

ZIMBABWE: O, LORD, HOW LONG?

Peter Henriot

“Yes, Zambia has problems – but thank God, we’re not Zimbabwe!”

I’ve heard that remark several times recently and even repeated it myself. But I never appreciated the full meaning of it so much until I listened last week to several close Zimbabwean friends tell me about what they are experiencing these days in our neighbour to the south. They had come to a meeting in South Africa that I was attending, analysing the future of democracy in our region.

They told me stories of terrible suffering and asked me not to forget them when I returned to Zambia. “Put Zambia’s problems in context – and shout about Zimbabwe’s problems,” they told me! My friends are Zimbabweans, very nationalistic, very patriotic, working for social needs of the people in church-related institutions. They can’t be accused of being British lackies!

Well, I was deeply moved by what they told me and so here are a few of my shouts. I ask you to hear these shouts and then yourselves ask the same questions I will ask at the end of this week’s column.

RIGGED POLITICS

The news the past few days is that perhaps some power-sharing agreement has been reached between Mugabe’s ZANU-PF and Tsvangirai’s MDC. My friends warned me not to take too easily the “agreement” language and gestures. For what can you expect, they say, from a set of politicians who were defeated in March elections but rigged the results in order to have a run-off. And then when it was evident that the Ruling Party would also lose the run-off in May, they launched a terrorist campaign that crowded out the opposition from any “free and fair” chance of repeating their March victory.

Were the March elections “rigged” to deny the MDC a victory? Simply ask what happened to the vote count from the results posted immediately outside polling stations (like we had here in Zambia for the 30 October elections). Independent observers state that Tsvangirai received more than the required 50% of votes, certainly more than the 47.9% awarded to him after a one month – yes, that is one month! – delay to announce “official” results.

Mugabe and his friends – including commanders of the armed forces -- have publicly made it quite clear that they will never accept any popular election results that go against the “sovereignty” established by the “liberation war.” That “sovereignty” is embodied in Mugabe himself. Hence the manipulation of elections, the renegeing on agreements, and the blaming of all criticism on former colonialists and their sympathisers!

VIOLENT POLITICS

While political disputes rage on, the effects of present and past violence corrodes any real sense of democracy. Who gives orders to arrest Opposition leaders and sympathisers, to suppress popular demonstrations, to destroy homes and businesses in urban areas considered to be supportive of MDC, to unleash “war veterans” and youth militias against their fellow citizens?

Intense fear is the order of the day. Understandably, this is what keeps ordinary citizens off the streets, since peaceful demonstrations are strictly forbidden. And when they are attempted, they are dealt with in a bloody fashion.

COLLAPSED ECONOMY

But even more widespread than the political violence adopted to maintain the current rulers in power is the economic and social violence perpetrated against the vast majority of the population.

THE POST reported that the Governor of the Bank of Zimbabwe was this past week re-appointed (on what constitutional grounds, since no formal government has yet been mandated?) to preside over an official inflation rate of 231 million %, but an unofficial and more realistic rate of 89.7 sextillion %. That's 89,000.000.000,000,000,000%!!

The economy has almost completely come to a halt, and only major foreign currency is readily accepted. Severe shortages of basics like food and fuel are the order of the day. Electricity and water are turned off in Harare and elsewhere. Sewerage and garbage disposal has closed down, with the consequent frightening rise in cholera. Hunger is widespread as charitable agencies struggle to provide provisions for almost one-half the population in the months ahead.

Hospitals and clinics face shortages of everything but patients, especially now as the cholera epidemic spreads (already over 400 deaths in the past several weeks). Educational institutions are not functioning, as teachers (those who have remained in the country) struggle for wages that wouldn't even cover transport costs to get to their schools.

DECEITFUL DENIALS

What makes the situation described above so very sad is that the persons in power, from Mugabe on down, simply deny there are any problems in their country. At least not any problems that they could be blamed for! People really aren't hungry or sick, the economic situation really isn't that bad after all, and any political difficulties are the products of the imperialist/colonialists and their MDC puppets.

So strong is the denial mode of operation that highly respected world figures like Jimmy Carter, Koffi Annan and Graca Michel could be turned away from a humanitarian visit on grounds that their visit was not only not necessary but was politically motivated to oppose Mugabe and friends.

One can only wonder whether the leaders themselves believe the stories that they tell others. Do they go out into the urban compounds and rural wastelands and see, hear and smell the devastation they daily cause? Mansions and Mercedes may protect them from the tragic realities of their sister and brother Zimbabweans, but what about their consciences?

SO WHAT?

OK, at this point the reader can ask me, so what difference does my shouting make and what could we do? For Zambia, the collapse of Zimbabwe is a disaster not only for the citizens of that sad country but also for us here, living in a country with some problems but overall a truly blessed country. So here are some questions we should ask – and look for some immediate answers!

1. What is the Zambian government's official policy towards the increasing number of refugees fleeing here from our neighbour? Because of the cholera epidemic, will Zimbabweans continue to be turned away in Livingstone? What about the growing number of Zimbabwean women now selling (vegetables and themselves!) on the streets of Lusaka?
2. What is the response of the Zimbabwean High Commissioner in Lusaka to the analysis made here and elsewhere that challenges both the legitimacy and the morality of the current regime in power? Can the Commissioner explain why so many fellow citizens are fleeing into Zambia? Remember, this is Zambia, a country whose citizens sacrificed much in lives and prosperity to assist in the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe.
3. What is the stance of President Rupiah Banda toward the Zimbabwean crisis? Is there any part of the Mwanawasa "legacy" of courageous challenge that endures in his official position? Will he exercise moral leadership in the SADC region?

So these are the shouts I promised my Zimbabwean friends. Any echoes here in Zambia?

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