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Time for Britain to start talking to Mugabe

By Michael Holman

With Mugabe's health failing, it is time for Britain to re-engage, writes Michael Holman

Time is running out for Robert Mugabe. The combination of advancing years and poor health are taking their toll on the 87-year-old despot. As mortality catches up with Zimbabwe's president, so an opportunity should be opening for Britain to re-engage with its former colony.

On the economic front, there is a modest easing of a crisis that began some 10 years ago with the seizure of commercial farms, abetted and enforced by paramilitaries. Inflation has been brought down to double figures after the astronomical level of the past. Goods are back on supermarket shelves (albeit at a price beyond the reach of many).

But political tensions put economic gains at risk. As promised elections draw nearer, voter intimidation by the ruling party is on the rise and a nervous population seeks assurances about post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. If ever there were a time for constructive external advice, it is now.

Yet rather than encouraging contact, London appears to have ordered its embassy in Harare to do little more than keep a diplomatic death watch, as if Mr Mugabe's demise will mark the removal of the obstacle on the country's road to peace and democracy. Maybe. But there is also a case for fearing that his death will be a catalyst for violence. Expectations of his imminent passing have created a febrile atmosphere in the ranks of his Zanu-PF party, which shares power in an uneasy coalition. Far from seeking to restore honest governance, Mr Mugabe's would-be successors plot and scheme, seeking ways to protect vested interests.

On the other side of the political divide, opponents anticipate revenge for those who lost their lives at the hands of state-sanctioned thugs and mourn the hundreds of thousands who died as a result of hunger and disease, brought about by gross mismanagement.

Others bitterly recall the army's slaughter of some 20,000 civilians in the southern province of Matabeleland in the early 1980s – and their demand for retribution could well exacerbate ethnic tensions between the country's Shona majority and the Ndebele.

Meanwhile, efforts by southern African leaders to resolve the crisis are again running into the sand. The commitment to “free and fair” elections, the cornerstone of a fragile agreement that brought the opposition into government, has been fatally undermined. There is convincing evidence that Mr Mugabe’s agents have fiddled the electoral register.

The need to ease these tensions, encourage contacts that go beyond the formal and official and break a deadlock seems clear. However, when a senior British politician this month indicated his willingness to respond to an overture from Harare and meet Mr Mugabe for a private exchange, provided such an initiative had the Foreign Office blessing, the response from London was unequivocal.

If there were to be any contact, said an official, it would be between the two governments. But as matters stood, ministers were “determined” to have nothing to do with the regime “directly or indirectly”.

This London-knows-best attitude contrasts starkly with the treatment of the white minority regime of Ian Smith, which issued a unilateral declaration of independence in 1965. This act of defiance led to a guerrilla war, which ended with an independence constitution negotiated at London’s Lancaster House in 1979.

During these years, scarcely a month went by without a diplomatic initiative of one sort or another, in which the way had been paved by a succession of intermediaries and honest brokers. Today, the need for reconciliation is almost as urgent. The agenda might include the merit of an amnesty for those who admit and repent their political and economic crimes, for example; or urging the Commonwealth to play a greater role; or seeking the support of the governments of Mozambique and Zambia to provide land for the resettlement of Zimbabwe’s commercial farmers.

Far from keeping a distance from such discussions, Britain should be active in promoting them – not just biding time until the passing of Zimbabwe’s leader. The experience of Lancaster House should be kept in mind. Three decades later, it is time that talking began again.

The writer is a former Africa editor for the Financial Times

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