

Mbeki's Difficult Zim Mission – Part II

A week ago, I wrote about former South African president Thabo Mbeki's visit to Zimbabwe, on a political dialogue mission, which saw him meeting President Emmerson Mnangagwa, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance leader Nelson Chamisa, members of the Political Actors Dialogue (Polad) and selected civil society leaders.

The article explained Mbeki's herculean task in his efforts to institute talks, especially between Zanu PF and the MDC Alliance. Though having previously scored a historic success in his facilitation of the Government of National Unity (between 2009-2013) involving Zanu PF and the two MDC formations, the article further argued that the MDC Alliance however saw Mbeki as a dishonest broker who is sympathetic to the ruling Zanu PF. Apart from the "Mbeki factor", the article further presented a compendium of local, political, military, social and economic challenges which will potentially inhibit the latest round of talks.

This sequel focuses on the complexity of Mbeki's task, even in the "post-Mugabe era", which was always a Western obsession and fixation especially the period between 2008-2017. Despite his unmatched charisma and brand of politics which found appeal to Zanu PF supporters, there was however an anticipation of Mugabe's exit from the political scene, on account of the three possible scenarios of electoral defeat, military action and death.

While death in office was the most probable, Mugabe was however removed from office in 2017 by a de facto coup d'état which was sanitized as a "military assisted transition", or a "popular democratic expression" organised under Operation Restore Legacy, at the instigation of the Zimbabwe Defence

Forces (ZDF).

Despite being an astute statesman and diplomat renowned and scorned in equal measure for his “quiet diplomacy” or “African solutions to African problems”, especially in application towards Zimbabwe, Mbeki faces a number of challenges in his mission. The first challenge emanates from the fact that Mnangagwa’s Second Republic was established through a coup d’état which was endorsed by a Zanu Pf which was almost vanquished in a heated power struggle. The opposition, led by the MDC also gave its “blessings” to the military action. It is incisive to note that other elements such as Joice Mujuru, formerly the country’s vice president until her unceremonious exit in 2014, following a factional battle, also rubberstamped the decision, along with other stalwarts such as Dumiso Dabengwa. Beyond Zimbabwe, the military action was underwritten by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the AU and sections of the “international community” especially the British and the Chinese. Very few “dissenting” voices clearly stood out in criticism of the action. For once, the lofty talk about democracy was set aside including by the West who wanted to see Mugabe’s back and the East (led by China), who sought another leader in the mould of Mnangagwa, who was venerated as Zimbabwe’s “Deng Xiaoping”, having a reformist agenda for Zimbabwe!

Mugabe’s political demise was a combination of age and toxic politics within Zanu PF, which was now dominated by a coterie of G40 elements fronted by his eccentric wife Grace and her acolytes Professor Jonathan Moyo and Saviour Kasukuwere. This group was motivated in instituting “generational renewal” and at the same time expunging the party from the “clutches” of war veterans who had sided with Mnangagwa in the heated succession matrix. It is contradictory that the G40’s demographic renewal mission sought to infuse the party with younger cadres while at the same time coalescing on a nonagenarian (Robert Mugabe), who was nonetheless a kingly

figure in the country's politics and that of Africa in general.

This ambitious lot organised a well-orchestrated campaign leading to the firing of Emmerson Mnangagwa who was then vice president, before his epiphanic return to the country as a "president in waiting", after the military had rolled tanks with starry-eyed Zimbabweans marching to the streets in unheralded fashion in the country's history. In the end, a veneer of legality was accorded to the military putsch which had confounded SADC, the African Union (AU) and the entire world at large given its degree of precision and seamlessness if compared to other bloody situations across the continent. Even the AU had to backtrack from its utter rejections of coups as a method of taking over power. The army's involvement brazenly buttressed the view that the security element is the chief determinant in deciding the country's political stakes. While Mbeki will be engaging with the political actors with a civilian face, his efforts are however likely to be futile given the army's brazen role to Zimbabwe's politics especially since 2000.

When Mugabe was removed, one thing was clear. Zimbabwe had entered into a mutually hurting stalemate which affected all Zimbabweans and required a uniting beyond the political divide, race and even tribe. Politically, Zimbabwe's parties had begun a motion to institute an impeachment process before Mugabe's "resignation" on 21 November 2017 which was received with wild joy in the capital. While the seeds of unity were sown in Mugabe's removal, Zanu PF however failed to utilise this momentous opportunity in the call for initiating a dialogue with the opposition. Despite the background talks between Zanu Pf and the MDC, which was supported by Zimbabweans who had warmed up to the idea of another looming political settlement to save the country, nothing materialised, leading to another round of political, social and economic quagmire.

Even though Mnangagwa emergence bore a semblance to the conversion of Biblical Saul to Paul, Mnangagwa preached reform and a new dispensation of social and economic gains to be reasserted under his presidency. True to his word, Zimbabwe had enjoyed a free environment leading to the holding of elections on 31 July 2018. However, few days before the elections, it became clear that the political environment had become charged, signalling the impending political contest between the state and citizens in the likely event of another electoral dispute.

Battle lines were drawn. Chamisa was upbeat about his looming victory, while Mnangagwa expected a routine victory, typical of liberation parties in the region. On 1 August 2018, protesting youths took to the streets calling for the immediate release of election results, claiming that a "rigging process" was underway to defy Chamisa's perceived "win". Things took a heated turn, with security forces opening gunfire, leading to the deaths of six people and various degrees of injury (about thirty-five people according to official figures). Despite the establishment a Commission of Inquiry (in August 2018) to look into the post-election violence chaired by a former South African president Kgalema Motlanthe, the dye had been cast. Despite the Commission's recommendations for accountability in respect of alleged perpetrators and making sure that the events of 1 August were not repeated, the political atmosphere was already tense. Zimbabwe has however continued with its spectre of violence, as seen earlier in January 2019, after security forces opened live rounds of ammunition on protesters expressing disapproval on the steep fuel increase which had been announced by President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Last year, there were many other ugly incidences of violence, which dented the much-pronounced efforts about a new dispensation respecting human rights!

Mbeki's gesture to facilitate dialogue is highly commendable. However, to get Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa to be on the same

table will be a masterstroke. Not that it is impossible, but it is the toxicity of the environment which currently impinges on political coexistence despite differences. Any meeting between Mnangagwa and Chamisa must however not be seen as a preparatory meeting for another Government of National Unity (GNU), much as the generality of the citizens may wish for such, for the nation's progress. Another GNU is highly unlikely simply because president Mnangagwa is heading midway towards his five-year tenure which ends in 2023, before the nation goes for another elections. However, Zimbabwe is likely to have another disputed election, if reforms are not put in place. ZEC is seen as partial to Zanu Pf. Zimbabwe also needs reforms which will ensure that the elections are credible, peaceful, free and fair. This calls for among other things, media reforms and professionalism within the army, regardless of the electoral outcome.

Any talk of dialogue leading to the GNU is further weakened by the fact that Zanu Pf is already planning for another "routine victory" in 2023. President Emmerson Mnangagwa has already been endorsed by Zanu Pf as its "sole candidate" for the next elections in 2023. At the same time, the MDC keeps insisting the need for electoral reform, before the 2023 elections. With his mark of youthfulness, charisma and popularity, Nelson Chamisa now wants "full political power". He knows that the country is going off rails, but still believes that any act towards a shared political arrangement will give Zanu Pf a lifeline. These views are not farfetched however. They are based on tangible political experiences. Chamisa understands well Zanu Pf's political dexterity, which was highly portrayed during the 2008 elections, which Morgan Tsvangirai is highly believed to have won, before the ruling party pulled the trump card of violence. While the GNU brought stability, the opposition however slept on the wheel with Zanu Pf, mastering a "resounding victory" at the 2013 elections.

As a protégé and successor of the late MDC leader Morgan

Tsvangirai, Chamisa equally understands the complexity of any power-sharing agreement with Zanu Pf, that is if it is to happen ever again. The question, however, remains: how will Chamisa get the political power in view of the military's entrenchment in the country's politics? This remains one question, which even Mbeki's dialogue will not answer!

The MDC Alliance is also very suspicious of Zanu PF's invitation of Mbeki and his subsequent efforts to facilitate a dialogue, some 18 months after the 2018 elections. The divisions which emerged from the last elections required magnanimity in embracing the MDC Alliance, which scored some 44% to Mnangagwa's 50.8%, according to results by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Mnangagwa should have officially recognised the opposition as a key political actor, especially going by the election results. Knowing the internal political realities which obtain in Zimbabwe, Mnangagwa should not have wholly depended on SADC and AU's endorsement of the election as "free, fair and credible", despite reservations expressed by the Electoral Observer Missions (EOM).

The MDC Alliance disputed the elections and lodged a historic Constitutional Court application challenging the results. However, the Court dismissed the application on the basis of lack of evidence. As the MDC Alliance refused to recognise Mnangagwa, Zanu PF rode on the Constitutional Court's validation of the official election results which were changed three times! Again, Zimbabwe entered another mutually hurting stalemate with the MDC arguing that a dialogue cannot commence without addressing the electoral irregularities, which constituted the source of the problems!

The continued disagreements between Zanu PF and MDC posit great difficulties for Mnangagwa's cohesion to build Zimbabwe, even before considering Mbeki's intervention. Mnangagwa's challenges negatively impact both his domestic and foreign policy dimensions. Following the isolation which Mugabe encountered from the West especially after the land reform

exercise in 1999, Mnangagwa largely premised his “re-engagement” drive as an outward-looking endeavour! While gallivanting at key forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the elite World Economic Forum (WEF) preaching the gospel of re-engagement, Mnangagwa however failed to realise the need to establish re-engagement locally! In the end, Zanu PF’s hair-splitting tendency of viewing domestic and foreign policy issues individually has cost Mnangagwa’s hard sell of a new dispensation! For Mbeki, dealing with such a situation will be very difficult. It is made more difficult by pronouncements of a new era to address excesses of violence, which have portrayed Zimbabwe negatively.

With these conditions, dialogue will be difficult. It can only take off with sincerity, maturity and the presence of a shared national vision. Africa’s post-independence dialogue efforts are littered with numerous case studies of dialogues which resolved problems once and for all. Zimbabwe stands out like a pendulum having moments of stability but swinging back and forth for the greater part. It is workers, ordinary people and vulnerable groups of society who will suffer in an unresolved political crisis. In politics, dialogue is a healthy engagement to provide coexistence, peace, unity and progress.

Despite Zimbabwe’s seemingly insurmountable challenges, the country still gleams with hope, whose full value can only be realised by ensuring a genuine dialogue which promotes the interests of Zimbabwe. Mbeki is however an accessory and not the answer. The answer is Zimbabweans themselves, especially Emmerson Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa. Not the Polad forum which has no mandate.

Mbeki’s task can only be made simple if Mnangagwa and Chamisa exude statesmanship. Yes, the statesmanship which Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai showed at some point. Or the one between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga (in 2008), which provided a template for Zimbabwe’s GNU between 2009-2013!

For now, we keep fiddling while Rome burns.

[Mbeki's Difficult Zim Mission – Part I](#)