

# ***Thinking on the Withdrawal of Zimbabwe From British Commonwealth in 2003***

Yu XIANG

School of Law  
Jiangnan University  
Wuhan 430056, Hubei, China;

**Abstract**—On December the 7th of 2003, the government of Zimbabwe declared its formal withdrawal from the Commonwealth. This essay tries to analyze this political event from the point of political science, holding the view that Zimbabwe's democratic political system lacks necessary independence; there was potential conflict between the economic structure and the democratic system. On the other hand, Zimbabwe has grown strong feeling of nationalism through its long experience of colony and there also existed political and cultural differences between African countries and the developed countries in the Commonwealth. These enable us to have a better understanding why Zimbabwe has taken such a strong stand in this event.

**Keywords**—Zimbabwe; Robert Mugabe; The British Commonwealth

## I. INTRODUCTION

On May the 21st of 2018, Zimbabwe applied to join the Commonwealth after it has been suspended from the Commonwealth for over 15 years. So we can't help thinking about the reasons why Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth so firmly. In December, 2003, Zimbabwe declared its formal withdraws from the Commonwealth after The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) decided to continue Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth. On the surface, the reason seemed to be the extremely negative attitude held by the developed countries alliance in the Commonwealth towards the human rights and democracy condition in Zimbabwe. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in March, 2002, Australia, British and other western countries blamed Robert Mugabe for his persecution imposed on the candidate of the opposition in the election. Then they executed economic sanction against Zimbabwe and also decided to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth for temporarily one year. One year later the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting insisted on the continuous suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, which led Zimbabwe's firm assert to withdraw from the club.

According to the writer, there is not only one reason for any political affairs. You will find different answers to any affairs if you try to do analysis from different angles. This paper tries to peer into this event from the point of political science.

First of all, it is necessary to introduce the Commonwealth which is the other side involved in this event. Originated from the British Empire, the Commonwealth is a union consisting of

Britain and its former colonies and dependent countries which have already gained independence. After the First World War, under the pressure of the increasing passion for the national liberation movement in the colonies, Britain tried to balance the relationship with its former colonized countries. In 1926, the internal relations committee of the Imperial Conference proposed that Britain and its former colonies Canada, Australia and South Africa were "the members of the Free association of the Commonwealth". They were united together by the loyalty to the King of Britain with equal status and being independence in domestic and foreign affairs. Five years later, The Statute of Westminster affirmed this legally. Since then, the Commonwealth established formally. In 1949, member country India became a republic country and elected their head of state. Therefore, Britain changed the principle "the members of the commonwealth should be loyal to the king" into "the members of the free united association", which means Britain king is the head of the Commonwealth, but is no longer the ruler of the Commonwealth. Since then, the Commonwealth became a loose confederation in which all the members have economic and political cooperation and negotiation with each other. However, there is wide gap between the poor members and the rich members. Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are all developed countries, while some others are developed countries and even some are underdeveloped countries. The poor need financial and technological help from the rich, and the rich need the raw materials, labor and market of the poor. So mutual economic assistance and mutual economic benefit became the main feature of the Commonwealth. But because of the wide economic gap between them, there are signs showing the developed countries within the Commonwealth try to integrate the Union with their own values through the way of economic aids. This make the loose Confederation loses cohesion to its member countries and some developing member countries gradually lose their faith in the Commonwealth.

## II. UNSYNCHRONIZED POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT LED TO THE WITHDRAWAL OF ZIMBABWE FROM THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH

One reason that directly triggered the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth was the persecution imposed on the candidate of the opposition in the election by the party in power led by Robert Mugabe. Another reason came from the land reform launched by the government. On February 28th, 2001, tortured by long-term poverty, the black grabbed white farmers' land violently. Government of

Zimbabwe took acquiescence attitude towards this, and also launched the fast track land reform in 2001 forcing the descendants of the white settlers to transfer their land to the poor black, which violated Britain and other developed countries' interests in African. So the Human right problem proposed by the Commonwealth to some extent reflected the fact that the land reform policy which harmed the interest of the white settlers led to the dissatisfaction of some developed counties in the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, the land reform movement revealed some problems in the process of Zimbabwe's political development.

One of the main problems left by the colonial period of Zimbabwe was the land dispute between the white and the black. Owning 70% of the land the white made up less than 1% of the total population in the country when the country gained independence. "So in this African country, on the one side is a succession of villas and farms cultivated with machine by the White, whereas barren land cultivated with manual labor and shabby huts scatter on the other side. The wide gap between the poor and the rich was due to the colonists' plunder of the land, which was also the main reason why the black lived in poverty for so long time."<sup>[1]</sup> Facing this, the newly established government did not introduce efficient policy. In 1997, the government planned to nationalize 1500 farms, but finally the government only got back 500 farms. 500 thousand black families that had no land at all waited in despair and then became despair while waiting. Facing the slow process of land reform, many black lost their patience, so the storm of the black grabbing land of the white broke out. This event also showed the fact that the political system can't satisfy the need of the society. The government could not provide efficient land reform policy to ease the tension between the black and the white which led to the turbulence of the social order and the political situation. As the leader of the national independence movement, the government in power realized an average increasing rate of 4. 5% per year in agriculture, making the country one of the few African country which could export crops to other countries. Thus the government got support from the Black citizens. But what on earth led to the lack of ability for the political system to meet the demand of the society.

*A. The low level of political institutionalization and the political system lack necessary independence.*

According to Huntington, "the autonomy of the political organization and political procedures within the political system is one important factor that measures the level of the political institutionalization."<sup>[2]</sup> That is to what extent the political organization and political procedures can be independent of other social organizations. The land problem showed that Zimbabwe's political system need economic support from the developed countries in the Commonwealth and the white farmer within the country. The democratic union of Zimbabwe presented by Robert Mugabe and other liberation organizations just attracted followers with the slogan of land reform. In 1979's negotiation launched by the British, the democratic union of Zimbabwe led by Robert Mugabe and other liberation organizations made great compromise on the land problem and accepted the oral promise that the American and Britain governments would pay for the land Zimbabwe government bought from the white farmers. Zimbabwe

government also promised not to grab the land of the white farmers forcefully and agreed to launch the land reform under the principle of free trade. All this content has been written into Lancaster Constitution, which put up obstacles for the later land reform. According to the theory about the political development in developing countries, the early modernizers' political development set an example in aim, direction and the route for the developing countries. So the developing countries would follow the way of the developed countries consciously or unconsciously. Different from the self-development of the earlier modernizers, the developing countries began their political development in a international society featured with obvious dependence relationships. Just like Zimbabwe, dependence on the developed countries made the structure and function of its political system become fragile and weak. Right after the independence movement, the government led by Robert Mugabe realized that the land problem concerned about the stability of the political regime, because the voters who supported the ruling party were mainly black who had no land at all. So from the year 1980, the government tried to promote the land reform with efforts. They purchased land from the white and then distribute the land to the black. But the process went slowly and the picture in which the black without land labored for the white with little pay remained almost the same. With the obstacles from the western society, the government found it very difficult to achieve success in the reform. Both the USA and Britain did not realize their promise to pay for the land purchased by the Zimbabwe government for the reason that the land reform was not transparent. Insisting on the Lancaster Constitution, the white farmers did not agree to transfer the land without a large amount of money paid by the government. Agriculture was the pillar of Zimbabwe's economy, which provided 69 percent raw materials for the industry and also consumed 66 percent of the industrial products. Without support from the developed countries, Zimbabwe government had no choice but to undertake a radical land reform which worsened the economic situation. We can see the failure of land reform in turn re-enforced the government's dependence on the farming economy, putting the government in dilemma. From all this, we can find the political system lack necessary independence and flexibility to deal with the social issues in the country.

*B. Tension between the backyard farming economy and the democratic system*

After the independence movement, Zimbabwe established the western-style political system, setting up congress elected by the public and allowing several parties chasing for seats in the congress. Since 1980 the democratic union of Zimbabwe led by Robert Mugabe has been in power, and the predecessor of the ruling party was Patriotic Front which was once the leading party in the independence movement. So generally speaking, the authority in power after the independence movement to some extent was on behalf of the benefits of the mass of the blacks. For the purpose of racial reconciliation, the ruling party accepted the mediation of the western countries, agreeing to settle the land problem through the way of peaceful purchase. But in this way, the government has lost control of settling the land problem. Without the financial help from the western countries the government had no money to pay for the land. And on the other hand, if the government plundered the

land owned by the White, then the Lancaster Constitution would be violated. So we can see that the farming economy and the political system did not get along well with each other. There existed a potential game and contradiction centering on the land dispute, which underlined social turbulence and political instability. With the independence movement going far away, charismatic power of the leader could no longer gain enough legitimacy for the government. Public recognition for the government relied on what the government has done and how much welfare the government has brought for the public. When the government failed to settle the land dispute over so many years, supporting rate for the government of the public, especially the black who made up 90% of the total population dropped gradually. In 1995, Robert Mugabe was reelected as the president with a narrow majority. The government showed mercy towards the Black soldiers when they grabbed land from the white farmers, so that most black would support the present government in the following election. We can see it was the sticking out of the contradiction between the farming economy and the political system that triggered a series of social and political crisis.

### III. POLITICAL CULTURE DIFFERENCES LED TO THE WITHDRAWAL OF ZIMBABWE FROM THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH

From the above analysis we can see that the resolution made by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting only suspended Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth continuously. CHOGM also proposed that if the Human right condition in the country improved then the door of the Commonwealth would be open for Zimbabwe. Still there were also disagreements as for the continuous suspension resolution within the Commonwealth. But why Zimbabwe refused the membership so firmly? We can consider this from the perspective of political culture. According to American political scientist Lucian Pye, "political culture is the composite of basic values, feelings, and knowledge that underlined the political system."<sup>[3]</sup> Hence we can say political culture is the mindset that decides people's political behavior and has great effect on how the political system functions.

#### A. *Strong Feeling of Nationalism*

Since the British colonists Roz and Rad began their colonial expansion in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) with the South African companies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, large amount of resources in this country were plundered by the colonists. "Firstly they plundered the treasures underground; then they grabbed the land, they forced the black to labor for them in the mine. Some Black was forced to leave their rich soil and cultivate on barren land, and still many became homeless, wandering everywhere. Land passed onto them by their forefather was controlled by the colonists all of a sudden."<sup>[4]</sup> From the year 1923 to 1963, the white racist legalize the fact of grabbing land from the black. The colonial experience produced strong feeling of nationalism in Zimbabwe, which led to the highlight of sovereignty in foreign affair. Anything that might be harmful to the sovereignty of the country could lead to strong reaction, because this would remind people in the country of the hardship and humiliation they have experienced in the colonial period. So when the developed countries in the

Commonwealth criticized Zimbabwe's domestic affairs under the name of human rights and democracy, they tended to consider it to be a challenge and threat to the integrity of their sovereignty. Just as the president asserted "we will absolutely not sacrifice our sovereignty for the membership of the Commonwealth"<sup>[5]</sup>, when he declared the withdrawal of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth.

#### B. *Culture difference between the "African alliance and the White alliance" in the Commonwealth*

Most member countries in the Commonwealth are developing countries from Africa which are called African alliance, and the others are developed countries represented by Britain which are called white alliance. Due to their different history and tradition, both the developed countries and the developing countries in the Commonwealth evolved different political culture. The former emphasized the value of liberty, democracy and equality. They considered these values to be universal, making efforts to spread them to other countries. This intention is good and sincere, but it can also become the excuse of power politics and interventionism. Especially when the other countries do not have appropriate social and economic condition to cultivate and develop such values, blind transplant of such values might have negative results. Influenced by the wave of democratization, most African countries, including Zimbabwe established their democratic system at a low level of economy. Reflecting the situation in Zimbabwe, uneven allocation of land, wide gap between the white and the black, low level of economy development, we can see the condition could not support the realization of the so-called free, democracy and equality. Influenced by the wave of democratization, the political system built in this country actually lacked the nature of democracy. Just like what Huntington described "the level of economic welfare in a society shapes the values and attitude of their citizens, that means high level of economic welfare promotes mutual belief among its citizens."<sup>[6]</sup> With large amount of resources distributed among different social group, societies become more open and the citizens are easier to accept the democratic values held by the industrialized societies. So the universal values held by the western society are based on a strong economy and the blind transplant of the values on a low level economy can only cause reverse psychology and resistant behavior. The withdrawal of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth is just one example.

### IV. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we can see the withdrawal of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth show us that there was potential conflict between the farming economy and the democratic system. Only when this conflict was settled, can the economy become strong enough to pave way for the breeding and forming of the values held tightly by the western countries, which in turn can consolidate the democratic system in Zimbabwe. Past experience showed Zimbabwe government itself could not reconcile the above contradictions independently, so if Zimbabwe joins the Commonwealth once again this year, it is necessary for the developed countries in the Commonwealth provides substantial help for the country. In this way economy can

operate in a favorable cycle and the values of liberty, democracy and equality can truly realize one day in this country.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] N. Public-interest library of Yifan . <http://www.shuku.net:8080/novels/baogaowenxue/jbbwntg.html>
- [2] M. Samuel P. Huntington. *Political Order in Changing Society*, Yale University Press, 1968
- [3] N. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-culture>
- [4] J. Wuwen. The land reform was conducted vigorously in Zimbabwe . *National Security Communication*, 2000, (12): P15-16
- [5] N. The people's internet. <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/guojj/14549/2242701.html>
- [6] M. Samuel P. Huntington. *Political Order in Changing Society*, Yale University Press, 1968