
Why SA and the UK fear Mugabe

Brandon Hamber

E NGLAND's November and December cricket tour of Zimbabwe received extensive coverage in the British press. In one week nearly 60 000 words were printed on it in the London-based tabloids alone.

It has been a fiasco. The British government said it opposed the tour, given Zimbabwe's track record on human rights. But it claimed it would be risking being sued if it forcibly prevented the tour. The British government diverted attention from its own dithering by blaming the International Cricket Council for not taking a moral stand by calling a halt to the tour and for threatening to impose stiff penalties on England for failing to appear.

The South African government continues its so-called back-door diplomacy with Zimbabwe, a strategy that is tantamount to implicit support.

The England and Wales Cricket Board has continually looked for a way out of the moral dilemma of playing in Zimbabwe, given its dodgy human rights record. But they are yet to confront the issue head-on.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network estimates that 2,2-million rural Zimbabweans need food aid. The security budget will increase from about \$16m this year to \$70m next year. The economy is in free fall.

Human rights violations are undeniable. These are set to increase before the elections next year, especially because human rights groups will be prevented from monitoring such abuses under the Non-Government

Organisation Bill. Cricket is a minor issue to most human rights organisations.

Mugabe is playing the world for a fool. He can get away with this because the South African and British governments, which can do something decisive about the Zimbabwean situation, both have their own reasons for not rocking the boat too much.

Mike Selvey, writing in the Guardian recently, noted that the inaction of the two governments was linked partly to other sporting events.

During the Cricket World Cup, SA, despite its power as host nation, did little to deal with the Zimbabwean question. This was because it feared losing the votes of Zimbabwe and other African nations for its Soccer World Cup bid if it acted against Zimbabwe. With London's 2012 Olympic bid being launched recently, the British government is in a similar position.

Selvey concludes that for the South African and British governments the stakes attached to their various international sporting bids "in financial and prestige terms" seem to be "higher than a handful of morals".

Given its colonial history in the region, the British government also does not have a solid moral foundation to use as a platform for taking resolute steps. It seems afraid of accusations by Mugabe of racism and of him dragging their exploits in Iraq into the mix.

The African National Congress (ANC) government, on the other hand, seems to be wedded to the notion that it owes the Mugabe government something because of its support during apartheid. Who it really is indebted to, however, is not Mugabe but the Zimbabwean people, who would be better off without him.

The only way the British government is going to react decisively is if there is growing domestic and international pressure. This pressure should mount first from the southern African region.

The key to this is the ANC. If it begins to criticise Mugabe explicitly and robustly, the floodgates could open. As a result, the domestic pressure on the British government would force it to get off the fence and take a firm stand supporting a boycott.

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