

## **Zimbabwe can't be re-admitted into Commonwealth without strict accountability mechanisms!**

Opinion by Tendai Ruben Mbofana

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I always say Zimbabwe can be a most strange place to be – if only we lived in peace and prosperity, with our fundamental rights being respected as sacrosanct.

When then President Robert Gabriel Mugabe withdrew in anger from the Commonwealth on 7 December 2003 - more as a spoilt child throwing an embarrassing tantrum after being denied his desired toy – he labeled the grouping an ‘Anglo Saxon unholy alliance’!

This was after the organization had dared hold to account the ZANU PF regime for the wanton violations of citizens’ rights, especially towards the disputed and often violent 2002 presidential elections – which pitted Mugabe and the then opposition MDC leader Morgan Richard Tsvangirai - characterized by horrendous acts of brutality against his supporters across the country.

The Commonwealth did what even regional and continental bodies - the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), which are expected to be ordinary citizens’ first line of defence against oppressive governments – were too afraid or corrupted to do.

True to nature, both SADC and the AU turned a deaf ear to Zimbabweans’ cries by choosing to pretend as if there was nothing untoward or amiss in the country – when a brutal reign of terror was being unleashed on opposition supporters and members.

This has become a troubling pattern with these useless bodies – whose leaders have opted to stand with kleptomaniac repressive governments – as opposed to the suffering people.

Nonetheless, the Commonwealth – more in touch with reality – suspended Zimbabwe in 2002 for violating the Harare Declaration (how ironic!) - whose guidelines spelled out individual liberties under the law, respect of political beliefs, and their inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes.

Instead of reforming and amending its wayward ways, the ZANU PF administration chose to play the ‘spoilt brat’ – threatening to leave rather than merely respecting its own citizenry’s rights – leading to the withdrawal.

Judging from Mugabe’s theatrics prior to this move, as he issued ludicrous ultimatums and recklessly using the race card – he was hoping to split the organization along color and creed.

Nonetheless, this ill-considered plan backfired, as the vast majority of member states – save for the usual suspect, South Africa, fronted by Thabo Mbeki (who unashamedly declared that there was no crisis in Zimbabwe) – overwhelmingly voted for the country to be held to account.

Twenty years down the line, the same ZANU PF regime is now down on its knees, with tail between its legs, begging to be re-admitted into the 56-member body – which they once condemned as an ‘Anglo Saxon unholy alliance’.

That is what I call comedic – if only these disgraceful decisions did not directly adversely affect the ordinary people – who, in most cases, are the very same suffering the brunt of the ruling establishment’s barbaric oppression.

As a Commonwealth delegation led by its Assistant Secretary-General Prof. Luis Franceschi visits Zimbabwe to evaluate the country’s suitability for re-admission – the question is, ‘how different is the situation today, than when it was suspended in 2002, and subsequently withdrawing a year later’?

What has changed?

Is Zimbabwe now in compliance with the Harare Declaration, or on such issues as the 2018 Commonwealth Principles on Freedom of Expression and the Role of the Media in Good Governance?

Are Zimbabweans truly freer today as compared to 2002?

Tragically, the answer is an emphatic NO!

In fact, it can be argued that the people of Zimbabwe are worse off today – as their rights are callously trampled upon, in the most savage way, left right and centre, by the Emmerson Mnangagwa government.

I was privileged to have been invited to take part in a workshop hosted by the Commonwealth Foundation, which focused on media and civil society freedoms.

It was undeniable - as we interacted and conversed with other participants from across the Commonwealth - that Zimbabwe is still light-years behind other countries in the area of human rights, democracy and media freedoms.

I was convinced, as I had been beforehand, that Zimbabwe was not yet ready for re-admission into a grouping which holds in very high regard ‘individual liberties under the law, respect of political beliefs, and their inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes’.

Today, worse than ever before, the main opposition CCC party is practically only legal in the books, and on the ballot paper – yet, cannot freely participate in the country’s democratic processes – faced with relentless, vicious attacks on its operations, repeatedly refused permission to campaign, its supporters (including senior members and MPs) routinely brutally beaten up, or arrested on spurious charges (and, denied their constitutional rights to bail).

Who can forget the harrowing images of a savagely battered Jasmine Toffa (17 October 2022), and Job Sikhala constantly in leg irons as he appeared in court (before even being found guilty of any crime)?

The Commonwealth delegation should definitely sit down with these opposition CCC MPs, if they sincerely desire to understand the true picture of Zimbabwe.

Whilst they are still at it, they can also visit the families of those murdered by ZANU PF thugs – such as Mboneni Ncube in Kwekwe – or, those allegedly abducted, or sexual abused as a political weapon, as Joanna Mamombe and Cecilia Chimbiri.

Civic society organizations – who, like the media, are an essential component of any democracy, and considered the conscience of any government – are under the constant threat of banishment, with the proposed PVO (Private Voluntary Organizations) Bill, which will place an unnecessary amount of power in the government to regulate their operations.

Strangely, how can a government control a non-governmental organization?

Of course, it is no secret that the ZANU PF regime seeks to silence all those exposing its unquenchable penchant for looting state resources, wanton violations of human rights, and questionable electoral processes that are clearly tailored against the opposition.

How can anyone claim that Zimbabwe is ready for the Commonwealth when the judiciary and the electoral commission are opaque – whose operations do not appear to meet the demands of both the country's Constitution, but also acceptable international guidelines on the conduct of free fair and credible elections?

No wonder the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) seems intent on keeping away the voters' roll – which both the opposition and civil society view as shambolic – by setting access at a shocking US\$187,000.

As if that was not crazy enough, nomination fees for presidential candidates have been pegged at US\$20,000 each.

If this is not a sinister plot to severely restrict the democratic space, then I don't know what is!

There is no way Zimbabwe can be re-admitted yet into the Commonwealth.

However, should the grouping be so eager to have the country back – there need to be very strict conditions set, as well as close review and monitoring mechanisms put in place to ensure the political elite are held accountable for their actions.

Without such measures, we will just be going back to 2002, all over again!

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