

Breaking the ideological stranglehold

by Elinor Sisula

“Why is this Tony Blair coming to our country to contest elections? He is the one causing all this trouble.” So effective had been the anti-Blair campaign of the Zimbabwe government in the 31 March election that poor MaMoyo believed that Tony Blair was in Zimbabwe physically participating in the elections. MaMoyo’s mistaken belief was not based on ignorance or lack of intelligence but was a result of five years of sustained propaganda from the state coupled with the almost total denial of media voices to the rural populace of Zimbabwe.

Analysts seeking to explain the staying power of the Mugabe regime agree that Robert Mugabe’s greatest success has been to divert attention from internal repression by invoking anti-imperialist solidarity. In a recent article published in the *Review of African Political Economy*, professors Brian Raftopoulos and Ian Phimister noted: “The land question in particular has been located within a discourse of legitimate redress for colonial injustice, language which has resonated on the African continent, and within the Third World more generally.”

Thus the government-owned *Herald* is able to dismiss international concern about human rights, democracy, press freedom and the independence of the judiciary as a smokescreen to maintain the colonial grip (of Britain) on Zimbabwe. The consequence of this, argue Raftopoulos and Phimister, is that “when opponents of Zanu-PF have expressed their criticism of the regime through the language of human rights and democracy, they have struggled to make their voices heard above the clamour of anti-imperialism. Their protests have either been grotesquely misrepresented or simply ignored.”

Debates within the South African media are a case in point. The South African President, cabinet ministers and ANC leaders, especially the ANC Youth League have buttressed Mugabe’s ideological position by launching stinging attacks on conservative white Western critiques of the Mugabe regime and conspicuously downplaying or ignoring critical African voices.

A case in point is the response to the report on the situation in Zimbabwe by the African Union’s Commission of Human and People’s Rights which has been all but ignored by the South African government.

Based on a fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe in the wake of the controversial 2002 presidential election in Zimbabwe, the AU Human Rights report was compiled by distinguished and respected individuals, including Professor Barney Pitso, a liberation movement veteran, former chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission and current Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa. It is ludicrous to dismiss someone of Pitso’s stature as a “puppet of Western imperialism”, so the AU report is simply ignored.

Also ignored was the Zimbabwe government’s exclusion of some of the most experienced African electoral observers in the 31 March elections. Not one government in the region protested against the exclusion of the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa and the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

If the democratic movement in Zimbabwe wants to make any headway in breaking the Mugabe regime’s ideological



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stranglehold within the region, it has to highlight the appropriation of an anti-imperialist discourse to serve narrow political interests.

It has to invoke African instruments such as the Constitutive Act of the African Union and the African Charter for Human and People’s Rights. It also has to make a shift away from Zimbabwean exceptionalism and locate Zimbabwe within African debates on elections, democracy and governance.

For example we should have had extensive Zimbabwean commentary on the recent elections in Togo, the crisis in the Ivory Coast and the attempts to restore peace in the DRC and rebuild the state in Somalia.

There is a lesson for Zimbabweans to learn from all these experiences – the cost of decades of dictatorship is high and recovery is sometimes well nigh impossible. Let us try to resuscitate the patient before it is too late.