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South Africa: Breathing New Life into "Quiet Diplomacy"ⁱ

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Zimbabwe's dangerous economic and political slide seems to be compelling South Africa to rethink its behind-the-curtains diplomacy and to take a public, tougher stance. With its bilateral approach having hit a dead end, Pretoria must now step up its multilateral engagement with African institutions and the wider international community to pursue a mix of diplomatic pressure, sanctions and incentives to halt Zimbabwe's slow-motion implosion.

Zimbabwe is ineluctably edging towards a failed state, posing a real menace to regional peace and security and forcing Pretoria to take a hard look at their 'quiet diplomacy' policy. On 17 May, Deputy Foreign Minister, Aziz Pahad, sounded alarm bells over the impact of Zimbabwe's economic meltdown on South Africa - including the burden of over two million refugees. President Thabo Mbeki has also public backed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's proposed diplomatic intervention to resolve Zimbabwe's crisis. Pretoria's public call for an urgent solution to the Zimbabwe crisis signals a break with its behind-the-curtains diplomacy.

Mbeki responded to Zimbabwe's crisis, triggered by the controversial 2000 land reforms, by invoking 'quiet diplomacy' - a policy underpinned by the imperatives of African solidarity and peer pressure rather than 'megaphone diplomacy' and open criticism of illiberal policies. Besides shielding President Robert Mugabe from international pressure, the approach strengthened the hand of the ruling elite and

stabilised the state, postponing Zimbabwe's political meltdown. The policy has sacrificed democracy at the altar of stability and, particularly, of Pretoria's intense fear of having a failed state on its doorstep.

However, the nightmare of a failed state looms even larger. The most formidable 'opposition' to Mugabe's regime and threat to Zimbabwe's stability is an economy running amok: a world record peace-time annual inflation rate of 1042.9%; over 75% unemployment; almost empty foreign reserves and acute fuel and food shortages. The economic free fall complicates a triple humanitarian crisis: over four million refugees and internally displaced persons; chronic food shortages with several million hungry; and 24.6% of adults infected by the HIV virus - although the rate is laudably declining.

Harare's heaping all the blame on external forces and sanctions for its economic woes is unhelpful. It must start redressing its own policies, which have pushed the economy to the ropes. For instance, the 2005 state-engineered urban clean-up (Operation Murambatsvina) left over 133,000 households without shelter or livelihood and wiped out the informal sector -the poor's haven.

Mugabe has promise to retire when his term expires in 2008, but the absence of a transition plan is fostering an atmosphere of a country suspended in a limbo between war and peace. The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front is split right in the middle by a vicious race to succeed Mugabe. Its plan to create a 'transitional presidency' and postpone elections in 2008 is threatening to drive key party stalwarts into the opposition, with the party's break imminent. Moreover, the regime's reliance on the nearly 40,000-strong military and over 20,000 ready-for-combat youth militias to crush popular revolts is fostering a climate of a country under a de facto martial law. However, with shrinking incomes and irregular pay, the rank and file officers may not be relied upon to quell riots.

Mbeki's intervention in October 2005 failed to prevent the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) from fracturing into two rival factions, now locked in self-destructive feuds, violence and disputes over the party's name and assets. Dark clouds hang over the idea of an opposition alliance to field one presidential candidate in 2008, making slim the chances for a democratic change and creating widespread frustration and uncertainty.

In February 2006, Mbeki drummed a draft constitution, arising from the inter-party talks he brokered in 2002-2004, as the showpiece of quiet diplomacy. The draft can serve as a starting-point for a constitution-making process, but it remains stashed in a cold freezer, with Mugabe declaring in February 2006 that:

"There is no crisis requiring intervention in Zimbabwe."

Even as the ripples of Zimbabwe's crisis rock its neighbourhoods, Pretoria lacks the requisite force of sanction to reassert its mediation role. However, it has taken a significant first step in deploying economic pressure to breathe new life into quiet diplomacy. In September 2005, following the dispute over Zimbabwe's arrears to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pretoria offered a US\$500 million credit line to enable Harare pay off its debts and purchase fuel and food. However, it urged for inter-party talks on a new constitution, the repeal of restrictive laws and an economic recovery plan as pre-conditions for the credit. Harare shot down this initiative, paying its IMF arrears and printing Z\$60-trillion (about US\$230 million) to sustain its operations. Pretoria's officials, however, insist that the loan is still on the table following the IMF's decision to block Zimbabwe's access to a renewed credit line. This creates an opening for re-engagement; Zimbabwe is unlikely to take the offer owing to considerations of national sovereignty and pride.

Declined support from African leaders like Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, who supported Mugabe with a staggering \$480 million in 2002, might boost the South African economic pressure. Nevertheless, Foreign Minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, said on 29 May that South Africa will not impose targeted sanctions against Zimbabwe.

Pretoria's multilateral diplomacy through the 14-member Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) has slim chances, with its diplomats acknowledging, *"Mugabe is larger than SADC."* SADC is unlikely to take on Zimbabwe's crisis as an agenda during its August 2006 summit.

The African Union's leaders' summit is believed to have the requisite diplomatic weight to accelerate change in Zimbabwe, but it lacks the political will and courage. *"Zimbabwe is a hot potato,"* a senior AU official told the author. The AU's credibility suffered a setback after its January 2006 summit rejected, on technicalities, yet

another resolution by its own Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) critical of Zimbabwe. Its July 2006 summit offers an opportunity to mobilise the continent behind a call for urgent action to resolve Zimbabwe's crisis, but South Africa needs to act to ensure that the chance is not missed.

Pretoria sees as its best chance the backing of the UN plan on Zimbabwe. Although the plan's contours are still blurry, it is said to involve a trade-off between an aid package and Mugabe's exit timetable. However, Zimbabwe has poured cold water on the plan, with President Mugabe's spokesperson, George Charamba, saying that Annan's invitation has lapsed. Annan's point-man, the UN's Under-secretary General for Political Affairs, Ibrahim Gambari, has also denied that there is such a plan, albeit confirming that the Secretary-General's visit is still possible. Zimbabwe's new diplomatic offensive to rope in former Tanzanian President, Benjamin Mkapa, to help in bilateral talks with British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, appears to be dead in the water, with the UK backing the UN initiative. Pretoria's new tough stance might send the right message to Harare, but its officials must now stay the course.

¹ *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Political Studies (CIPS)*

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