

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Time to Suspend Sanctions on Zimbabwe

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The U.S. dollar may risk losing its status as the world's reserve currency, but American dollars are a hot item in Zimbabwe. Three years ago that nation's economy was in crisis. Hyper-inflation made economic life almost impossible. The government issued a 100 trillion (Zimbabwe) dollar note—the highest denomination of money ever printed anywhere. But in 2009 the newly installed “unity” government adopted the U.S. dollar as its own. Inflation is now just four percent.

It's one of the hopeful signs which David Coltart, a Zimbabwean senator who also serves as Minister of Education, points to. Coltart is visiting America encouraging greater awareness of and improved engagement with his country.

Coltart is a long-time opposition activist who joined the government created with Morgan Richard Tsvangirai as prime minister. The Movement for Democratic Change won the legislative election four years ago, but then President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front essentially staged a “military-backed coup,” forcing Tsvangirai to concede the upcoming presidential election, which he could have won in a free vote, explains Coltart. However, pressure from the Southern African Development

Community (SADC) forced Mugabe to accept a coalition government which granted the MDC a majority of the cabinet posts, though none controlling security forces.

The unity agreement obviously is imperfect, but, argues Coltart, there was “no alternative to it.” Economic sanctions “would have destroyed the country.” He points to education—8,000 schools had closed. Thousands of people could have died in a devastating cholera epidemic. But “there has been a lot of good since 2008,” he notes.

The schools have reopened; public health has improved. With the U.S. dollar as the national currency the government faces financial accountability: it “no longer can print money,” he notes. Supermarket shelves were empty three years ago; today the stores are stocked with goods. The human rights situation also is much better. “More than 400 people were murdered or disappeared in 2008,” says Coltart, but virtually none this year. (An MDC activist was reportedly murdered on Saturday.)

Zimbabwe still faces major economic and political challenges. Elections must be held next year, and Mugabe is talking about holding an early vote. “There is deep concern” in ZANU-PF about Mugabe, who “though a fit 88 is still 88,” Coltart explains. Hard-line elements also fear ongoing political reform because “if there is a new constitution and decentralization of power with new election rules it will be a lot tougher for them to win an election.” Moreover, ZANU-PF activists may fear that the longer the economy improves “the greater the contrast with the chaos before and even their own supporters will be less inclined to go back.”

Coltart urges increased U.S. and European engagement. He complains that “current policy seems to be to wait until Robert Mugabe goes.” However, he believes the West could play a more positive role by lifting sanctions, largely targeted against ZANU-PF figures and restricting Zimbabwe’s access to World Bank and IMF credit. He views the issue as mostly symbolic, but “lifting

sanctions wouldn't cost America anything and would send a very clear signal of a preparedness to engage."

He acknowledges that many in the exile community feel differently, but "surely those of us in the trenches should be listened to." He has "great sympathy" for the exile viewpoint, but notes that "it is easy to advocate hard-line policies if you don't have to deal with the consequences."

By following Africa's lead in this regard Washington also could reaffirm the positive role played by Zimbabwe's neighbors. "SADC and the African Union said there was no choice but for" Mugabe to enter into the unity agreement and currently are pressing him to finish constitutional and electoral reform before holding elections, says Coltart. In his view "South Africa in particular and Zimbabwe's immediate neighbors are not going to budge" on this issue. In turn, they have "said to the U.S. and Europe, trust us." They know that "if it falls apart, it will undermine their credibility."

The coming months will prove critical for Zimbabwe's future. Should crisis again envelop the country, the impact would be felt throughout the region. In contrast, successful political reform would strengthen the MDC and ZANU-PF moderates, creating the possibility of a peaceful transition of power in the future. In Zimbabwe, like Burma, Washington should shift its policy from isolation to engagement.