

Portugal and its former colonies rediscover an old idea whose time has come

Back in about 1985 I found myself in a far-off capital musing together with an ANC leader who shall remain nameless about the manifold sins and wickednesses of colonialism.

"You know," said this paragon of political virtue, who had been kind enough to open her house to me, "I am so pleased we were colonised by the English." I nodded gratefully.

"Just imagine being Mozambican and being colonised by the Portuguese. A bunch of peasants, man."

Well, if she is to be believed, there you have it: the probable reason Mozambique has joined the British commonwealth and part of the explanation for other former Portuguese colonies, such as Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe, moving closer to the francophone commonwealth of nearly 50 countries.

Yet last week in Lisbon, these former Portuguese colonies, together with Angola, Brazil and Cape Verde, joined Portugal to form a seven-nation commonwealth, the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries. The new grouping will have no trade or currency dimension, nor is travel between its member to be made any easier. It is a politico-cultural group whose main effect is likely to be diplomatic and only indirectly economic.

The idea of forming a lusophone commonwealth has been around for two decades. But it has come to nothing in the past, partly because of charges that it would amount to neo-colonialism and partly because of complications caused by wars in Angola and Mozambique.

Its take-off now seems to be explained by what is often referred to as "the crisis of the nation state", and also owes much to the ambitions of Portugal and the most powerful of its former colonies, Brazil.

But to talk of the crisis of the nation state in relation to a country such as Angola or Mozambique may be to engage in flattery. For what we might usefully call a nation has not developed within either country since independence.

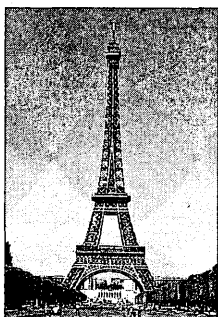
In the old days, Portuguese colonial governments could exercise their writ over only parts of these territories. And since the mid-1970s the governments in these two former colonies have done no better.

Of course, as might you, I wish it were otherwise. But the trend continues. These governments exercise no significant control over their economic policies, let alone influence within their economic environments.

In extreme instances, such as in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the popular experience of a change of government may be little more than the

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FROM EUROPE



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passing of one robber baron in favour of another. Even in less desperate circumstances, combination with other countries has come to seem one solution to weakness.

So it is that a country like Mozambique, the poorest in the world, should benefit from membership of the British and lusophone commonwealths.

But the countries that reckon they have the most to gain from the new grouping are Brazil and Portugal.

Brazil's economy is back from the brink. If emphasising a shared language helps Brazil win big contracts in oil-rich Angola, then that is certainly a good enough reason to do so.

Brazil also has an ambitious diplomatic agenda. Along with other Third World states, it has been arguing for a restructuring of the United Nations, particularly of the security council. Bluntly, Brazil believes it should have a permanent seat on the council along with Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.

Portugal's motivations are also diplomatic and economic. It hopes the commonwealth will increase its (feather) weight in the European Union. Moreover, Portugal is angling to be elected next year to one of the rotating security council seats for two years.

But the economic reasoning is far stronger. Portugal has been slow to take advantage of the long-term opportunities that have opened up in Angola, while Mozambique's port at Maputo, its infrastructure and commerce are now being drawn again almost wholly into the South African economy.

So what was Portugal to do? Clearly, it believed it had to exercise whatever leverage it could to secure the potential benefits of its own colonial legacy. And by the time the seven heads of government met in Lisbon last week, global developments meant that the commonwealth was an old idea whose time had come.

It did not require any special peasant cunning to see that.