

Encircling Zimbabwe: between friend and foe

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The African continent is again under the spotlight with the ongoing crisis in Côte d'Ivoire and another one continuing to develop in Zimbabwe. The Côte d'Ivoire conundrum is extensive and has been aggravated throughout the past months. Two factions with military capabilities and certain ethnic alignments battle through civilian life in support of different leaders. The possibility of a scenario of sorts has been revived in Zimbabwe, after the gradual collapse of the power-sharing government between President Robert Mugabe and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and the successful election of a Speaker of Parliament from the latter's party – the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Both countries have similar diplomatic nuances that must not be excluded when crises occur. In fact, Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire's different political factions are now battling in a broader, foreign theatre, looking for support wherever it may exist. Both are part of the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and both are also inserted in regional organizations with similar powers and characteristics, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Although there exists no evidence to argue that the political problems of Zimbabwe will evolve into Côte d'Ivoire's civil war, it is

however relevant to question the regional mechanisms in place, their capacity to intervene and the political and military availability of the SADC to create a scenario close to what ECOWAS achieved by condemning Laurent Gbagbo's grip on power.

With regard to Côte d'Ivoire, both the UN and the AU have in different stages backed-up the ECOWAS' proceedings and refrained from taking more concrete actions, either through substantially limitative resolutions or through enhancing peacekeeping missions on the ground. Yet, ECOWAS has been actively involved in trying to oust Laurent Gbagbo from power, by suspending Côte d'Ivoire's membership in the organization¹ and even by threatening military intervention at one point.² The ECOWAS has maintained an overall degree of unity when dealing with Côte d'Ivoire and Laurent Gbagbo. However, it is not certain that in the event of armed conflict in Zimbabwe, the SADC will be able to adopt a similar position and isolate Robert Mugabe from the regional and larger international community.

1 Paul Oklo, "Ivory Coast suspended from ECOWAS amid presidency crisis, Jonathan says" (*Bloomberg*, 7 December 2010).

2 Honore Koua, "ECOWAS bloc to give Laurent Gbagbo 'last chance'" (*Africa Review*, 26 December 2010).



It is important to note that both organizations are made up by regional states, each with specific interests and political rhetoric, and all possessing different yet particular problems. In the case of ECOWAS, the only country with significant political power to change the outcome of the Côte d'Ivoire's conflict is Nigeria. It is vastly more developed in economic and military terms than its colleagues, although it is also experiencing a period of limited instability. On the other hand, the SADC has not one but several powerful countries, ranging from regional power house South Africa to economic and military giant Angola and development champion Botswana, to name just a few. The fact that the disposition of power is not centralized in one regional state, but rather dissolved in many poles of influence and military might, will only strain the SADC's autonomy to undertake multilateral action, as unilateralism proves to have sufficient strength to block any measure the organization chooses to take. A brief examination of each SADC country's position with regard to the Zimbabwean power-sharing crisis might shed light on the impact these difficulties will have on any SADC resolve that attempts to go beyond classic rhetoric and political condemnation.

Although Botswana and South Africa are established democracies, with the latter already involved in the Zimbabwean crisis, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) will probably produce different opinions and judgements with regard to Robert Mugabe's rule over the country. The recent constitutional changes in Angola and the affirmation of its regime have created conditions which allow its diplomacy to object to any action that involves foreign intervention of any kind, be it political or military, thus protecting its own regime. Although Angola appeared to take Laurent Gbagbo's side during the first stages of the Côte d'Ivoire electoral issue – but recently committed to the AU's pro Alassane Ouattara position – President José Eduardo dos Santos always supported a peaceful, non-evasive solution to the crisis, even when the ECOWAS was making its readiness to resort to military action known. Everything points to a similar behavior with regard to Zimbabwe if the political crisis

worsens. Angola will be hosting the 31st SADC Summit in Luanda, and will take its presidency in August 2011, a position which allows it to shelter its opinions and provides higher international visibility to Angola's plans and policies due to a possible association of the organization with Angola's term. On the other hand, Joseph Kabila's DRC will most likely share this line with Angola and refrain from adopting a harsher stance. Although presidential and legislative elections are scheduled for this year in the DRC – which is itself a point of contention between the DRC and SADC – Robert Mugabe was an important ally of Joseph Kabila during the Second Congo War, committing

approximately US\$2 million per day in his aid,³ a substantial support Joseph Kabila cannot disregard when his ally is under regional pressure to leave office.

The most attentive of all SADC members has been South Africa. After Thabo Mbeki's 'quiet diplomacy' failed to produce any results, Jacob Zuma took over the case as SADC's facilitator. Jacob Zuma, who was seen as an ally of Robert Mugabe, has had meetings with opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, even before the March 31st Summit of the troika of the SADC Organ on Defense, Security and Political Cooperation⁴ took place, which adopted a more 'hostile' rhetoric, calling for an immediate end to violence, intimidation, hate speech and harassment. On his part, Robert Mugabe continues to argue that the facilitator's job is to facilitate dialogue, not to dictate upon Zimbabwean internal problems.

Botswana has also expressed concern with the ongoing situation

in Zimbabwe. By far one of the leaders most critical of Robert Mugabe, President Ian Khama has accused the latter of failing to honor the power-sharing agreement and even called for fresh elections. Indeed, Ian Khama appears to be one of the most critical voices in the entire

3 Alan Little, "Civil war: Joseph Kabila's inheritance" (*BBC News*, 24 January 2001).

4 The SADC troika is chaired by Zambian President Rupiah Banda and was attended by South African President Jacob Zuma and his Mozambican counterpart President Armando Guebuza. President Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai and Deputy Prime Minister Arthur Mutambara were also present at the summit.

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SADC universe, but not without reason. Much like South Africa, Botswana is struggling to keep its borders sealed from the many Zimbabweans illegally entering the country to flee political oppression and economic meltdown. Botswana has already closed its embassy in Harare,⁵ a decision followed by Botswana Foreign Minister Phandu Skelemani's call for the region to sever all foreign relations with Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Another harsh critical voice is Zambian President Rupiah Banda, who reportedly told Robert Mugabe to 'shut up' when he was attempting to explain the recurrent political repression of his regime – even accusing him of 'talking non-sense'⁶ during the troika meeting.

On the other hand, there are other countries who are neither staunch defenders nor harsh critics of Robert Mugabe. Apart from the countries mentioned above, Mozambique, Tanzania and Namibia have either had meetings with the MDC leadership or have stated they wish for a peaceful solution to end the current political conflict in Zimbabwe, thus refraining from committing any further political capital to SADC's efforts.

There are lingering problems with SADC's approach which most likely derive from the lack of unity and common ground its member states have to condemn or even conceive a potential intervention in Zimbabwe. Unlike the ECOWAS, so far the SADC has been unable to congregate in a productive way, although the tables seem to be turning for Robert Mugabe, especially since South African President Jacob Zuma adopted a much tougher stance towards his regime. While the outcome of this political crisis is still unclear, it is apparent that the SADC possesses neither the strength nor the unity to make its policies significant, a weakness revealed when Robert Mugabe refrained from adopting any of SADC measures without significant

regional consequences. Having supporters like Angola and the DRC waiting in the wings only further underpins the problems of political consistency blocking the SADC's sphere of action.

Now that militia loyal to his opponent has cornered Laurent Gbagbo, it is rather difficult to imagine a situation where the MDC could not only successfully do the same, but also do it without foreign countries assisting Robert Mugabe. Perhaps regional unity and a limited degree of internal conflict is enough to oust a power thirsty leader. Yet, these conditions fail to reflect on Zimbabwe's tough reality for the time being.

5 "Botswana-Zimbabwe: Botswana to close its embassy in Harare" (UNHCR, 5 December 2008).

6 Fortune Tazvida, "Shut-up, you're talking nonsense" - Zambian President told Mugabe" (*Zimbabwe Mail*, 4 April 2011).

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