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Africa's Zimbabwe Problem

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Zimbabwe was recently elected to chair the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), to the dismay of human-rights groups and nations, like the United States, that would like the United Nations to take its responsibilities seriously. This election is more than a travesty; it is a cruel demonstration of disregard for the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe on the part of the U.N. and those African countries that helped Zimbabwe to the chairmanship.

The United Nations defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The CSD was established in 1992 to promote sustainable development, review implementation of various environmental agreements, and provide policy guidance to local, national, regional, and international levels. Explicitly noted in the documents that the CSD is supposed to promote is the notion that "Good governance within each country and at the international level is essential for sustainable development" and that "Peace, security, stability and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms... are essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring that sustainable development benefits all."

Looking the world over, it is difficult to find many countries that fail to abide by these principles to a greater degree than does Zimbabwe. When Robert Mugabe came to power in 1980, he inherited well-developed manufacturing and mining sectors, a competitive agricultural sector, a thriving tourist industry, and sound infrastructure. The country has rich mineral deposits of asbestos, chromite, coal, copper, diamonds and other gems, gold, iron ore, nickel, and platinum. The country was rightly regarded as one of the bright lights in Africa.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Mugabe began facing serious challenges to his authority. In response to the growing opposition, he initiated a ruthless, seven-year campaign to maintain political power. During that time, Mugabe has targeted his opponents for abuse, legal harassment, and economic punishment, and used his authority to reward allies and elicit support from the police, the military, and other key groups. Notably, Mugabe started to expropriate large, mostly white-owned, commercial farms. With property rights and the rule of law severely weakened, credit and investment dried up, sending shockwaves through an economy that was heavily reliant on agricultural production.

Those policies have resulted in a precipitous economic decline, political repression, and a humanitarian crisis rivaling that in Darfur. Over the last seven years, Professor Craig Richardson of Salem College estimates the economy has shrunk by 40 percent, wiping out almost 60 years of gradual economic improvements. The standard of living has dropped to levels last seen in 1948. The World Health Organization estimates that Zimbabwe has the world's lowest life expectancy — 34 years for women and 37 years for men.

Unemployment is at 80 percent. The currency is nearly worthless and inflation currently exceeds 3,700 percent per year. Last week, the black-market exchange rate for one U.S. dollar reached 40,000 Zimbabwean dollars.

The economic meltdown has led to environmental devastation. Zimbabwe, once known for its flourishing wildlife, used to have a sophisticated tourism industry that accounted for up to 6 percent of the country's GDP. Hunger and lawlessness have put an end to that.

Brian Gratwicke, an Oxford-educated environmentalist and Zimbabwean national who runs a U.S.-based nature and wildlife website estimates that "Eighty percent of 250,000 head of game that lived on privately owned commercial farms have been poached by land invaders — often with the encouragement of senior ZANU-PF officials who wanted to wrest control of the farms from their rightful owners." To make matters worse, Gratwicke argues, chronic environmental problems such as deforestation and overgrazing, water pollution, uncontrolled fires, human-wildlife conflict, and wildlife-borne disease are spreading through Zimbabwe.

On both environmental and development grounds, Zimbabwe is a terrible example to the rest of Africa and the world. Electing Zimbabwe to chair the committee charged with guiding U.N. policy in those areas is absurd.



The election of Zimbabwe to the chairmanship of the CSD cannot be dismissed as an unfortunate aberration. The nomination of Zimbabwe to the chairmanship was widely reported and strongly criticized by the U.S. and other countries. Despite that criticism, the African regional group in the U.N. refused to back away from nominating Zimbabwe. Moreover, the African group and the U.N. have made a habit of such outrageous appointments. For instance:

- * Zimbabwe currently serves on the Executive Board of the World Food Program, despite the fact that Zimbabwe, considered the breadbasket of Africa only a decade ago, is now unable to feed itself and regularly appeals to international programs for food aid. The primary reasons for the devastation of Zimbabwe's once flourishing agricultural sector are the politically motivated seizure of commercial farms, most of which were given to Mugabe's cronies, and other anti-market economic policies.

* Zimbabwe was elected to the Executive Board of the U.N. Children's Fund for a three-year term beginning in 2008 despite the fact that, according to UNICEF itself, one in four children in Zimbabwe are orphans. This tragic situation is in significant part due to the policies of the Zimbabwean government that have increased the spread of HIV/AIDS, reduced life expectancy, and eroded the health care system.

* Zimbabwe was elected to the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT) for a term expiring in 2010 despite the government's Operation Murambatsvina, which demolished informal housing and markets and rendered 700,000 urban Zimbabweans homeless or unemployed. It is believed that 70 percent of the urban population may have lost shelter or employment and over 2 million (more than 15 percent of Zimbabwe's population) are believed to have been indirectly affected by loss of customers, employees, or markets. The government told those affected to "return to their rural origins," even though most had no such home to which they could return. Indeed, many had initially become homeless when the government sanctioned the seizure of commercial farms.

The ability of Zimbabwe to routinely be elected to such privileged positions in the U.N. is illustrative of just how little regard many states have for the purposes of the U.N. and the influence those states have over the decisions, elections, and activities of the organization.

This comes as little surprise to those who have followed the United Nations and its many failures over the years. Nevertheless, it should embarrass those governments in Africa that claim to be trying to improve the lives of their people, enhance the quality of government across the continent, and elevate the influence which the region is given in international fora and the seriousness with which it is taken.

There is something fundamentally wrong when African countries feel comfortable, and even are insistent, about putting a country like Zimbabwe forward as a candidate for influential positions despite that country's record of violations and abuses directly related to the position it would assume. How can the rest of the world be comfortable giving Africa a permanent seat on the Security Council, for instance, if the continent cannot even rouse itself to put forward suitable candidates for lesser bodies?

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Underdevelopment in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of the Private Sector and Political Elites

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by Moeletsi Mbeki

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Executive Summary

Economic growth in Africa, as in the rest of the world, depends on a vibrant private sector. Entrepreneurs in Africa, however, face daunting constraints. They are prevented from creating wealth by predatory political elites that control the state. African political elites use marketing boards and taxation to divert agricultural savings to finance their own consumption and to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the state. Peasants, who constitute the core of the private sector in sub-Saharan Africa, are the biggest losers. In order for Africa to prosper, peasants need to become the real owners of their primary asset — land — over which they currently have no property rights.

Peasants must also be given direct access to world markets. They must be able to auction their cash crops, including coffee, tea, cotton, sugar, cocoa, and rubber, freely rather than being forced to sell them to state-controlled marketing boards at discounted prices. In that respect, South Africa is unique in the region. The country does not have a large disenfranchised peasantry. Most of South Africa's private sector belongs to South Africans, who also have a say in the political process. The future will show whether those factors will constrain the power of the South African political elite in a manner that is sufficient to safeguard South Africa's growth potential.

Full Text of Foreign Policy Briefing no. 85

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