

Southern Africa News Features

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UK's POLICY TOWARDS SOUTHERN AFRICA: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

By Masimba Tafirenyika

On 9 April Britons go to the polls to elect a new government that will run their country for the next four years. Outsiders will once again focus their attention on Britain's foreign policy, reviewing past policy and assessing the possibilities of any future changes, not least its southern African policy.

While the ruling Conservatives under the leadership of Prime Minister John Major are looking forward to a historic fourth term in office, Neil Kinnock's opposition Labour Party supporters hope to reverse the trend of three election defeats at the hands of the former Premier Margaret Thatcher.

The dramatic change of governments in Eastern Europe and the demise of the Soviet Union and their need for foreign aid have put these countries in direct competition with Africa for economic aid and foreign investments. There are growing fears that Africa may find itself marginalized as Western nations devote attention to propping up Eastern Europe's fragile governments.

As Britain, facing its longest recession since World War II, goes to the polls, bread and butter issues, not foreign policy, have been dominating the campaign. The situation has been exacerbated by growing unemployment, fuelling concern among Tories as their party faces its toughest electoral battle since February 1974 when Edward Heath lost marginally to Labour.

A similar pattern towards down-grading foreign policy is emerging in the United States as the campaign for November elections gains momentum.

This is hardly surprising because in times of international recessions, nations tend to concentrate on domestic issues. As a result foreign policies are usually relegated to the back seat. The current adverse international economic climate will likely mean less aid to developing countries in general and Africa in particular.

More and more African countries are embracing multi-partyism and the concept of free market economic systems. Whether these will act as a panacea to Africa's current economic crisis is still anybody's guess.

Addressing the annual general meeting of the Southern Africa Association in London recently, the British Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Lynda Chalker, admitted that "democracy does not of itself guarantee economic growth."

True, otherwise how would one explain the current economic recession that has caused general hardships and uncertainty among the British and the Americans, citizens of traditionally democratic countries.

Among foreign policy analysts in southern Africa, the absence of fundamental differences in the foreign policies of both the Conservative and Labour parties has robbed the election of the enthusiasm that has characterized past elections.

British policy towards southern Africa has generally been one of sympathy and support. This is hardly surprising considering that its "policymakers do not see their prime function as shaping events in Africa, but as defending British interests as they relate to the continent," according to Roger Martin, a former British career diplomat in southern Africa, who at one time served as deputy high commissioner in Zimbabwe.

Southern Africa has the highest concentration of British investments in Africa. Consequently, any government that seeks to protect these investments is guaranteed the support of Her Majesty's government.

The departure of the "Iron Lady" from the helm of British politics and the many advances that have been made towards dismantling apartheid in South Africa, accompanied by current moves to lift sanctions, have removed potential areas of foreign policy disagreements between Labourites and the Tories.

The problem of removing apartheid has dominated various British agendas over the last few decades. Britain's foot-dragging policy on the imposition of sanctions against South Africa at one time made it a country southern Africans loved to hate.

Fortunately, as a dilution to its intransigence to penalize South Africa, Britain provided support to most, if not all, the countries in southern Africa. It supports the Mozambican government in its fight against the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR).

Mozambique was, and still is, seen as "the geographical key to the region (because of its transport routes) and Zimbabwe the political key (because of its political, economic and military pre-eminence).

This led to the military training of Mozambican soldiers by the British army in eastern Zimbabwe to help improve efficiency in the war against MNR. The training continues even up to today and no change is expected with a Labour government.

Recently the Mozambican President, Joaquim Chissano, named Britain as one of the official observers to the current peace talks in Rome. Britain has vowed "to promote an early and full ceasefire in Mozambique, a durable peace agreement and the earliest possible elections under a multi-party system".

In Angola, Britain has diplomatic relations with the ruling-MPLA government, unlike the United States. According to Chalker, her government's policy towards Angola for the next 12 months is to "contribute to the maintenance of peace; a successful transition towards multi-party democracy; an economic reform programme backed by IMF; the development of that country's great economic potential and greater British interest in playing a part in that development."

Britain is one of the many Western countries providing support to Zimbabwe's Economic Adjustment Programme (ESAP), to help it create conditions attractive to foreign investors.

If the Conservatives are returned to power, Britain's southern African policy within the next 12 months, as spelt out by Chalker will seek:

- to encourage all sides in South Africa to conduct serious negotiations on a new constitution, to end political violence, to develop a transitional framework for government within which sensible economic and social policies can be implemented and to prepare for democratic life;
- to persuade the international community to underpin the constitutional reform process by relaxing trade and financial sanctions, by renewed access to the IMF and World Bank, by encouragement of new investment and by carefully targeted aid;
- to help the new Zambian government to develop IMF-backed economic reforms, and strengthen democracy;

- to improve respect for human rights in Malawi;
- to encourage regional political co-operation and increasing economic integration.

Britain has been, and continues to be, one of the major donors of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) since its formation in 1980.

The government has also pledged nine million pounds to help southern African countries cope with the problems caused by prolonged drought that is ravaging the region. The countries expected to benefit are Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

In the event of a Labour government coming into power in the April elections, continuity rather than dramatic changes in policy would be the safest bet. (SARDC)

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