

A Cry for Zimbabwe

A Moment to End the Repression—Unless the World Retreats Into Silence

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Zimbabwe, long plagued by the repressive leadership of President Robert Mugabe, has reached the point of crisis. Leaders of the democratic opposition were arrested and beaten, and one was killed, while attempting to hold a peaceful prayer meeting on March 11. Morgan Tsvangirai, head of the Movement for Democratic Change, emerged from detention with a swollen eye and a fractured skull. Several days later, Nelson Chamisa, the movement's spokesman, was stopped en route to a meeting with European officials and beaten with iron bars. Other activists have been prevented from leaving the country to seek medical treatment for wounds inflicted by police.

Unrest has continued, as have the violent crackdowns. Mugabe, stubborn and unrepentant as ever, has vowed to "bash" protesters and dismissed international criticism as an imperialist plot. Although anti-government feelings are prompted by the regime's lack of respect for human and political rights, Mugabe's poor management of the economy is also to blame. The inflation rate, more than 1,700 percent, is the world's highest, while an estimated four out of five people are unemployed. Zimbabwe, once Africa's breadbasket, has become, under Mugabe, a basket case.

The crisis in Zimbabwe raises familiar questions about the responsibilities of the international community. Some argue that the world has no business interfering with, or even commenting on, the internal affairs of a sovereign state. This principle is exceptionally convenient for dictators and for people who do not wish to be bothered about the well-being of others. It is a principle that paved the way for the rise of Hitler and Stalin and for the murders ordered by Idi Amin. It is a principle that, if consistently observed, would have shielded the apartheid government in South Africa from external criticism and from the economic sanctions and political pressure that forced it to change. It is a principle that would have prevented racist Rhodesia from becoming Zimbabwe and Robert Mugabe from ever coming to power.

We are not suggesting that the world should intervene to impose political change in Zimbabwe. We are suggesting that global and regional organizations and individual governments should make known their support for human rights and democratic practices in that country, as elsewhere. We should condemn in the strongest terms the use of violence to prevent the free and peaceful expression of political thought. We should make clear our support for the standards enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Given Mugabe's consistent unwillingness to respect the legitimate complaints of his people, this is not the

time for silent diplomacy. This is the time to speak out. It is especially important that members of the African Union and Southern African Development Community (SADC) raise their voices, for they have the most influence and can hardly be accused of interventionism. As the examples of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela remind us, it is never inappropriate to speak on behalf of justice.

As in South Africa, the solution to the economic, political and social quagmire in Zimbabwe is open dialogue -- perhaps facilitated by the SADC -- that includes all relevant parties and leads to an understanding based on support for democracy and respect for the legitimate rights of all. To this end, the government of Zimbabwe should cease its abusive practices, repeal draconian laws and bring the electoral code into line with regional and international standards.

Presidential and parliamentary elections that are transparent and considered to be legitimate by the people of Zimbabwe and by local and international observers should be held. Should Mugabe decide to run for president again, as he has said he might, the world will have to make an effort to ensure that balloting is fair. However, Mugabe's own party, which includes responsible and moderate elements, might well consider whether the time has come for a new leader.

With crisis comes opportunity. This is the moment for political and civic leaders in Zimbabwe to unify around a common goal: a peaceful and democratic transition. Members of the opposition would be well advised to overcome their differences and to speak with a single, strong voice. In this way, reformers can demonstrate to the people of Zimbabwe and to the world that there is a viable and patriotic alternative to the repressive and misguided leadership under which the country has suffered for so long.

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