

How will mediator really help Zimbabwe?

Mkapa will be sidelined from structural issues

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ALTHOUGH the former president of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa, was appointed some months ago as a mediator between Zimbabwe and Britain, it was only recently that the spotlight fell on him.

Some days before the seventh African Union Summit in Banjul a fortnight ago, media reports created a lot of excitement, wild expectation and sensational hype over an alleged rescue package for Zimbabwe by the United Nations boss, Kofi Annan. The media argued that the UN boss would meet the Zimbabwean leader, President Robert Mugabe, at the margins of the summit and present him with a retirement package that would also include massive injection of international aid to normalise the political situation and resuscitate the ailing economy.

It was as if this was a done deal; Zimbabwe's crises would have been solved once and for all. Dragging President Thabo Mbeki into the mix, the media also suggested that he would attend the meeting as its architect. None of this happened and as some analysts had correctly predicted, Mugabe rejected Annan's initiatives.

The critical question however is whether Zimbabwe needs a mediator? What options does Mkapa have? Frankly, I do not think Zimbabwe needs a mediator. Zimbabweans need to negotiate among themselves. Anything from outside should be an addition and not an alternative.

The crisis in Zimbabwe is a structural one, one of governance, economic meltdown and political misadministration. It is not primarily one of strained bilateral relations between Harare and London, a premise on which Mkapa has been appointed.

There is suspicion already that he is very close to Mugabe and as such he is not credible, especially in the eyes of the opposition, civil society and other pro-democracy groups.

It is also possible that the Harare regime might have taken advantage of this closeness to confine Mkapa's role to mending relations between Harare and London, rather than as a mediator in the internal political and economic crises.

What further exacerbates the situation is a scenario where the British might refuse to negotiate. What can Mkapa do? I am convinced that the crisis in Zimbabwe right has forced both the opposition and Zanu-PF into readiness to negotiate a solution. But the real test is whether the British and other European counterparts are also ready.

The fundamental problem is that Britain will not negotiate with Mugabe in the current state of the country. The current British policy towards Zimbabwe is that pressure must be put on Mugabe to change his policies . And so until that happens, it is not possible to hold mediation.

What then are Mkapa's options? I agree with a colleague who is of the view that Mkapa will not add anything new if his mandate is to mediate between Harare and London.

There is a possibility of a stalemate due to Britain's insistence on a reversal of government policies and Harare's intransigence. But Mkapa can be of value if he convenes an international conference on Zimbabwe, possibly mandated and supported by the African Union, SADC, the UN and the South African government, to deal with issues ranging from the rescue package to political and economic stabilisation and normalisation. Its participants would include Britain, America, the EU, UN, AU, SADC, civil society formations, South Africa and other important stakeholders.

Resolutions made in this conference ought to be binding on all parties.

A conference of this nature has more clout than a dialogue between Britain and Zimbabwe.

I think this is the only level where Mkapa has leverage and his mediation role can be effective.

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