

# How Zimbabwe lost at the UK-Africa Summit

Recently, the UK-Africa investment summit was held in London.

For British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the event was of huge importance. The summit came a month after Johnson's party had garnered an emphatic victory over Jeremy Corbyn who fronted Labour. The mere fact that the UK-Africa Summit came soon after the historic British election depicts an attempt by Britain to rebrand its diplomacy outside the canons of the Commonwealth, which is a nostalgic association of former British Colonies.

In a bid to characterise relations beyond the Empire and its "territories", the UK-Africa Summit pulled a masterstroke narrative about "creating lasting partnerships that will deliver more investment, jobs and growth to Africa."

In the end the focus on partnerships sought to eclipse the West's efforts towards pumping aid across Africa to a new business driven dispensation. While aid still trickles into Africa in all manner, there is an attempt to rebrand the diplomatic process as a win-win interaction between sovereign states unbound to the shackles of the colonial past and neo-colonial realities! Whichever way, however, the fate of African countries is still tied to receiving all manner of alms, just like the biblical story of the blind man at the Beautiful Gate, in the Book of Acts. Unlike the blind man who was instructed to get up and walk, African states are continuously tied to all manner of servitude. If it is not direct aid, then it is about getting bad deals from the numerous multilateral forums which African leaders attend at any given opportunity!

With British media and their experts having hyped up the UK-

Africa Summit, there was an attempt to locate the diplomatic overtures as part of a broader post-Brexit strategy to reach out to non-traditional European partners! That is the dilemma which the continent faces. Unlike China's engagement with African countries, Western overtures have largely been motivated by the need to "weaken" Beijing's power or, in the case of the British, to chart a new trajectory with a continent widely regarded as insignificant in global trade and commerce, especially by Western countries!

As the UK-Africa Summit went on, there was pandemonium about a Libyan Conference, held in Berlin, with various European leaders and of course the African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat in attendance. The presence of Mahamat was needed to legitimise a conference seeking to chart the path of a country whose slain leader was removed from power in a brazen Western operation!

The mere mention of a Libya Conference being held yonder in Germany conjured up the infamous Berlin Conference on Africa in 1884/5 in which European states carved the continent to their whims! In the end both the UK-Africa Summit and the Libyan Conference shaped the tone for competing political narratives!

As a Zimbabwean, it was the UK-Africa Summit which generated greater attention and mattered more to me, especially in view of Zimbabwe's foreign policy goals under the presidency of Emmerson Mnangagwa. Upon coming to power on the back of a military coup d'état in 2017, President Mnangagwa pronounced a foreign policy of "engaging and re-engaging." In the quest to "engage", Mnangagwa sought to deepen ties with nations which Zimbabwe had enjoyed cordial relations with. These included states within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), African Union (AU) and other notable "friends" such as China and Russia. Much focus was however on the "re-engagement" programme which was targeted primarily at the UK and its Western allies who had imposed sanctions on Harare

over the years.

While the re-engagement exercise was not new, having been conducted even during the Government of National Unity (GNU) between 2009-2013 and afterwards in various futile trips to Western capitals, it was however Emmerson Mnangagwa's call which became fundamentally important in view of the demise of Robert Mugabe! Britain definitely wanted to see Mugabe's back but it was not anticipated that his successor would find the going tough. After all he had said he is as "soft as wool" and had hit the right cords when he spoke about his reform agenda. The British were not worried about his lack of charisma, unlike his predecessor. They saw a pragmatic leader who would steer Zimbabwe's developmental path agenda. Even Zimbabweans set aside Mnangagwa's past omissions for once in 2017.

Despite the noise in his re-engagement scheme, the British elected to snub Zimbabwe at their first UK-Africa summit. Following the "shut-out" from the British, Zimbabwe's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which is led by SB Moyo, who seized the airwaves during the ouster of Robert Mugabe, quickly issued a defiant statement.

The statement read: "The UK is a sovereign country which can determine who can attend any of its business events.

"The Ministry wishes to place on record that since the advent of the Second Republic, Zimbabwe-UK relations remain cordial and high-level exchange visits characterise this bilateral relationship.

"One event, therefore, cannot justifiably be a barometer of relations between Harare and London."

Without doubt, Zimbabwe had reverted to its default mode, but without the usual acerbic tone which became synonymous with Robert Mugabe. Surely the British had warmed up to Zimbabwe and everything was going on well. The British motivations in Harare were driven by a pragmatic realisation that any change

in Zimbabwe was likely to be within the ruling party and not the opposition, which has tried to seize power unsuccessfully for the past twenty years! The policy direction of the British, was without doubt an anti-climax point in the relationship between the two countries. Worse, Mnangagwa's "Open for Business" mantra was not given a platform for a hard-sell in London!

While some narratives suggested that the whole forum was a non-event, it is incisive to go beyond such assertions, which are quite misleading. Even with a paltry 15 heads of state attending the event, unlike the "full house" which is synonymous with Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and other such events, it remains disingenuous for Zimbabwe to belittle the event all together. For long, European relations with Africa have largely been targeted towards former colonies. This applies largely for the British and the French. This is the mistake which the West keeps on making in its attempt to engage with Africa, largely out of colonially-built relationships!

We are a country well known for hopping the plane at every given opportunity and having the biggest delegations as well! Zimbabwe's absence at the UK-Africa Summit cannot be conveniently explained away by pointing to other hugely successful fixtures such as the FOCAC. Equally it is self-defeating to frame a victory for Harare on the basis of old colonial and neo-colonial considerations. Zimbabwe cannot suddenly dismiss the platform as a non-event by resorting to the British colonial past and post-independent interventions to exert influences on sovereign African states. These arguments are now tired and weakened by the pragmatic realities of our time.

### **Post-colonial contradictions**

Below, I will explain how Zimbabwe lost out from the event, basing on Zimbabwe's post-independent experiences and the

contradictions which have ensued in the country in the way Robert Mugabe and later on Emmerson Mnangagwa have dealt with the British. For Robert Mugabe it took some twenty years after independence before the ensuing sour relations with Britain took a toll. Mnangagwa on the other hand has only been in power for some two years and now at odds with the Britain!

The British position on Mnangagwa has to be understood by locating Zimbabwe's political circumstances before and after independence. At independence in 1980, the then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe was a darling of the West. He preached reconciliation and even won accolades for his statesmanlike gesture across Western capitals. With the UK's vested interests intact, everything was flowing smoothly, even though a genocide had taken place in the 80's. Not that it was a British matter. But for the typical sermonizing on democracy and human rights, any typical Western country would have raised the alarm on the brutal acts of violence. In any case, African nations should institute democratic values as part of a self-expression of a sovereign state. They should not continue to blame the West for meddling in their internal problems which could have been averted in the first place. In the Zimbabwean scenario, however, the British were politically duplicitous, as they only went overboard insisting on democracy and human rights after Zimbabwe carried its land reform exercise in 1999. While Western countries saw the agrarian exercise as a threat to the interests of the white commercial farmers, Robert Mugabe insisted that the drive sought to reassert the black empowerment agenda in light of the aims of the liberation struggle.

Despite the fact that it is convenient to point the finger of blame at Zanu PF for its political handling of the land question, the British Government acted as a catalyst for the institutionalisation of the land-reform. In an infamous letter dated 5 November 1997, the then Secretary of State Claire Short argued that:

“I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the cost of land purchase in Zimbabwe.”

“We are a new Government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interest. My own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonised not colonisers.”

The Zimbabwean Government was heavily offended by Short's remarks, which were tantamount to a declaration of war. With the then Labour-led Government reneging on the Conservative party's pledge to fund the land reform programme, in terms of the Lancaster House Province, the Zimbabwean Government took Tony Blair and his Labour Party's pronouncements as a policy digression from the one set by Margaret Thatcher. The Zimbabwean Government's disdain for the Labour Party and approval for the Conservatives is largely based on the handling of the land issue. Despite this sentimentality, it is worrisome that a Conservative government elected to shut the door against Zimbabwe, for different reasons.

In the past two years, the British had expressed some optimism in Mnangagwa's leadership just as Zimbabweans had done when they marched on the streets in November 2017. Mnangagwa was seen as a pragmatist needed to solve the political, social and economic problems of Zimbabwe. He was unlike Robert Mugabe whose eloquence and mastery in narrating historical grievances against colonialism were well known. The problem with Robert Mugabe however was that he tended to see a Western hand in all of Zimbabwe's problems. Notwithstanding the tendency to blame Westerners for all of Zimbabwe's problems, Mugabe's powerful anti-imperialism rhetoric however resonated with the bulk of the “global south states” in Africa, Asia and South Africa.

Mugabe therefore overworked his beliefs of colonial intrusion, which had of course been measured in his defiant announcement that “Zimbabwe would never be a colony again.” Yet his bravado became meaningless in view of the bad governance, corruption,

breakdown of the rule of law, disputed elections and violence which affected the cohesion of Zimbabwe especially in the post-land reform period!

Mnangagwa was simply supposed to address the excesses of the Robert Mugabe period. With the UK-Africa Summit having come and gone, it is now clear that at least for now, the change from Robert Mugabe to Emmerson Mnangagwa has not had a profound bearing on British policy towards Harare. In 2002, Zimbabwe pulled out of the Commonwealth which Mugabe argued was an insignificant forum of colonial roots. While Mugabe seemed bullish, there is no doubt that within Zanu PF, there were alternative views in the country. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that soon after attaining power through a military process in 2017, Mnangagwa sought to do all it took for Zimbabwe to re-join the Commonwealth!

Mugabe's derision of the British was further motivated by the rise of China which brought political and economic support to Zimbabwe. This precisely explains why Zimbabwe took every opportunity to call China its "all-time weather friend" in a monolithic foreign policy which was centrally dominated by the Look East Policy (LEP). In preaching the "Open for Business" gospel, Mnangagwa made a liberal grand entrance to engage with every country out there. In his approach, Mnangagwa sought to be a Zimbabwean Deng Xiaoping with a reform agenda. He spoke about reforms glowingly, though falteringly. It was Deng who remarked that "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." Mnangagwa's foreign policy reasoning was therefore based on the need to ensure development, investment and a functioning economy. Concerns of whether the investment was from Britain or China were not pertinent! The British gave ear to this reform agenda, having been bashed at every forum by the eloquent Robert Mugabe, who perceived the West as having an elaborate scheme to effect regime change in Zimbabwe! In departing from Mugabe's politics, Mnangagwa's approach sought a re-alignment based on

practical considerations as opposed to unhelpful political grandstanding.

Mnangagwa has however preached multilateralism but not much traction has been gained from his discourse. The British who supported Mnangagwa's ascendancy and warmed up to him have deserted him. Between 2015 to 2017, the British ambassador Catriona Laing carefully read the country's politics and backed Mnangagwa who was Robert Mugabe's deputy. Unlike other British diplomats who did not hide their disdain for Zanu PF, Laing however became useful even for Mnangagwa's rise and his subsequent endorsement even during the 2018 elections.

It is important to note that the political and diplomatic spheres have immensely changed from two to three decades ago. Fortunately, the snub on Mnangagwa was not read in terms of the olden approaches of a Western "imperialist" nation shutting the door against a typical African visionary! Mnangagwa lacks the vision, charisma and the political dexterity required to be a pain for Western foreign policy objectives! He is not another Robert Mugabe, Thomas Sankara, Patrice Lumumba, Hugo Chavez or even Muammar Gaddafi. He preaches democratic values at every given opportunity, without much success.

In the end, Mnangagwa is dithering at every turn. His "Open for Business" mantra has been oversold without corresponding practical benefits for citizens. Though he promised a new dispensation, Zimbabwe stands confronted with the same old problems which have even worsened. Attempts to unlock investments have been difficult due to a difficult operating environment now exacerbated by frequent power outages. The security condition of the country continues to deteriorate, having a bearing on the peace and security of the country and investment inflow into the country. Zimbabwe continues to be dogged by policy inconsistencies relating to the country's currency challenges. Even the Chinese do not seem eager to invest in Zimbabwe.

The business summit was no doubt a key point for Mnangagwa to sell the image of a new Zimbabwe. But he was denied that opportunity, which depicts British attitudes towards Mnangagwa. At this stage, the British actions cannot be whitewashed by seeking some solidarity with the Chinese. The Chinese deeply revered Robert Mugabe as part of an old generation of African nationalists who established strong ties with the Communist Party of China (CPC). There are a few remnants of this generation in fact! However, those remnants are not in the policy corridors now being defined by the business agenda! In any case, it was easier for the Chinese to expend their solidarity politics on Mugabe in the early 2000's as part of reviving the links of past comradeship. This is now a bygone era, however.

Britain's stance on Zimbabwe, therefore, characterises a continuing complex problem! Harare knows this quite well. Foreign policy mandarins in Zimbabwe keep harping on about re-joining the Commonwealth in 2021. The British have been very clear that this can only come after fulfilling a raft of reforms, including media reforms and security sector reforms. In 2000, it was convenient propaganda to dismiss such conditions on the basis of Western double standards to weaken a sovereign nation. But not anymore. It is prudent for Zimbabwe or any other African country to be in the habit of effecting reforms, first for the benefit of the local citizens as opposed to meeting capital requirements! With the UK-Africa Summit having already come and gone, there is strong evidence of the government's failure at the domestic level, which is now having a negative bearing on the country's foreign policy undertakings! That is the dilemma which confronts Emmerson Mnangagwa.

For Zimbabwe, it is important to have normal relations with all countries. These could be "good" or "bad", "Western" or "Eastern", "democratic" or "authoritarian". Mnangagwa knows this quite well, but finds himself in a difficult position!

This makes his snub at the UK-Africa Summit as a hugely significant event denting his diplomatic undertakings!