens of the country. Those diamonds are blood diamonds.

What we need to see is justice and transformation for the ordinary people of Zimbabwe – the farmers and the workers – we owe them too much to give up now.

I do hope to wear my collar again before too long, but it would be best if this is because free and fair elections have taken place in Zimbabwe, legally and peacefully removing from office the President who is responsible for so much violence and destruction.

The international community cannot afford to turn its back on the people of Zimbabwe in their hour of need.

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