

Why rejoining the Commonwealth is such an enticing prospect for Zimbabwe's new regime

Sue Onslow explores why rejoining the Commonwealth is an attractive proposition for Zimbabwe's new President.

Rejoining the Commonwealth has been a key element of the mood music of Zimbabwe's foreign policy of 'robust reengagement' with the international community under President Emmerson Mnangagwa. At first glance, this seems something of a diversion from the pressing domestic issues facing the new ZANU-PF leadership. International commentators were quick to point out last November that the parlous state of the Zimbabwean economy demanded [massive foreign direct investment](#) and emergency lines of credit to address multi-lateral debt, as well as re-engagement with the Lima Process. Furthermore, there were [issues of rampant corruption](#), the acute cash shortage, woefully depleted public services, and pressing need for reform in the public sector where [civil service salaries consume nearly 90 per cent of state expenditure](#). Yet, signs of Zimbabwe's reengagement rapidly gathered momentum. In a statement in the House of Commons on 20 November 2017, UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson 'backed [Zimbabwe's] "fine and noble aspiration" [of re-joining the Commonwealth], but stressed the African nation had much to do to restore its international reputation before it could be welcomed back.' Scarcely a week later, following on from the then UK Minister for Africa Rory Stewart's lightening visit to Harare to meet newly-inaugurated President Mnangagwa, the Times of London reported Zimbabwe had [opened talks with the UK about 'rejoining the Commonwealth'](#).



Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa has made rejoining the Commonwealth a key priority for his government Image Credit: UN Geneva via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Intrigued by this seeming unlikely alignment of British foreign policy with the 'new dispensation' in Zimbabwe, I visited Harare in mid-January to investigate the level of interest in this issue, and to ask why was renewed membership of this financially-straitened 'club', whose relevance is publicly questioned in the British media, deemed such an attractive proposition? Surely [Chinese](#) and [other foreign direct investment](#) was of much greater importance?

The responses surprised me, as did the uniformly positive emphasis that I had arrived at an opportune and appropriate time to ask these questions. Views among ordinary Zimbabweans in Harare ranged from the generic – a wish for access to Commonwealth scholarships and the associated chance to establish lasting professional networks established through student experience at UK universities, participation in the Commonwealth Games, memories of Commonwealth teachers and pen friends (representing being part of a wider world, than Zimbabwe's current isolated position) – to the specific, most notably a profound hope that the current restrictive UK's visa regime would be more sympathetic to Zimbabwean visitors if the country was back in the Commonwealth. I also encountered a hope that 'robust engagement' with the Commonwealth could offset Chinese business penetration of Zimbabwean markets by widening the pool of possible foreign investors, as well as boosting Zimbabwean confidence to drive a harder bargain with their Chinese business interlocutors. There was an associated hope that Commonwealth reengagement would accelerate the removal of US sanctions and the few remaining EU measures, which are still deemed to taint the Zimbabwean business environment.

At an elite political and civil society level, attitudes were decidedly mixed. I was warned of a discernible undertow of enduring resentment towards the Commonwealth among what might be termed the ZANU-PF 'hard core'; however, that there was also an emerging dominant view that reengagement with the Commonwealth would be a much needed and rapid foreign policy success. I encountered an edge of outright impatience – a product of a brisk, goal-driven military mindset among the new Foreign Minister SB Moyo and his special advisers – and friction with the more cautious bureaucratic attitude of career diplomats within the Department of Foreign Affairs, which stressed careful strategies, strict hierarchies and control of lines of communication. Among leading opposition figures, there was keen interest in the Commonwealth dimension offering a wider environment within Africa to foster change in Zimbabwean institutions, diluting any enduring sense of a colonial 'axis' between London and Harare. The Commonwealth was seen as typifying an African philosophy of learning from one another, therefore detoxifying Western pressure for change. Therefore, domestic sensitivities that Zimbabwe was being hauled into the dock for persistent violations or misdemeanours, would be eased by the argument of Commonwealth African countries already possessed a template for, say, security sector reform, or local government administration and engagement with wider society, which the Zimbabwean government could usefully emulate. (This viewpoint came from a leading member of the Parliamentary committee on multilateral engagement.) There was also the desire for knowledge transfers in how to handle international negotiations which, it was believed, the Commonwealth could support. In addition, the Commonwealth was seen as a potential source of practical help on land questions (harking back to the assistance the Secretariat offered in the 1990s, in collaboration with UNDP).

Overall, I repeatedly encountered the phrase describing reconnection with the Commonwealth as 'low hanging fruit': that the Commonwealth offered an apparent quick diplomatic success for the ZANU-PF government, regaining a kite mark of respectability in the international community, very much in keeping with Mnangagwa's instruction to ministries to achieve discernible success within 100 days; and its varying forms of 'soft power penetration' and multi-layered connectivity would rapidly foster the image of a more benign new dispensation, putting a clear stamp on the post-Mugabe era. Altogether, then, a reboot of ZANU-PF using foreign policy to protect the regime, and continuing to ensure its political hegemony.)

In contrast, there was acute concern among opposition MPs and civil society actors that by rushing through re-engagement, the Commonwealth would be endorsing the unconstitutional change of leadership in November 2017, raising the likelihood of this happening again in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the Commonwealth thereby risked debasing its own moral currency as a values-based association committed to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The proponents of this view were kicking as hard as they could against the 'stability' narrative of accepting the 'soft' or 'non-coup' and concentrating exclusively on economic revitalisation. Directly associated to this profound anxiety, was the expressed fear that the Commonwealth, by reengaging too quickly would simply solidify ZANU-PF's authoritarian practices, and undercut any impetus for reform. Leading opposition MP Tendai Biti, in particular, was emphatic that the Commonwealth should negotiate from a standpoint of *distrust*, not trust. This made me wonder whether this was symptomatic of fundamental opposition weakness and division (there are currently 99 registered political parties in the country), and redolent of a hope that the international community could oblige ZANU-PF to introduce meaningful change, which the opposition cannot. The current government certainly faces huge challenges in trying to manage its narrative of change, without allowing licence for vocal criticism and calls for retribution beyond a narrow few. The Mnangagwa government's handling of the Gukurahundi issue is going to be a test case.

I then watched as the public narrative of rapid re-connectivity gathered momentum. On 2 February, on her first overseas visit, the new UK Minister for Africa, Harriet Baldwin was [assured](#) by the Zimbabwean head of state that his country would re-join the Commonwealth 'this year'. This was followed shortly afterwards by Foreign Minister SB Moyo's statement to the Zimbabwean parliament in mid-March that discussions were underway, culminating in his visit to London during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting from 16-20 April 2018.

What to make of all this? Care is certainly needed not to conflate improved British-Zimbabwean bilateral relations with Zimbabwe's rapid readmission back into the Commonwealth, but the two are firmly connected. The UK, evidently driven by the energy and particular input of the British Ambassador in Harare, has indeed been a leading supporter of Zimbabwe's return. However, although the UK has just hosted the 2018 Commonwealth summit and consequently was a crucial player in setting the agenda of the heads of government meeting, and will occupy the 'chair-in-office' role until the next Commonwealth summit in two years' time, Britain does not enjoy special privileges within the association. There are Commonwealth [established processes for joining the Commonwealth](#) and yardsticks of assessment, which have evolved since President Mugabe flounced out of the Commonwealth in December 2003, just before Zimbabwe's continued suspension for human rights violations around the 2002 elections.

The upcoming elections, due by August 2018, are going to be a vital yardstick to assess Zimbabwe's democratisation processes and progress. Mnangagwa has publicly [invited the EU](#) and AU to send observation teams, commenting he also 'is disposed' to [consider an approach from the Commonwealth](#). In normal circumstances, Commonwealth observation teams are only dispatched at the member country's express request. So there clearly needs to be some protocol fudges here, since Zimbabwe is not yet a member. There are issues around cost – the 2002 team was 45-strong – but there is a strong likelihood that this will be separately met by the British and Australians. Furthermore, as elections are generally deemed to have been 'stolen' months, if not years, before the election, a Commonwealth election observation team would need to be on the ground well in advance of the actual polling date. There remain substantial questions around whether these will indeed be free and fair elections: there are outstanding issues around the appointment of the Chief Election officer; debates around whether [reforms to the Electoral Act will be implemented in line with the 2013 Constitution](#); concerns over management of data collected by the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) process; anxieties whether there are sufficiently robust IT management systems on collection and data storage, accessibility and security of information; enduring issues around [freedom of the media \(especially local radio\) and coverage of all political parties](#); and whether or not the electoral campaign is [marred, as before, by violence and intimidation](#).

Will Zimbabwe then achieve the perceived 'low-hanging fruit' of successful re-engagement with the Commonwealth sufficiently quickly to satisfy the military mind-set? If the Commonwealth is to retain its credibility and not merely reach comfortable accommodation with ZANU-PF's determined maintenance of power, the forthcoming elections cannot be taken as a token manifestation of adherence to the democratic values embedded in the Harare Declaration of 1991 and the Commonwealth Charter. A Commonwealth judgement on [how free and how fair is going to be key to Zimbabwe's reengagement](#).

Dr Sue Onslow is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Advanced Study in the University of London and Deputy Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.