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# A rescue package for Zimbabwe

By Michael Holman

If bravery shaped reality, Zimbabwe would be starting a new era. In the face of thuggery and in defiance of years of state intimidation, the country's opposition has swept the election board. But it would be premature to celebrate the political demise – and foolish to underestimate the resolve – of the 84-year-old Robert Mugabe, the man who has led Zimbabwe from independence in 1980 and who has since delivered it into the abyss.

In the days ahead we shall learn whether Zimbabwe is poised to return to democracy or whether it is in the throes of a slow-motion coup, as heavily manipulated “official” results are delivered to a disbelieving public, with the security forces ready to intervene.

It was always likely to be thus.

Hopes that Mr Mugabe would accept defeat at last Saturday's poll have been fuelled by a form of wishful thinking that defies both human nature and political gravity. It seemed improbable that a man who has flouted democracy for so long would respect the verdict of the ballot box and that he would not contrive to rig the official outcome.

As the realisation sinks in that the president is likely to fight from his bunker rather than accept defeat, there will be the usual cries that “something must be done”. But what, precisely? Any talk of expanding the ineffectual targeted sanctions against the regime borders on the absurd: the country is already in a state of economic collapse. What is more, sanctions seldom work – as Rhodesia itself showed. It took a guerrilla war to secure its transition to Zimbabwe.

Others will call for military intervention. But who will take on the task? To suggest the African Union, unable to cope with Darfur, is risible. South Africa? Hazardous. Remember that President Thabo Mbeki and Mr Mugabe are not “comrades in arms” – their guerrillas fought each other during Zimbabwe's liberation war and there are old scores to settle.

Furthermore, the record shows that interference in Africa, whether by outsiders or Africans, has usually been disastrous, whatever the motive – ideological (the US in Zaire, the Soviet Union in Ethiopia), humanitarian (the US in Somalia) or well-intentioned (Tanzania in Idi Amin's Uganda).

So what can be done?

If you lack a stick, then use a carrot. As Zimbabweans prepare for a final heave, their bravery needs to be supplemented by hope: hope that stems from evidence that their future will be marked by a rapid improvement in their wretched circumstances.

Of course, long-term recovery measures must be decided by Zimbabweans themselves; but short-term relief can be assembled in days. Preparation should take the form of an emergency aid conference, convened irrespective of the outcome of the current crisis, ready to be implemented when democracy returns. Donors would be asked to make public commitments to funding or supplying Zimbabwe's desperate needs: fertiliser for agriculture, raw materials and spare parts for industry, medicines for clinics, fuel for transport.

On the agenda would also be ways to kick-start the country's hard-hit tourist industry, once a leading foreign exchange earner and an important employer. Perhaps this could take the form of a one-off offer to foreign visitors of a holiday, at cost, in one of Zimbabwe's many game parks.

Britain's Department for International Development should invest the £30m (€38m) it has earmarked for an orderly land reform programme in a commercial farming centre, located on the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border, where dispossessed farmers might regroup to use their expertise.

Meanwhile, newspapers could lead an appeal for books; magazines and academic journals could provide free subscription to the country's schools and universities and libraries.

This package of measures would be published and made available to every Zimbabwean, telling them what the future holds. Who better to co-ordinate the programme than the Commonwealth, that near-moribund association of 50-odd countries, linked by a history of association with Britain? It was a Commonwealth summit in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, in 1979 that helped lay foundations for Zimbabwe's independence elections the following year.

The organisation has allowed Zimbabwe to drop off its agenda, using Mr Mugabe's withdrawal from membership in 2003 as an excuse for shameful neglect. Let the Commonwealth lead the exercise that could redeem its failure and offer help as well as hope to the brave people of Zimbabwe.

Two birds, one stone.

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