

Focus

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Zimbabwe's bad example

THERE ARE THOSE who would conclude that the stench from the recent election in Zimbabwe confirms the death of democracy in that country, and perhaps in the region. Such a conclusion, to paraphrase Mark Twain, might be a "bit premature."

Having said that, the bell does toll for the Mugabe regime, and it's ringing loudly. Robert Mugabe's time has clearly come and gone. Whether we measure it in terms of his violation of the rule of law relative to the land seizures or election rigging. Or, whether we base it on what Zimbabwe was at independence versus what it is now.

I first went to Zimbabwe in 1982. The name of the capital city was still Salisbury, and Harare was the center of black life in the area. The Zimbabwe dollar had near parity with the US dollar, the nation was the breadbasket for the region, and it was a beacon of hope and a place that refugees from other countries went to find sanctuary.

Today, the currency trades at around 260 to the dollar, the country will need hundreds of millions of dollars of food aid, and Zimbabweans now flee their homeland seeking sanctuary and hope in other places. Mugabe's time is up, and the evidence is overwhelming. But that is not the only lesson to be gleaned from this latest debacle in Zimbabwe. There are other very important lessons to be learned.

■ Lesson number one. While Mugabe's masquerade as a champion of freedom and fairness is over, the masses of people in Zimbabwe demonstrated overwhelmingly that they desperately want democracy to prevail. The turnout for the election far exceeded what we see in the way of turnout for elections here. Not simply was the turnout overwhelming, but people also endured the inconvenience of long lines and the threat of intimidation and death in order to cast their votes. That's being serious about democracy!

■ Lesson number two. The unilateral efforts of the West, however well intentioned, are not the most effective way to further movements for democratic governance. The European Union's sanctions, and the US support for such, did not work in ensuring that the Movement for Democratic Change got a fair shot in the Zimbabwe election. What we should appreciate is that such unilateral action comes across as "preachy" and self righteous at best, or paternalistic at worst.

If we want to be helpful, it is important to work in partnership with regional

leadership to find solutions to regional problems. Having recently met with the chairman of the Southern African Development Community, Malawian President Bakili Muluzi, I know that the leadership in the region was as aggrieved and concerned about the situation in Zimbabwe as anyone in the world community. The opportunity for partnering with the regional leadership was there for the making.

Had that opportunity been pursued, quite possibly the outcome in Zimbabwe would have been different. And, if not, at the least a framework for solving the problem could have been put in place.

■ Lesson number three. While

Robert Mugabe is currently the most visible African leader on the front pages of western newspapers, he should not be portrayed as the *face of African leadership*. Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa is not Mugabe, nor is South African President Thabo

Mbeki. Botswanan President Festus Mogae is not Mugabe. Nor are Tanzania, South Africa, and Botswana Zimbabwe. There are leaders and countries on the continent of Africa that are serious about democracy; they are not simply talking the talk, but walking the walk. They deserved to be acknowledged as such; and they deserve our support.

If we are as serious about democratization in Africa as the hubbub would suggest, we need to appreciate the further lessons that are reflected in the total picture coming out of Zimbabwe and the region. We must remember that democracies in their infancies are not what they can be when they mature. We know as much based on our own experience.

Lest we forget, such anachronisms as the Electoral College were put in place to correct the mistakes of the people and not necessarily reflect the will of the people. We must remember, as reflected in the controversy of our last election, that democracy is sometimes "messy."

This is not to say that the election in Zimbabwe reflects any of the above, it is simply to say that we must engage the leadership of these nascent democracies reflecting our experiences, and not our arrogance. If we do, we will be able to share some valuable insights and encourage the needed perseverance if the grandest designs and loftiest hopes of the leaders and people are to be realized.

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Don't judge
African
democracy
by Mugabe.