

SADC and RSA positions on Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth

1. Letter by Mr Aziz Pahad, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, South Africa, to Business Day, Johannesburg, 9 December 2003.

Your article titled “Pull out deals blow to Mbeki” on 9 December needs a response.

I don't understand how the journalists can conclude that the “policy of quiet diplomacy is in tatters”. What is the alternative? Moreover the committee of 7 has been mandated to dialogue with all parties in Zimbabwe to assist the Zimbabweans to find a solution to their economic, political and social crisis. They will be using so-called quiet diplomacy.

Tom Lodge's unsubstantiated view that “Mbeki never likes to admit that [he] is wrong” and that “government's policy is so vague, so subtle, so nuanced, that it scarcely amounts to a policy” is not worthy of “professors” of political science.

Lodge's conclusion that “within Africa Mbeki looks weak and within the Commonwealth he will be taken less seriously” and Solomon's view that “Mbeki has no credibility as a leader” is remarkable for its naivete.

SADC in a statement expressed its “strong disagreement” with the decision not to allow Zimbabwe back into the councils of the Commonwealth. It further expressed the view that the decision will do nothing to assist the people of Zimbabwe to overcome their present difficulties. As we warned, it has resulted in Zimbabwe withdrawing from the Commonwealth. The present situation in Zimbabwe calls for engagement...and not isolation and further punishment.

The SADC statement reflects the consistent view held by the South African government, viz, that we are extremely concerned about the political, economic and social crisis in Zimbabwe and that bilaterally and through SADC and the AU we will spare no effort to find a solution in the interests of the Zimbabwean people. We believe that SA and the international community must assist in creating the conditions for the government and the opposition MDC to dialogue to resolve the Zimbabwean problem.

We have also consistently argued that forums like the Commonwealth provide opportunities to openly and frankly discuss all issues, including Zimbabwe, so that a common approach could be developed to resolve any problems. Therefore we argued against Zimbabwe's continued suspension. The continued suspension is procedurally wrong and undermines the very principles of democracy that many claim to champion.

Zimbabwe's predicted withdrawal from the Commonwealth, once sanctions were re-imposed, will only deepen the divide within the Commonwealth and brings into sharp focus the debate about the relevance of the Commonwealth.

“Professors” and “analysts” have a responsibility to make informed analysis and not be driven by the political baggage they carry.

Note: This letter has been lightly edited.

2. Statement on the continuation of the suspension of the suspension from the councils of the Commonwealth

We, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) members of the Commonwealth supported by some members of the Commonwealth, wish to voice our strong disagreement with the decision not to allow Zimbabwe back into the Councils of the Commonwealth as reflected in the Abuja Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) Statement on Zimbabwe.

We are concerned that the matter of Zimbabwe's participation seems to have been prejudged, considering the pronouncements made by some members prior to the finalisation of this matter.

This decision will do nothing to assist the people of Zimbabwe overcome their present difficulties. As we warned, it has resulted in Zimbabwe withdrawing from the Commonwealth.

The present situation in Zimbabwe calls for engagement by the Commonwealth and not isolation and further punishment. We reaffirm our determination to continue to assist the people of Zimbabwe.

We also wish to express our displeasure and deep concern with the dismissive, intolerant and rigid attitude displayed by some members of the Commonwealth during the deliberations. The Commonwealth has always operated on the basis of consensus. We fear that this attitude is destined to undermine the spirit that makes the Commonwealth a unique family of nations. This development does not augur well for the future of the Commonwealth.

Issued on behalf of Lesotho as Chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security, 9 December 2003