

# **Commodifying Oppression: South African Foreign Policy towards Zimbabwe under Mbeki**

***By Dale T. McKinley (March 2003)***

**Comments can be sent to the author at:**

[drdalet@metroweb.co.za](mailto:drdalet@metroweb.co.za)

Since the late 1990s onset of what has been called, the Zimbabwean 'crisis', virtually all attempts at explaining (or rationalising) South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe have been dominated by a one-dimensional focus on the political context of policy-making. In the few instances where economic considerations have come into play, the arguments have focused on altruistic motivations to avert a complete 'collapse' of the Zimbabwean economy and prevent any associated domestic and/or regional contagion.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, this article argues that South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe has been, and continues to be, driven by the combined, and in this case complementary, class interests of South Africa's emergent black and traditional (white) bourgeoisie (whether located in the public and/or private sectors). Put another way, South African policy can best be understood, and explained, by critical reference to the political economy of a renewed South African sub-imperialism.

## **The poverty of the Zimbabwe 'debate'**

Under the stewardship of Thabo Mbeki (whose ascension to the office of the President in 1999 was paralleled by intensifying political and economic problems in Zimbabwe) South African policy towards Zimbabwe has been the subject of a great deal of both positive and negative attention. In South Africa, public opinion and analysis has generally, if often unevenly, been divided along racial lines with

the obvious exception of the large number of black Zimbabweans now residing here as a direct result of the multiple crises afflicting their home country.<sup>2</sup>

The main reason for this racial divide has been the dominant perception amongst South Africans that the land 'reform' policy of the Mugabe regime, which is an integral component of the contemporary Zimbabwean crisis, is fundamentally defined by issues of race. For Mbeki's ANC government, and most black South Africans, Mugabe's land policies represent, at their core, a genuine attempt to address what Mbeki calls "one of the enduring legacies of colonialism", namely large-scale white ownership of land at the expense of the black majority. For the majority of the white population and the predominately white political opposition, Mugabe's land programme is viewed as a disingenuous and politically motivated attempt to maintain power at the expense of white Zimbabweans (and, to a much lesser extent, a sizeable portion of black Zimbabweans who do not support Mugabe's ZANU-PF party and government). This racial divide on the Zimbabwean 'question' is also reflected at the international level. The result is that the majority of nations positioning themselves 'against' Mugabe are predominately Northern and white, while most of those siding 'with' Mugabe are predominately Southern and non-white.

The most publicly visible manifestation of this racialised divide can be seen in the ongoing 'battle' within the Commonwealth, especially as applied to the 'troika' of Commonwealth nations (South Africa, Nigeria and Australia) tasked with monitoring and evaluating the situation in Zimbabwe. The fact that the recently held Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement gave unqualified political support to the Mugabe regime at virtually the same time that Australia, Britain and the United States were successfully pushing for the renewal and extension of 'smart sanctions' against Mugabe and his cronies, supports the public perceptions (real or imagined) that racial solidarity has been the driving factor behind policy stances towards the Zimbabwe crisis.

This unfortunate, but somewhat predictable, racial polarisation has impoverished much of the 'debate' on the historic origins and contemporary character of the Zimbabwe crisis<sup>3</sup>. In the context of South Africa's foreign policy towards

Zimbabwe though, it has tended to completely obscure any meaningful analysis of the very real economic motivations behind South Africa's policy and the attendant politics that so effectively conceals such motivations. The result has been the domination of a very narrow analytical approach to explaining the primary factors behind South African foreign policy towards Zimbabwe. A classic example can be found in the analysis of Dr. Siphosiso Buthelezi from the influential and generally pro-government South African think-tank, The Africa Institute<sup>4</sup>.

According to Buthelezi, the primary explanatory factor behind South Africa's 'constructive engagement' policy is the desire to ensure that there is no collapse of the 'sister' Zimbabwean economy, whose health is so important to South Africa (the inherent assumption being that such a 'collapse' has not already occurred for the majority of Zimbabweans). This factually suspect contention then explains the "cautious" approach towards the Mugabe regime on the issues of political repression and general abuse of human rights, the parallel desire of the Mbeki government evidently being to coax 'Comrade' Mugabe into gradual political changes that would prevent the 'collapse'. The analysis is further supported by Buthelezi's argument that the 'quiet diplomacy' of the Mbeki government is under-girded by fears of South Africa being seen as the "hegemon" in the region (and continent), the desire here being one of avoiding a 'unilateralism' that would be at the expense of smaller African nations such as Zimbabwe<sup>5</sup>. It does not take a leap of analytical faith to see that the dominant 'effect' of such analysis is to confirm the primacy of racial and political solidarity in deciphering South Africa's Zimbabwe policy.

While other secondary explanations have been put forward by political analysts, such as Mbeki's continued adherence to a political Pan-Africanism and the sorry state of land reform in South Africa itself<sup>6</sup>, Buthelezi's arguments capture the main contours of what has passed as the dominant analytical foundation for explaining South African foreign policy towards Zimbabwe. The widespread acceptance, either actively or passively, of such primary explanations indicates the extent to which an alternative, and more relevant, class analysis of South African foreign policy has been sorely lacking.

### The class basis of South African policy

Just before Zimbabwe's national parliamentary elections in early 2000, that took place within a context in which Mugabe's ZANU-PF regime was facing the first real political challenge to its 20-year hegemony from the upstart opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the Mbeki government announced an economic "rescue package" for the Mugabe regime of close to R1 billion<sup>7</sup>. Not surprisingly, the explanation that came from sympathetic economists and foreign policy analysts at the time was that such financial support was a pre-emptive move by the Mbeki government to halt the decline of the Zimbabwean economy in the interests of the Zimbabwean people, South Africa and the Southern African region.<sup>8</sup>

However, upon a closer inspection of the targets of the "rescue package" it becomes clear that the real beneficiaries of this evidently neighbourly philanthropy are South African government parastatals (all of which are now either partially privatised and/or corporatised) and government-controlled financial institutions. By early 2000 one of the targets, the Zimbabwean electricity parastatal (ZESA), was estimated to owe its South African counterpart (ESKOM) in the region of R300 million. Similarly, the government owned-National Oil Company of Zimbabwe, the country's sole oil procurement agency, was estimated to owe over R250 million to its suppliers, with one of the key suppliers at that stage being the South African oil/coal parastatal – SASOL. Part of the "rescue package" also included more than twenty joint investment projects in Zimbabwe, in the areas of infrastructure, tourism and natural gas exploration "involving South Africa's state-owned corporations such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the Industrial Development Corporation"<sup>9</sup>.

As has been clearly evident in South Africa since Mbeki ascended to the political throne, the main means of facilitating the construction and expansion of a black bourgeoisie politically and economically tied to the ruling ANC party, has been through the direct and/or indirect manipulation of state resources and power. The majority of the so-called 'black economic empowerment' schemes have been initiated by ANC aligned politicians-cum-capitalist entrepreneurs, who have used

their political and personal connections with ANC leaders in government to gain financial backing for the launch of private corporations<sup>10</sup>. It is then this emergent black capitalist class (alongside their political counterparts in the ANC government) who benefit, politically and economically, from the privatisation and corporatisation of parastatals that proceeds apace. Likewise, this class has benefited handsomely from the billions of Rands that continue to be pumped into 'black economic empowerment' via government-controlled financial institutions and through the national fiscus<sup>11</sup>.

Against such a backdrop, the "rescue package" provided to the Mugabe regime was anything but a genuine attempt by the Mbeki government to help the Zimbabwean people out of a rapidly escalating crisis and in the process shield the region from the associated 'contamination'. Rather, it was the first major step in what has become a race against both time and Mugabe, to secure the economic (read: class) interests of an emergent black South African bourgeoisie, in both the state and private sectors, through the auspices of a 'foreign policy' smokescreen. While there is little doubt that the package assisted Mugabe's ZANU-PF in narrowly scraping through the 2000 elections (with the help of some serious state intimidation, violence and electoral fraud), the longer-term importance resides in the considerable economic (class) foothold gained via Zimbabwean indebtedness and South African investment and trade options.

Indeed, the ANC government's cynical political support for Mugabe during the 2000 elections is best understood as a pre-emptive political tactic to stave off the potentially negative consequences that an electoral victory by a relatively unknown and potentially unfriendly political force, the MDC, could well have engendered. If the MDC had (formally) won the 2000 election, the ANC government and the South African capitalist interests it incubates and supports would have been at a distinct disadvantage in relation to the contending interests of capitalists (both Zimbabwean and international) that supported the MDC. By providing political support and legitimacy to the (victorious) Mugabe regime, Mbeki's government was ensuring the longer-term security and expansion of South Africa's (capitalist) economic 'investments' in Zimbabwe while

simultaneously tying the future health of Mugabe's capitalist cronies to South African investment/patronage<sup>12</sup>.

Somewhat ironically, given the overt racial politics that most often has provided the contextual milieu to Mbeki's approach to Africa-specific foreign policy issues, initiatives such as the Zimbabwe "rescue package" have also provided white South African capital with political space for pursuing their own economic interests in that country. Mbeki has made a veritable religion out of his public pronouncements assuring domestic (white) South African capital, as well as international capital, that the ANC government will never follow Mugabe's example of either land 'reform' or contempt for the 'rule of law'. And yet, Mbeki's political rhetoric, as exemplified in the rationalisation of economic 'support' for the Mugabe regime and the embracing of the fraudulent results of Zimbabwe's 2000 elections, played to the ANC's majority black constituency whilst providing political cover for investment in Zimbabwe by both black and white South African capital<sup>13</sup>. South African Foreign Minister, Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma provided the classic (foreign policy) rationalisation for the government's stance – "we are not going to be combative with Zimbabwe ... we will exercise responsibility"<sup>14</sup>.

Once the more immediate 'challenge' of the 2000 elections had been dealt with, Mbeki launched into a disingenuous and racialising rhetoric as a means to deflect attention (and analysis) away from the objective realities of both South African policy and Mugabe's continued (mis)rule. On a visit to Zimbabwe not long after the elections, Mbeki claimed that the "clamour over Zimbabwe reveals (the) continuing racial prejudice in South Africa" and announced that, "President Mugabe and I will meet ... to pursue the objectives of peace, stability, democracy and social progress for Zimbabwe, South Africa and the rest of the region"<sup>15</sup>. Such diversionary ploys only provided added space for the corresponding intensification of South African economic 'intervention' and, internal crises, in Zimbabwe. The ANC government and its capitalist counterparts continued with their business of 'buying-up' more of Zimbabwe, complemented by the Mugabe regime's unremitting efforts to ensure the disintegration of the central pillars (both public and private) of the Zimbabwean economy.

### The rationale of South African sub-imperialism

The cumulative effect of South Africa's policy approach between the 2000 parliamentary elections and the presidential elections in March 2002 was to effectively institutionalise Zimbabwe's political and economic crisis. Knowing full well that the Mbeki government would continue to provide political cover and economic sustenance to his regime (despite the occasional public criticism to mollify western governments and capital<sup>16</sup>), Mugabe was 'free' to intensify the scope of state repression against any political opposition, pursue the corrupt and commandist programme of 'land reform' and gain maximum elite 'booty' (while bleeding the national fiscus) from the Zimbabwean army's presence in the DRC.

By the time of the 2002 elections, Mugabe's proto-fascist rule, solidified by the crucial backing of the Mbeki government, had all but guaranteed the outcome of the election. On the eve of the election, and realising the need (at the rhetorical level) to give a veil of legitimacy to an electoral process that had already been completely hijacked and raped by Mugabe and his thugs, Mbeki once more played the race card. Rather than face up to the reality of what was about to happen, Mbeki defended Mugabe by accusing the "white world" of a "stubborn and arrogant mind-set (that) at all times must lead ... its demands must determine what everybody else does". With a cynicism that would have made Machiavelli proud, Mbeki went on to "appeal to all our brothers and sisters beyond the Limpopo river and province to reaffirm their commitment to democracy".<sup>17</sup>

Helped along by the political naiveté of the MDC (that had no other political strategy than to contest an election under conditions that virtually assured its illegitimate outcome), Mugabe's ZANU-PF succeeded in making a mockery out of even the limited (bourgeois) democracy that had survived up until the election. As if on cue, the ANC issued a statement gleefully proclaiming that, "the will of the people of Zimbabwe has prevailed ... President Robert Mugabe has won the presidential elections with an overwhelming majority".<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the ANC dominated Parliament and the National Cabinet of Ministers quickly followed suite, giving unqualified endorsement to its electoral observer mission report that the elections had been "credible and legitimate".<sup>19</sup> Such hypocritical

rationalisation was to be expected from those whose own class interests and accompanying economic strategy required the political survival of the Mugabe regime.

More important though, was the ANC's framing of what was now required of the Mugabe regime, the South African government and the region as a whole in order to find "solutions" to the "problems" facing Zimbabwe. In absolute synchronicity with the overall strategic thrust of the Mbeki government's policy approach (and the class interests it represents) to Zimbabwe up to this point, the ANC stated that, the "focus" must be "on the fundamental task of reconstruction and development to ensure a better life for all Zimbabweans".<sup>20</sup> What better and more opportunistic way to provide the necessary policy framework for codifying and expanding the presence of South African capital in Zimbabwe than to present the 'challenge' as one which could only realistically be 'met' by increased penetration (and ownership) of that same capital?

In the months following the 2002 elections, the Mbeki government and the ANC itself made every attempt, through public statements and diplomatic manoeuvring, to push such a strategy. Whether as applied to their calls for the dropping of 'smart sanctions' against the Mugabe regime or to the attempts to quietly persuade Mugabe to tone down internal repression, the underlying principle remained the same – managing the Zimbabwean 'crisis' through its political rationalisation, as a means of ensuring shorter-term benefit from, and longer-term control of, the Zimbabwean economy.

MDC President, Morgan Tsvangirai became so exasperated at the South African strategy (partly because the MDC itself had shown no willingness or capacity since the election, to mobilise the majority of Zimbabweans in the face of an intensified political and economic crisis) that he launched a bitterly worded attack on Mbeki and South African policy at the end of 2002. Tsvangirai accused Mbeki of being a "dishonest broker" and South Africa of becoming "part of the Zimbabwe problem because its actions are worsening the crisis"<sup>21</sup>. What Tsvangirai failed to grasp however, is that the "worsening of the crisis" (in relation that is, to the material existence and political opinions of the majority of Zimbabweans) is not the



primary concern of Mbeki and his government's policy towards Zimbabwe. Indeed, as long as Mugabe occupies, even if shakily, the political driving seat, the strategic impetus behind South African policy will remain the degree to which the 'crisis' facilitates the longer-term interests of an emergent black bourgeoisie in South Africa that aspires to both regional and continental ascendancy.

What should have been analytically clear a long time ago, but which has become practically visible in the last several months though, is that South African foreign policy towards Zimbabwe is not umbilically tied to the continued personal rule of Mugabe. Recent and ongoing behind-the-scenes attempts, facilitated by the South African government and ANC-aligned capitalists, to ease Mugabe out of power and replace him with more maleable ZANU-PF leaders is a clear indication that the character of Mbeki's Zimbabwe foreign policy has nothing to do with political loyalties and altruistic economic motivations<sup>22</sup>.

The attempt to forge an elitist political deal (masquerading as a consensual 'government of national unity') should be seen as what it is - confirmation that Mbeki's bottom line remains one of securing the strategic interests of South African capital whilst simultaneously consolidating his government's 'role' as the main African arbiter of both a regional and continental capitalist political economy. Further, if Mbeki can oversee the installation of a 'new look' ZANU-PF government that is more 'acceptable' to the international financial institutions (World Bank & IMF) and the core capitalist states in the North, then he will have doubly succeeded, further cementing South Africa's position as sub-imperial power number one in the neighbourhood.

The double (and complementary) tragedy of Zimbabwe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be clear for all to see. On the one hand, the gradual but systematic oppression of the Zimbabwean people by a shrewd comprador megalomaniac and his acolytes who have sold the lives of the vast majority of Zimbabweans down the metaphorical 'river' of power and greed. On the other, the equally gradual but systematic loss of any meaningful popular and sovereign control over, and 'ownership' of, domestic wealth and economic resources to South African

capitalists (using the vehicle of the government they run) who have commodified the oppression of the Zimbabwean people for their own class power and greed.

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<sup>1</sup>Other than a few discussion documents emanating from think tanks (e.g. The Africa Institute, IDASA) and the ANC, there has been precious little analysis of South Africa's contemporary foreign policy towards Zimbabwe on offer. Descriptive journalistic and/or advocacy articles have dominated public discourse on South Africa's involvement with the Zimbabwean 'crisis'. The overwhelming focus of the books and academic journal articles dealing with Zimbabwe, that have appeared since the late 1990s, has been on the internal character of Zimbabwe's political economy.

<sup>2</sup> While there are several thousand white Zimbabweans resident in South Africa there are, by anyone's count, hundreds of thousands of black Zimbabweans who live in South Africa on a permanent basis, the vast majority of whom can be classified as economic refugees. Since the elections of 2000 though, there have been growing numbers of black Zimbabweans who have fled to South Africa to escape the widespread political repression of the Mugabe regime.

<sup>3</sup> There are several exceptions to this. However, the most incisive analyses of the Zimbabwean crisis have come from academics, whose work has not been readily available to the general populations of either Zimbabwe or South Africa. Two examples of such analyses are: Brian Raftopoulos and Lloyd Sachinkonye (eds) (2001), *Striking Back: The Labour Movement and the Post-Colonial State in Zimbabwe, 1980-2000*, Harare, Weaver Press; and, Patrick Bond and Masimba Manyanya (2002), *Zimbabwe's Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice*, Scottsville, University of Natal Press.

<sup>4</sup> Despite claims of 'independence', the origins of The Africa Institute (probably the most influential think-tank in the realm of South African foreign policy) lie in the desire by the ruling ANC to have a sympathetic, black intellectual counter-balance to the historic dominance of more oppositional white intellectuals and think-tanks. Virtually all the public documents and presentations emanating from The Africa Institute have provided intellectual support for Mbeki's foreign policy approach, whether as applied to Zimbabwe or more generally.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Siphosiso Buthelezi (25<sup>th</sup> February 2003). Seminar talk on Zimbabwe presented at The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation - Johannesburg.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Calland, "A Betrayal of Democracy", *Mail & Guardian*, 14-19 March 2003 and, Greg Barrow, "Mbeki's Dilemma over Zimbabwe", *The Guardian*, 13 March 2001. Barrow argues that, "Mbeki has to be very careful not to criticize a leader in a neighbouring country who appears to be doing more to help rural black people".

<sup>7</sup> See "Zimbabwe: SA Economic Aid", <http://www.irinnews.org>, *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Integrated Regional Information Network*, electronic news item, 14 February 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Also see, "Zimbabwe: Economic Rescue Package", <http://www.irinnews.org>, *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Integrated Regional Information Network*, electronic news item, 22 February 2000. This report also quotes a SASOL spokesperson as indicating that SASOL was in talks with the Zimbabwe government to supply a large portion of the country's fuel requirements.

<sup>10</sup> To name but a few of the more prominent individuals that are now to be found in the private sector - Cyril Ramaphosa, Nthato Motlana, Shaiber Shaik, Brigitte Radebe, Patrick Mosepe and Tokyo Sexwale. Additionally, within the public sector there has emerged a sizeable class of individuals, all Rand millionaires via the salaries and share deals they receive, whose new found class status is wholly dependent on the continued privatisation and corporatisation of public assets being carried out by the Mbeki government. In an indication of just how rapid has been the ascent of this new black bourgeoisie, a late 2002 article in the *New York Times*, quoting from a study done by the University of South Africa, revealed that back in 1996 blacks' share of the after-tax income received by the wealthiest fifth of South Africans was 13 percent. Only four years later, blacks' share of the income of the richest group had risen to 23 percent. See, Rachel Swarns, "Rich but Not Comfortable, in South Africa's Black Elite", *New York Times*, 2 August 2002.

<sup>11</sup> In the past four years, The Mbeki government, guided by the neoliberal GEAR macro-economic strategy, has targeted all of South Africa's main parastatals for either privatisation and/or corporatisation. Within the framework of GEAR, Mbeki has made it very clear that one of the

priorities of the ANC government is to build a new black capitalist class as the engine of economic growth in South Africa. As practical indication of this, the 2003 National Budget allocated R10 billion to 'black economic empowerment', the majority of which will find its way into the pockets of a very small minority of aspiring black capitalists. To put this in perspective, in the same budget less than R2 billion was allocated to combat HIV-AIDs over the next two years (in a country with the highest prevalence of HIV-AIDs in the world) and less than R4 billion for specific 'poverty alleviation' programmes (in a country with an unofficial employment rate of close to 40%) .

<sup>12</sup> The 'capitalist cronies' are mainly to be found in the ranks of senior politicians, military officers and banking officials (within both public and private banks), all of who have 'black economic empowerment' initiatives to thank for their position and wealth. They have played (and continue to play) an important role in providing Mugabe with access to substantial funds (often through black market transactions) for sustaining state patronage and its repressive apparatus. For an MDC perspective on the role of the bankers in particular see, "MDC on Monday: The Dictator's Bankers", *Daily News*, 9 September 2002.

<sup>13</sup> See Barrow (2001). Any South African who has visited Harare and other major urban centres in Zimbabwe over the last 2-3 years will have felt quite at home given all the South African companies now operating (and dominating) the Zimbabwean retail sector. Whereas ten years ago, Zimbabwean companies provided a majority of goods and services in the domestic retail sector, the contemporary situation makes Zimbabwe resemble a tenth province of South Africa.

<sup>14</sup> Marco Granelli, "SA won't condemn Mugabe", *The Saturday Star*, 16 February 2001.

<sup>15</sup> See, Thabo Mbeki – Letter from the President, "Clamour over Zimbabwe reveals continuing racial prejudice in SA", *ANC Today*, Vol.1, No.9 (23-29 March 2001) –

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/ancoday/2001> The quotes are referenced by Mbeki to a speech he made in Bulawayo in May 2000, one month after the Zimbabwe elections.

<sup>16</sup> Even the mild criticisms that emanated from the South African government as a result of 'playing up' to the likes of Australia and Britain in the Commonwealth (and the US and other G-8 countries in order to 'cover' support for NEPAD and the impending African Union), caused enough consternation amongst Mugabe's cronies for them to issue (through the editors of the government-owned *Herald* newspaper) a stinging – if opportunistic - rebuke of Mbeki for being in the "same bed with the architects of apartheid". See, *The Herald*, 3 December 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Thabo Mbeki, Letter From the President, "Zimbabwe: Two blacks and one white", *ANC Today*, Vol.2, No.10 (8-14 March 2002) - - <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/ancoday/2002>

<sup>18</sup> "Zimbabwe Presidential Elections: Time for Healing; Time for Reconstruction and Development", *ANC Today*, Vol.2, No.11 (15-21 March 2002) -

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/ancoday/2002>

<sup>19</sup> See the lead editorial in, *Mail & Guardian*, 22-28 March 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan Tsvangirai, Address at a meeting with MDC members of Parliament at Party Headquarters - Harvest House, Harare, 18 December 2002. Posted on the website of the Centre for Civil Society (University of Natal – Durban) – <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs>

<sup>22</sup> Allister Sparks, "Plots Abound as ZANU-PF Leaders try to shed Mugabe, Pacify MDC", *AllAfrica.com*, 18 February 2003 – <http://allafrica.com/stories/200302180512.html>. Sparks tells the 'story' of how MDC MP, David Coltart, flew to Johannesburg in early December 2002 at the behest of a "prominent South African businessman", to meet with a relatively unknown ANC politician, Patrick Moseke. According to Sparks, Moseke informed Coltart that ZANU-PF kingpin, Emmerson Mnangagwa had paid an earlier visit to talk with the South African government about plans to ease Mugabe into the ceremonial position of President. Mnangagwa would take over as Prime Minister, get rid of the more "egregious" ZANU-PF leaders (such as Information Minister Jonathan Moyo and Commissioner of Police, Augustine Chihuri), bring the MDC into the government and "restore the rule of law".