

## For better or worse, the Commonwealth and Zimbabwe's fates align

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*The club of 2.5 billion citizens is at a crossroads. Should it readmit a country that has rigged elections and persecuted opponents?*

It was the defining broadcast of the late Queen Elizabeth's 70-year reign that entwined the destinies of her cherished Commonwealth and what is now Zimbabwe.

Addressing the Empire on her 21st birthday in 1947, Princess Elizabeth promised that her "whole life whether it be long or short" would be devoted to serving the peoples of the Commonwealth.

The solemn pledge was recorded in the garden at The Victoria Falls Hotel in what was then colonial Southern Rhodesia; the scene remains unchanged. You would not tell from the colour of the hotel's lawn today that the worst drought in decades is pushing millions of Zimbabweans towards starvation.

Through mist rising from the roaring falls, the view from the terrace is the national park's treetops and a distant steel bridge arching over the Zambezi River. Completed in 1905, it was part of the masterplan of the British Empire-builder Cecil Rhodes for a railway linking Cape Town to Cairo.

The only glimpse of modern Zimbabwe is the copper ore-laden lorries backed up for miles on either side of the crossing and the sex workers looking for business. The rail network that once carried the royal family and powered an economy is long gone.

Rhodesia's part in the princess's momentous speech (which was transmitted ten days later as though live from Cape Town) bound it to the Commonwealth's evolution from the ashes of the Empire.

The tie has been both a beacon and embarrassment to the club that has grown to 56 member states but has always struggled for relevance. The trajectory from Rhodesia's white minority rule to Zimbabwe's independence and now callous dictatorship has been the stiffest test of the Commonwealth's moral purpose.

Its ruling in the mid-1960s that members should respect racial equality was pivotal in nudging forward the new Zimbabwe and increasing pressure on South Africa's apartheid policy and its occupation of Namibia. **It was in Zimbabwe's capital in 1991 that the heads of government adopted the Harare Declaration to bolster democracy and human rights in its member states.**

A little over a decade later, Zimbabwe was suspended for falling foul of those principles on the grounds that Robert Mugabe, who had ruled the country since independence in 1980, rigged his re-election in 2002 and persecuted his opponents.

After the suspension was renewed in 2003, Mugabe withdrew Zimbabwe's membership, likening the Queen's "family of nations" to George Orwell's Animal Farm — where some members were more equal than others.

## **A dysfunctional ‘family of nations’**

Even Mugabe’s critics believe he had a point. Countries that have flagrantly flouted rules on democracy, for example Fiji, Nigeria and Pakistan under military dictators, have faced suspension or left to avoid being expelled.

Yet others including Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) ruled by Africa’s last absolute monarch, the sultanate of Brunei and the recently admitted Togo, which has been run as a corrupt family business for decades, have gone uncensured.

Zimbabwe’s pending application to rejoin the Commonwealth poses a dilemma for its leaders when they gather this month in Samoa for the most consequential summit in decades.

With the King as its symbolic head and the election of the next secretary-general, a reset looks urgent to make the club of 2.5 billion citizens look fit for purpose. Whatever that purpose is.

Sue Onslow, the former director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, said that Zimbabwe’s readmission would “drive a coach and horses” through the principles on democracy, fundamental human rights and the rule of law as conditions of membership.

As far as Harare is concerned, that high horse has bolted. “No country in the Commonwealth is better than us in terms of democratic values ... None,” Nick Mangwana, the government’s spokesman said in a social media post that highlighted the challenge of policing miscreants in such an unwieldy bloc. Freedom and democracy can mean different things in Yaren (the capital of Nauru) and Yaoundé (Cameroon).

## **Worse not better**

The rigging and oppression that led to Zimbabwe’s suspension two decades ago have not improved but worsened significantly, opposition figures have told Commonwealth officials assessing its bid to rejoin.

President Mnangagwa has steered the country deeper into tyranny since he pushed Mugabe aside in 2017 with the promise that Zimbabwe was “open for business”. A new Patriotic Bill has criminalised any actions deemed damaging to the national interest.

The 2023 general election that extended the ruling Zanu-PF’s 43-year grip on power was declared unsafe by even an observer mission from Zimbabwe’s own neighbours, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), that has historically rubber stamped the results. Evidence is growing that Mnangagwa, 82, is clearing the path for an unconstitutional third term.

In April, Commonwealth assessors took notes from Jameson Timba, the leader of the main opposition Citizens Coalition for Change. He was arrested weeks later with scores of others at his home in Harare where he was hosting a bank holiday barbecue.

Timba, 60, and the group of 67, which includes a mother with her baby and a teenage girl, remain in jail without bail or charges. Runaway inflation and the collapse of Zimbabwe’s new currency — its sixth new money launch in 15 years — has left Mnangagwa fearful of a rival power grab and taking ever more merciless action.

David Coltart, the mayor of Bulawayo who served with Timba in a unity government led by Mugabe, said the mass detention was “the most outrageous of any since independence”.

Coltart said: “It is designed to have a chilling effect to serve as a warning to others: ‘Don’t even think about demonstrating’”.

### **Moving on**

The brazenness reflects Mnangagwa’s confidence that a jaded international community wants a shift. Post-Brexit, the British government is keener to talk about foreign trade deals rather than stale politics. In line with the regional rotation for the Commonwealth’s top job, the next secretary-general will be African.

Joshua Setipa, one of three candidates competing for the role, would like to see Zimbabwe back in the fold straight away.

A former trade minister for the kingdom of Lesotho, he points to West Africa for the dangers of principles over pragmatism. Threats made by the regional bloc Ecowas to military juntas to restore civilian rule in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali have seen them turning to Moscow instead.

“We can’t talk of the Commonwealth without talking about Zimbabwe which has played a critical role in its history,” said Setipa, tipped as a favourite for the club’s top job.

“Unless the Commonwealth is around the table with Zimbabwe then there is no obligation for them to listen to us about reforms or release those people who have been arrested,” he said. Commonwealth membership would not be a reward for wrongdoing. “It is more that it would be a missed opportunity if we kept them out.”

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