



Mugabe's Look East Policy in the Context of Iran: Afrocentricity and Mugabeism

Dominic Maphaka¹ 

¹ Department of Political Studies and International Relations, North-West University, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe's Look East Policy particularly the country's relations with China has drawn the attention of the media, academics, and scholarly literature. The introduction of the unwritten Look East Policy in 2003 saw the deepening of relations between Zimbabwe and countries in Southeast Asia, the Far East, and the Middle East. However, the literature focuses largely on Zimbabwe-China relations that were boosted by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation at the broader level. Leaning on the Afrocentric theoretical framework the article analysed Mugabe's Look East Policy in the context of Iran. The paper also leaned on Mugabeism which represents the ideology and personality of Mugabe as an influential political figure that dominated Zimbabwe's political landscape and shaped the country's policy direction at the domestic and international levels. Methodologically, the paper used desktop qualitative research that relied on primary and secondary sources. The article adopted Foreign Policy Analysis as an analytical tool and drew from Afrocentricity and Mugabeism as conceptual frameworks to shape the understanding of Zimbabwe's foreign policy towards Iran. It contributes to the discourse on Mugabe's Look East Foreign Policy which had focused largely on the challenges, failures and success of the Policy in the context of Zimbabwe-China relations. Alternatively, the paper analysed the role played by Mugabe as an individual decision-maker on the Policy in the context of Zimbabwe-Iran relations. It established that Zimbabwe-Iran relations were driven by Mugabe as an individual decision-maker. The Policy was informed by Mugabe's disdain towards neoliberalism, his bad history with the West and as a proponent of an economy that is driven by Africans based on their historical and material conditions. The Policy is also attributed to Mugabe's stubbornness and authoritarian characteristics.

Correspondence

Dominic Maphaka

Email: D.Maphaka@nwu.ac.za

Publication History

Received 24th October, 2023

Accepted 12th December, 2023

Published online:

20th December, 2023

Keywords: Mugabe, Look East Policy, Iran, Afrocentricity, Mugabeism

INTRODUCTION

The Look East Policy (hereafter referred to as 'the Policy') ushered in the deepening of relations between Zimbabwe and Asian countries, especially China. Mugabe advanced this unwritten Policy between 2003 and 2017 to evade the Western sanctions, promote Zimbabwe's agency on the globe, and reject Western ideology. The West sanctioned Zimbabwe due to the controversial land reform programme, alleged violation of human rights, and election fraud. The Policy prompted the deepening of relations between Zimbabwe and countries in Southeast Asia and the Far East.¹ During this period, Zimbabwe's foreign policy was shaped by ideas that emerged from the liberation struggle, with Mugabe (former and late President of Zimbabwe) stressing Zimbabwe's sovereignty and viewing Western countries, especially Britain, as trying to recolonise the country.² Mugabe became the main figure in the country's foreign policy. Zimbabwe's foreign policy was therefore

¹ Z. Chun, "China-Zimbabwe Relations: A Model of China-Africa Relations?," Occasional Paper, 2014.

² Percyslage Chigora, "Surviving in a Hostile Environment: An Analysis of Zimbabwe's Foreign Relations in 21st Century International Relations," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 3, no. 3 (2009): 92.

anchored on his experience as a nationalist and as an advocate of Pan-Africanist ideology.³ This posture would suggest that Mugabe was an Afrocentrist, given that he administered Zimbabwe based on the country's experience as an African country, whose material conditions were shaped by colonial history.

Mugabeism which represents the personality of Mugabe, his ideology, views, ideas, and experience as an African nationalist who fought for the liberation of Zimbabwe drove the country's foreign policy.⁴ Mugabe expressed his disdain for neoliberalism and castigated the West as intimidatory actors who sought to promote their hegemonic interests and ambitions at the expense of the Global South.⁵ For Mugabe, the Policy was also strategic, because former colonised Asian countries have managed to grow their economies which had previously been at the same level as those of formerly colonised African countries. Zimbabwe could draw a lesson from Asian economic development models, in the same way as the country had learnt from Asian countries' struggle against colonialism. In this regard, the Policy represented a drive by Mugabe to move from being only a political liberator to being an economic liberator as well. He wanted to promote Zimbabwe as an independent state resistant to foreign domination.⁶

Over the years, the Policy evolved to include countries outside Asia such as Iran in the Middle East and Russia in Eastern Europe. Zimbabwe's relations with Iran date back to the days of struggle when Iran supported the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) against the colonial administration of Ian Smith. Building on the historical relations he had established with Iran, Mugabe saw that country as an alternative partner amid tensions with the West. Scholarly literature on the Policy focuses largely on Zimbabwe's relations with China. In light of the above, the paper analyses the Policy in the context of Zimbabwe's relations with Iran. The paper is demarcated into five sections. The first section expounds on the Afrocentric theoretical framework and Mugabeism. This is followed by the research methodology which underpinned the paper. The third part of the paper provides a conceptualisation of the Policy. The subsequent section provides the findings and discussion. The last part of the paper provides a conclusion.

Afrocentricity and Mugabeism

Afrocentricity is about thinking and acting upon things in a manner through which African interests, principles, and perspectives take precedence.⁷ It is traced back to the Pan-Africanist movement, writers, and leaders. Asante is credited as the pioneer of the Afrocentric theory. He sharpened the works of Pan-Africanist writers in his works titled: *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*; *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*; and *The Afrocentric Idea*. Afrocentricity is premised on the canons of cultural centredness, paradigmatic pluralism, liberation, and cultural agency.⁸ At the heart of Afrocentricity is that African phenomena and communities cannot be understood better when studied through foreign lenses. Researchers are urged to anchor their work on African experiences to gain valid knowledge about an African phenomenon. In this regard, the African culture, ideals, values, and history should provide a ground for any study carried out about an African phenomenon. The canon of centredness is also premised on a conviction that Africans are marginalised in every aspect of life including their position in the global economy. Consequently, Africans are encouraged to reclaim their culture, ideals, values, history, and interests to elevate themselves and their economies from the margins to the centre of the world economy.⁹ Considering the above, the history, values, interests and material conditions of Zimbabwe shaped the analysis and understanding of Mugabe's Policy in the context of Iran.

Afrocentricity negates Eurocentric ethnocentricity on non-Europeans. It stresses that non-Europeans including Africans should be studied from their perspective. In other words, a perspective for each nation should occupy its legitimate space to enhance coexistence and development. Therefore, Eurocentricity is not supreme

³ Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Making Sense of Mugabeism in Local and Global Politics: 'So Blair, Keep Your England and Let Me Keep My Zimbabwe,'" *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 6 (2009): 1139–58.

⁴ J. Ndimande and K.G. Moyo, "Emancipatory International Relations and Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy Under Robert Mugabe 1980-C2017: A Reassessment.," *Afro-Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (2018): 1–22.

⁵ C.P. Murasi, "An Appraisal of Mugabeism in Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy: Zimbabwe's Relations with the Western Bloc (2000-2017)." (University of Zimbabwe, 2019).

⁶ Jeremy Youde, "Why Look East? Zimbabwean Foreign Policy and China," *Africa Today*, 2007, 3–19.

⁷ M.K. Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

⁸ Lisa Schreiber, "Overcoming Methodological Elitism: Afrocentrism as a Prototypical Paradigm for Intercultural Research," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 5 (2000): 651–71; Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*; Peggy Gabo Ntseane, "Culturally Sensitive Transformational Learning: Incorporating the Afrocentric Paradigm and African Feminism," *Adult Education Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2011): 307–23; D Maphaka, M B Rapanyane, and T E Maphoto, "An Afro-Centric Analysis of South Africa's Foreign Policy on the Southern African Development Community (SADC): Case of Zimbabwe, 1999-2018," *Journal of African Union Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 123–38.

⁹ Ama Mazama, "The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions," *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 4 (2001): 387–405; Dominic Maphaka, "A Shift or Priority? An Afrocentric Analysis of Zuma's Foreign Policy towards China," *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 42, no. 2 (2020): 87–108.

but it is just a perspective among others.¹⁰ In foreign policy analysis (FPA), the theory could be described as a rejection of Eurocentric ethnocentricity on development policies imposed on Africans. Thus, African foreign policy should be premised on the African view on development which is shaped by their historical and material conditions. The foreign policy position of African countries should not be confined to market-driven development policies that come at the expense of justice.

The canon of liberation and cultural agency is premised on the quest of Afrocentricity to re-centre, revive, and liberate African societies. This includes African history, views on epistemology, ontology, axiology, and the liberation of minds. In FPA, the canon suggests that African countries should have an agency in international relations and cease to be net recipients and actors that are being acted upon. In this sense, African countries should reclaim their sovereign space for policy-making and implementation that is encroached on by external actors.

On the other hand, Mugabeism entails the controversies, political behaviour, ideas, utterances, and actions taken by Mugabe during his tenure as the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe.¹¹ Mugabeism is interrelated with Afrocentricity advanced by Mugabe as a leader who sought to end the marginalisation of African nationals in the mainstream economy. It is premised on Mugabe's rejection of Eurocentric ethnocentricity on development advanced through neo-liberal policies. As an emerging concept, Mugabeism which represents Mugabe's experience, personality, and ideology, can provide a better understanding of Zimbabwe's foreign policy shift from the West to the East in the context of Iran. In this regard, Afrocentricity is complemented with Mugabeism. Considering his history as a political figure who has been at the peak of Zimbabwe's domestic and foreign policy for over four decades, his biographical background as a liberator, his incarceration, and ultimate ascendancy to the Presidency can shape the understanding of the Policy in the context of Iran.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach to research. This research sought to discover issues, understand a phenomenon, and answer research questions without necessarily relying on numerical data. Qualitative research also seeks to explain the data and generate knowledge from both primary and secondary data collected. The approach was adopted because it enables the interpretation of Zimbabwe's foreign policy. For this paper, the data was collected from open-access primary and secondary sources. Open-access primary data included policy briefs, Mugabe's media commentaries, speeches, and newspapers. On the other hand, secondary data was drawn from books, journals, theses/dissertations, and Mugabe's biography. As such, the researcher gleaned data about Mugabe's worldview, values, opinions, and personality.

Conceptualisation of the Policy

The former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohammad, is credited with having pioneered the term 'Look East Policy,' in 1981. For Malaysia, this Policy initiative was meant to draw development lessons from the achievements made by Japan and Korea in areas such as academic and technological know-how, labour ethics, and discipline. In this regard, Malaysia sought to stimulate economic growth and development by drawing lessons from the East. Subsequently, many countries started to Look East for various reasons in the post-Cold War era, including Zimbabwe, which adopted the Policy to contain the collapse of its economy and to find alternative sources of technology, capital, and trade partners.¹²

The Look East Policy refers to a strategic policy introduced and adopted by the Zimbabwean government to contain the economic woes brought about by its being isolated by its traditional Western partners by deepening trade and investment relations with countries of the East.¹³ The Policy has had both economic and political objectives, such as Zimbabwe's striving to draw much-needed investment and projecting itself as the defender of independence and sovereignty.¹⁴ After Mugabe visited the Far East in 2001, Zimbabwe opted to look to the East to diversify its trade and investment partners away from traditional Western partners.

¹⁰ Schreiber, "Overcoming Methodological Elitism: Afrocentrism as a Prototypical Paradigm for Intercultural Research"; Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*; Dominic Maphaka, "Dislocation or Relocation? An Afro-Centric Analysis of South Africa's BRICS Membership," *Journal of African Union Studies* 9, no. 2 (2020): 5–24.

¹¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Making Sense of Mugabeism in Local and Global Politics: 'So Blair, Keep Your England and Let Me Keep My Zimbabwe.'"

¹² D. Chimanihire, "Zimbabwe's 'Look East' Foreign Policy," in *Resilience Under Siege: The Zimbabwean Economy, Politics and Society*, ed. E. Chitando, M. Nyakudya, and G. Phiri (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 95–112.

¹³ S.T. Kushata, "An Assessment of the Look East Policy in Addressing Zimbabwe Economic Crisis: A Case of Zimbabwe-China Relations." (Bindura University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2017).

¹⁴ A. Laura et al., "Chinese Trade and Investment and Its Impacts on Forests: A Scoping Study in the Miombo Woodlands" (Bogor, Indonesia, 2011).

Significantly, the Policy was also designed in an effort to learn from the economic development models of the East and to deepen Zimbabwe's relations with countries in the East in various fields of the economy.¹⁵ At the heart of the Policy, was the promotion of cooperation between Zimbabwe and countries of the East. Zimbabwe targeted projects that had drawn the interests of countries of the East and these countries had the capacity to stimulate growth.¹⁶

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature in this terrain includes the works of Masunungure, Tinarwo and Babu, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Chipaike and Mhandara.¹⁷ Masunungure avers that the Policy was adopted by Mugabe to spite traditional Western partners.¹⁸ This is mirrored by Mugabe's remarks that "We have turned east where the sun rises, and given our backs to the West, where the sun sets". China became a suitable partner in this Policy outlook because its non-interference policy in the affairs of other states made it uninterested in democratic and human rights principles.¹⁹

Weighing in on the Policy, Tinarwo and Babu argue that the Policy was ambiguous and lacked clarity of its intended purpose because it came about as a reactive stance to the strong economic relations that were severed unexpectedly by Western Europe and America.²⁰ They conclude that Zimbabwe should craft a vibrant and solid foreign policy and strategy to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation with India and China. A comprehensive, coherent, and targeted foreign policy strategy for engaging these Asian countries was needed because they have enormous interests in Zimbabwe and the African continent at large.²¹

Ndlovu-Gatsheni regards the Policy as a fatal mistake committed by Zimbabwe through implementing a harsh foreign policy against the West.²² The Policy was pursued at the wrong time as the country had no capacity to deal with its impact on domestic development and growth. It took place at the time the Soviet Union had collapsed and the Socialist Republics of Eastern and Central Europe had disintegrated. Conversely, the Western capitalist countries occupied hegemonic status as the main actors that shaped the global economy and politics. On the other hand, countries such as China, Cuba, and Vietnam warmed up themselves to draw more investment from the Western capitalist world. The contradictory posture taken by Zimbabwe in looking to the East was a miscalculation strategically and tactically. This is so because at the time it was impossible to bring the socialist and anti-imperialist forces as a counterweight to the Western capitalist states.²³

Chipaike and Mhandara argue that against the backdrop of Zimbabwe's isolation, the country needed a powerful partner to fill the vacuum left by the West and reduce the possible demise of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic-Front (ZANU-PF).²⁴ The realities on the ground reduced it to a party slogan since the Policy was tied to the survival of the ZANU-PF. It is within this context, that during its political campaigns, ZANU-PF projected China as a suitable partner to aid the country to defeat imperialism, against ulterior motives for regime change. Another development that reduced the Policy to a slogan, is that the opposition parties and civil society groups were not consulted in designing the Policy. Hence the Policy received a backlash from local industries who were concerned with cheap Chinese goods flooding the markets.²⁵

It should however be noted that not in every country do opposition parties and civil society groups have a contribution to foreign policymaking and implementation process. In China which is as undemocratic as

¹⁵ Chimanikire, "Zimbabwe's 'Look East' Foreign Policy ."

¹⁶ G. Chinyama, "Look East Policy Remains a Mirage," <https://www.newsday.co.zw/thestandard/2015/02/15/look-east-policy-remains-mirage>, 2015.

¹⁷ Eldred V Masunungure, "Zimbabwe's Militarized, Electoral Authoritarianism," *Journal of International Affairs*, 2011, 47–64; Joseph Tinarwo and Suresh Chandra Babu, "Chinese and Indian Economic Relations and Development Assistance to Zimbabwe: Rationale, Controversies and Significance," *Journal of International Development* 35, no. 4 (2023): 655–67; S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Zimbabwean Nation-State Project: A Historical Diagnosis of Identity and Power-Based Conflicts in a Postcolonial State.," Discussion Paper 59. , 2011; R. Chipaike and L. Mhandara, "Evading Punishment: An Analysis of Zimbabwe-China Relations in an Age of Sanctions," in *China-Africa Relations: Governance, Peace, and Security*, ed. Berhe M.G. and Hongwa L. (Addis Ababa University: Institute for Peace and Security Studies and Institute of African Studies, 2013), 146–62.

¹⁸ Masunungure, "Zimbabwe's Militarized, Electoral Authoritarianism."

¹⁹ Masunungure, "Zimbabwe's Militarized, Electoral Authoritarianism."

²⁰ Tinarwo and Babu, "Chinese and Indian Economic Relations and Development Assistance to Zimbabwe: Rationale, Controversies and Significance."

²¹ Tinarwo and Babu, "Chinese and Indian Economic Relations and Development Assistance to Zimbabwe: Rationale, Controversies and Significance."

²² Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Zimbabwean Nation-State Project: A Historical Diagnosis of Identity and Power-Based Conflicts in a Postcolonial State."

²³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Zimbabwean Nation-State Project: A Historical Diagnosis of Identity and Power-Based Conflicts in a Postcolonial State."

²⁴ Chipaike and Mhandara, "Evading Punishment: An Analysis of Zimbabwe-China Relations in an Age of Sanctions."

²⁵ Chipaike and Mhandara, "Evading Punishment: An Analysis of Zimbabwe-China Relations in an Age of Sanctions."

Zimbabwe, the foreign policymaking and implementation process is the domain of the ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party.

Mugabe's Policy Beyond Asia

As mentioned earlier, the Policy evolved to include countries outside Asia such as Iran in the Middle East and Russia in Eastern Europe. Zimbabwe's relations with Iran date back to the days of struggle when Iran supported the ZANU against the colonial administration of Ian Smith. Zimbabwe's closer relations with Iran date back to 1996. At that time, the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to deepen relations with African countries in the face of isolation by the West. Iran sought the support of African countries in the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral platforms. Additionally, the country wanted to supply African countries with small arms and use the continent as an alternative market.²⁶

Economic Relations and Humanitarian Aid

Mugabe's anti-imperialist stance made him a suitable partner to Tehran (The Capital City of Iran). Between 2003 and 2017, Zimbabwe became isolated by the West and described as a pariah state like Iran. As a result, the relationship deepened over their common isolation stance by the West as both countries were seeking alternative trade and political partners. Given that both countries were sanctioned by the United States (US), they explored ways to deepen economic relations. They wanted to raise the volume of their bilateral relations to evade the Western sanctions which they described as illegal.²⁷

Zimbabwe signed a number of economic agreements with Iran in areas such as technology and infrastructure developments in 2005. Further, the two countries concluded agreements to cooperate in agriculture, oil industry, education, and humanitarian aid in 2006. The agreement also entailed cooperation between the private sectors of the two countries to facilitate bilateral trade. Two years later, the two countries signed a joint venture agreement for the manufacturing of tractors in Zimbabwe in 2008. As part of the agreement, Iran would control 55 percent and Zimbabwe Industrial Development Cooperation administered the remaining stakes. The project was envisaged to produce 5000 tractors annually and expand to other markets of the region in the future. A deal that saw Iran investing \$4 million was set to start with the importation of parts from Iran and later be replaced by locally produced ones.²⁸

Beyond that, the two countries concluded a memorandum of understanding to refurbish the oil refinery in Zimbabwe that would when completed, provide the African country with a long-term fuel supply in 2009. In return, Zimbabwe was expected to provide access to Iran in the strategic mineral reserves of the country. Iran had also constructed a gas power plant in Zimbabwe in the same year. In terms of humanitarian aid, Iran provided Zimbabwe with food hampers ranging from cooking oil, meal, salt, and the money to buy 250kg of maize seed in 2010.²⁹

The two countries developed closer relations to the extent that Zimbabwe was alleged to support Iran's effort to produce nuclear weapons. The allegation arose after Mugabe had expressed support for Iran to develop nuclear technology in 2009 and stressed that the distribution of the technology is skewed in favour of the West and disadvantaged the developing countries. For Mugabe, only countries without nuclear weapons were in a good position to make an informed decision about Iran's endeavour to develop nuclear weapons. Mugabe described Iran's nuclear project as a just cause and viewed Tehran as a victim of Western states' attempt at bringing regime change.³⁰ The reports emerged in 2013 that the two countries had concluded a secret deal through which Zimbabwe would have sold Uranium to Iran in support of that country's nuclear project. Iran dismissed the allegations.³¹ The Nuclear Project worsened the tension between Iran and the US as the latter country claimed that Tehran aimed to produce nuclear weapons. However, Iran argued that the uranium

²⁶ Euro-Gulf Information Centre., "Removing the Lid on Mugabe's Foreign Policy. Iranian-Zimbabwe Relations." <https://www.egic.info/removing-the-lid-on-mugabes-foreign>, 2017; A. Majidyar, "Iran Seeks to Boost Ties with African Countries.," <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-seeks-boost-ties-african-countries>, 2017.

²⁷ Majidyar, "Iran Seeks to Boost Ties with African Countries."

²⁸ A. Farrar-Wellman, "Zimbabwe-Iran Foreign Relations," <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/zimbabwe-iran-foreign-relations>, 2010.

²⁹ Farrar-Wellman, "Zimbabwe-Iran Foreign Relations."

³⁰ The Guardian, "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Arrives in Zimbabwe to Meet New Friend Robert Mugabe," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/22/ahmadinejad-visit-mugabe-zimbabwe>, 2010.

³¹ Farrar-Wellman, "Zimbabwe-Iran Foreign Relations"; Euro-Gulf Information Centre, "Removing the Lid on Mugabe's Foreign Policy. Iranian-Zimbabwe Relations."

enrichment programme was designed to fuel nuclear power stations and the country was allowed to carry out a project of that nature as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NNT).³²

Common Anti-hegemonic and Anti-colonial stance

In keeping with their common anti-hegemonic and anti-colonial stance, Mugabe and Ahmadinejad (former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran) urged developing countries to join efforts against Western hegemony and domination in 2007. Subsequently, the two countries signed and introduced their collaborative ‘Coalition of Peace’ in response to negative remarks by the then US President, George W. Bush Junior, about their governments in 2007. The coalition was seen as a mechanism to respond to bullies such as the US and its allies.³³ The two countries view the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a tool used by the West to fight their regimes. The then Iranian President claimed that the UNSC which was expected to serve the whole world was being used to coerce Zimbabwe and Iran.³⁴

Speaking on the side-line of the Group of 15 Summit in 2010, Mugabe accused the US and Britain of abusing the UNSC to bully and threaten weak states. On the other hand, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised Mugabe for resisting Western interference and pledged to persist in supporting Zimbabwe.³⁵

For his part, Mugabe argued that the two countries were unfairly vilified and punished by the US and its allies for taking a moral stance at the domestic and international levels. On the other hand, Ahmadinejad argued that the two countries' relationship was driven by the moral stance they have taken against the interference in their affairs by the US and its Western allies. Adding weight to the President of Iran's comments, Mugabe stressed that the two countries should fight against the US and its evil system, and the two countries had to establish a mechanism to defend themselves. Additionally, Ahmadinejad pointed out that Zimbabwe and Iran are both against Western hegemony and resisted being dictated by the arrogant powers.³⁶

Zimbabwe-Iran relations deepened at the time the West was trying to bring about regime change in both countries. The then US Secretary of State for African Affairs, Walter Kensteiner, described Mugabe's government as illegal and irrational because of its democratic nature. The Secretary further stated that the political atmosphere was unacceptable and the US had to exert pressure on neighbouring states to correct the situation. Equally, the West has been trying to effect regime change in Iran by sanctioning the government to collapse. Thus, the two countries shared a common principle of protecting their sovereignty and called for non-interference in domestic affairs. Mugabe and Ahmadinejad sought to defend and protect their country's sovereign independence. They believed that the sanctions imposed against their governments were prompted by the revolutionary stance taken by their countries against imperialism. The two leaders stressed that the West was using the domestic democratic movements to reverse the gains of revolution, and thus the crisis faced by their countries was part of the Western conspiracy to overthrow revolutionary leaders and rules. The neo-liberal policies were viewed as an attempt by the West to recolonise and exploit the resources of Africa and the developing world at large.³⁷

Afrocentricity and Mugabeism on Mugabe's Policy towards Iran

Building on Afrocentricity, Mugabe used the Policy to advance the redistribution of economic wealth to the previously disadvantaged indigenous people who were still excluded from many sectors including agriculture. He used the historical and material conditions of Zimbabwe as a former African nationalist who witnessed the dispossession of the land of African indigenous people and their marginalisation in the mainstream economy. In this regard, the Policy became a viable option as Iran and other countries of the East supported the country's affirmative action policies.

In his speech at the Earth Summit in 2002 in Johannesburg, Mugabe stressed that the land is an asset that not only defines Zimbabwe's personality and divides its sovereignty, but also carries the fortunes of the poor and their potential to realise sustainable development and empowerment. Agriculture as the mainstay of the

³² The Mail & Guardian., “Mugabe Sets Sail for Iran to Beef up Ties.,” <https://Mg.Co.Za/Article/2006-11-20-Mugabe-Sets-Sail-for-Iran-to-Beef-up-Ties/>, 2006.

³³ Farrar-Wellman, “Zimbabwe-Iran Foreign Relations.”

³⁴ M. Dzirutwe, “Zimbabwe's Mugabe Backs Iran's Nuclear Programme,” <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-iran-idUSTRE63M1WJ20100423>, 2010.

³⁵ N. Nkomo, “Praise from Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei for Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe,” <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/irans-supreme-leader-ayatollah-khamenei-admires-zimbabwean-president-mugabe-for-anti-western-stance-94181294/1469147.html>, 2010.

³⁶ Percyslage Chigora and Dorothy Goredema, “Zimbabwe–Iran Relations in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 13, no. 4 (2011): 423–30.

³⁷ Chigora and Goredema, “Zimbabwe–Iran Relations in the 21st Century.”

Zimbabwean economy made access to land a significant issue. He underscores that poverty, food insecurity, and underdevelopment in Zimbabwe were caused by inequitable access to land. Mugabe pointed out that Zimbabwe was still economically colonised after 22 years of its independence. Hence, his government decided to do justice by reclaiming and restoring the land to the indigenous black owners who had lost it to colonisers.³⁸

The Policy was also premised on Mugabe's Afrocentric rejection of Eurocentric ethnocentricity in non-Europeans.³⁹ Through the Policy, Mugabe sought to advance development that is centred on African views and driven by Africans in line with their historical and material conditions. This was represented by Mugabe's disdain for neo-liberal policies that view and understand development from a Eurocentric perspective. These policies did not take into account the historical and material conditions that perpetuated the marginalisation of indigenous Zimbabweans, and they thus advanced the market-driven development that ignored the past injustice. Consequently, Mugabe gravitated to the East to deepen relations with Iran as a like-minded state that rejected the universalisation of neoliberal policies that advanced Eurocentric ethnocentricity on development. Iran's common rejection of the neoliberal policies prompted Mugabe to use it as an alternative development partner and friend that could support him against the Western criticism of his policies. Thus, the Policy was spurred by Mugabe's preference for policies that are rooted in Afrocentricity as an African liberation fighter who experienced the dispossession, exclusion, and marginalisation of Africans in the mainstream economy.

Speaking at the 2002 Earth Summit held in Johannesburg, Mugabe argued that sustainable development failed because of a neo-liberal model of development advanced by market forces and defended through privatisation. As opposed to putting the interest of ordinary people first, Mugabe underscored that the model perpetuates inequality, advocates for the privatisation of public enterprises, and drives the state out of the public sphere in order to benefit big business. In Zimbabwe, there was a clear mind and vision to end the neoliberal model.⁴⁰

Mugabe used the Policy to reclaim the space for policy-making encroached upon by the West to advance the development that is shaped by Africans in keeping with their historical and material conditions. The adoption of this Policy was shaped by his perception of Western countries and international institutions as actors who wanted to dictate the development agenda of developing countries. It was also in keeping with his view that the no-strings-attached policies from the East provided a conducive environment for Zimbabwe to advance policies that were premised on its experiences. It became a viable option for Mugabe to protect Zimbabwean wealth and resources by establishing relationships with Iran that treated it as an equal member state.

Arguably, Mugabe's personal experiences shaped his view of the world and ultimately informed Zimbabwe's foreign policy position particularly his shift to the East. His shift from the East to the West was driven by his experience as a former African nationalist. The condemnation from the West reawakened the old memories of colonial oppression when Mugabe engaged in a struggle for independence and self-determination of Zimbabwe from colonial interference. On the other hand, Iran's support for Zimbabwe's colonial struggle along with the broader developing world of the East that has equally suffered colonialism, made them preferable partners rather than the West. This is well captured by Youde's argument that Mugabe stressed that the country looks to the East where the sun rises and turns its back against the West where the sun sets.⁴¹ Mugabe stressed that the developing countries of the East viewed the world the same way as Zimbabwe and other African countries and were colonised by the West.⁴² In this regard, Mugabe's personal experience shaped his perception of the globe and Zimbabwe's interaction with countries from the East such as Iran. Thus, the preference for the Policy was in keeping with his history. Unlike the West which had a bad history with Mugabe during his time as the liberation fighter, he had cordial relations with Iran dating back to the time of struggle when Tehran provided support to ZANU.

The adoption of the policy was also informed by Mugabe's personality. Personality refers to the attributes, behaviour, temperament, emotions, and mental traits of an individual. Murasi says that Mugabe's cousin, James Chikerema, described Mugabe as a person who was stubborn at a young age.⁴³ If he had a disagreement with anyone while herding, he would isolate himself from the group. Mugabe would select his cows and head them to the mountains away from the other boys. He never wanted to reconcile or compromise

³⁸ Mugabe's Speech at the Earth Summit in 2002.

³⁹ Dominic Maphaka and Happy Mathew Tirivangasi, "An Afrocentric Analysis of South Africa's Paradiplomacy: A Case of Limpopo Province, 2009-2018," *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2022): 53.

⁴⁰ Mugabe Speech at the Earth Summit in 2002.

⁴¹ Youde, "Why Look East? Zimbabwean Foreign Policy and China."

⁴² Youde, "Why Look East? Zimbabwean Foreign Policy and China."

⁴³ Murasi, "An Appraisal of Mugabeism in Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy: Zimbabwe's Relations with the Western Bloc (2000-2017)."

in a quest to reconnect with those around him. His reaction to criticism was that those people would remember him one day.⁴⁴

The Mugabe who at the tender age isolated himself from other boys when they had a tension, who made no attempt to negotiate and compromise is replicated by his insistence to Look East even when the country's economy was collapsing. The authoritarian Mugabe persisted with the Policy while ignoring diverging voices from his Deputy (Emmerson Mnangagwa), MDC splinter parties, Civil Society Organisations, and the public at large. The foregoing individuals and groups have expressed the flaws of this Policy and advised the government to restore relations with the West. Because of his stubbornness, Mugabe was reluctant to negotiate with the West who at the time represented the major markets on the globe, and traded with countries that were targeted by his narrow Policy. Arguably, stubbornness prompted Mugabe to opt for a Second-Best and imperfect foreign policy that limited Zimbabwe's prospects for development and growth in a globalised world. At that time, the US and its Western allies represented the major investment destination with Trade Agreements targeted by many countries across the globe.

Additionally, the Policy was driven by Mugabe's personality as an authoritarian leader who provided no room for divergent views. Mugabe's personality as an authoritarian leader made his identity synonymous with the identity of the country, the Policy became part and parcel of his tension with the West rather than a policy designed through a general consensus. This is captured by Rusere's arguments that Mugabeism denotes the personality of Mugabe as a political actor who determined what was acceptable for Zimbabwe.⁴⁵ Mugabeism suggests that Mugabe was the only leader of the nation with no room for plurality or opposing views in the Zimbabwean political environment. It perpetuated the dual identities of Mugabe and Zimbabwe with no alternative or different identities. Secondly, Mugabeism represented an ideological position that resisted Western domination and clout from former colonisers when it was convenient to the leader. This is so because initially, Mugabe was not hostile towards the West, but as time continued he projected Western Europe as enemies of the African imagination and emancipation.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

The paper contributes to Zimbabwe's foreign policy whereby Mugabe gravitated from the West to the East by deepening relations with countries of the East such as Iran. It argues that the Zimbabwe-Iran relations were driven by Mugabe's experience as a former African nationalist. The condemnation from the West reawakened the old memories of colonial oppression when Mugabe engaged in a struggle for independence and self-determination of Zimbabwe from colonial interference. On the other hand, Iran's support for Zimbabwe's colonial struggle along with the broader developing world of the East that has equally suffered colonialism, made it a preferable partner rather than the West. Through the policy, Mugabe sought to advance development that is centred on African views and driven by Africans in line with their historical and material conditions. This was represented by Mugabe's disdain for neo-liberal policies that view and understand development from a Eurocentric perspective. Consequently, Mugabe gravitated to the East to deepen relations with Iran, a like-minded state that rejected the universalisation of neoliberal policies that advanced Eurocentric ethnocentricity on development. Iran's common rejection of the neoliberal policies prompted Mugabe to use it as an alternative development partner and friend that could support him against the Western criticism of his policies. Thus, the policy was spurred by Mugabe's preference for policies that are rooted in Afrocentricity as an African liberation fighter who experienced the dispossession, exclusion, and marginalisation of Africans in the mainstream economy.

Moreover, Mugabe's personality as a stubborn individual prompted him to persist in looking East even when the country's economy was collapsing. As an authoritarian leader that left no room for negotiation and compromise, he ignored divergent views from members of his own party, opposition parties and Civil Society Organisations, and the public at large. Mugabe's personality as an authoritarian leader made his identity synonymous with the identity of the country, the Policy became part and parcel of his tension with the West rather than a policy designed through a general consensus.

⁴⁴ Murasi, "An Appraisal of Mugabeism in Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy: Zimbabwe's Relations with the Western Bloc (2000-2017)."

⁴⁵ R. Rusere, "Life after Mugabe(ism): The Legitimacy of Mugabeism in Contemporary Zimbabwe." (University of Birmingham, 2015), <http://www.academia.edu/25430484/life-after-Mugabe-ism-theLegitimacy-of-Mugabesim-in-contemporary-Zimbabwe>.

⁴⁶ Rusere, "Life after Mugabe(ism): The Legitimacy of Mugabeism in Contemporary Zimbabwe."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Asante, M.K. *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
- Chigora, Percyslage. "Surviving in a Hostile Environment: An Analysis of Zimbabwe's Foreign Relations in 21st Century International Relations." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 3, no. 3 (2009): 92.
- Chigora, Percyslage, and Dorothy Goredema. "Zimbabwe–Iran Relations in the 21st Century." *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 13, no. 4 (2011): 423–30.
- Chimanikire, D. "Zimbabwe's 'Look East' Foreign Policy ." In *Resilience Under Siege: The Zimbabwean Economy, Politics and Society*, edited by E. Chitando, M. Nyakudya, and G. Phiri, 95–112. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.
- Chinyama, G. "Look East Policy Remains a Mirage ." <https://www.newsday.co.zw/thestandard/2015/02/15/look-east-policy-remains-mirage>, 2015.
- Chipaike, R., and L. Mhandara. "Evading Punishment: An Analysis of Zimbabwe-China Relations in an Age of Sanctions." In *China-Africa Relations: Governance, Peace, and Security*, edited by Berhe M.G. and Hongwa L., 146–62. Addis Ababa University: Institute for Peace and Security Studies and Institute of African Studies, 2013.
- Chun, Z. "China-Zimbabwe Relations: A Model of China-Africa Relations? ." Occasional Paper , 2014.
- Dzirutwe, M. "Zimbabwe's Mugabe Backs Iran's Nuclear Programme." <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-iran-idUSTRE63M1WJ20100423> , 2010.
- Euro-Gulf Information Centre. "Removing the Lid on Mugabe's Foreign Policy. Iranian-Zimbabwe Relations. ." <https://www.egic.info/removing-the-lid-on-mugabes-foreign> , 2017.
- Farrar-Wellman, A. "Zimbabwe-Iran Foreign Relations." <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/zimbabwe-iran-foreign-relations> , 2010.
- Kushata, S.T. "An Assessment of the Look East Policy in Addressing Zimbabwe Economic Crisis: A Case of Zimbabwe-China Relations. ." Bindura University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2017.
- Laura, A., L.A. German, G.C. Schoneveld, S. Wertz-Kanounnikoff, and D. Gumbo. "Chinese Trade and Investment and Its Impacts on Forests: A Scoping Study in the Miombo Woodlands." Bogor, Indonesia, 2011.
- Majidyar, A. "Iran Seeks to Boost Ties with African Countries. ." <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-seeks-boost-ties-african-countries>, 2017.
- Maphaka, D, M B Rapanyane, and T E Maphoto. "An Afro-Centric Analysis of South Africa's Foreign Policy on the Southern African Development Community (SADC): Case of Zimbabwe, 1999-2018." *Journal of African Union Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 123–38.
- Maphaka, Dominic. "A Shift or Priority? An Afrocentric Analysis of Zuma's Foreign Policy towards China." *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 42, no. 2 (2020): 87–108.
- . "Dislocation or Relocation? An Afro-Centric Analysis of South Africa's BRICS Membership." *Journal of African Union Studies* 9, no. 2 (2020): 5–24.
- Maphaka, Dominic, and Happy Mathew Tirivangasi. "An Afrocentric Analysis of South Africa's Paradiplomacy: A Case of Limpopo Province, 2009-2018." *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2022): 53.
- Masunungure, Eldred V. "Zimbabwe's Militarized, Electoral Authoritarianism." *Journal of International Affairs*, 2011, 47–64.
- Mazama, Ama. "The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions." *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 4 (2001): 387–405.
- Murasi, C.P. "An Appraisal of Mugabeism in Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy: Zimbabwe's Relations with the Western Bloc (2000-2017). ." University of Zimbabwe, 2019.
- Ndimande, J., and K.G. Moyo. "Emancipatory International Relations and Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy Under Robert Mugabe 1980-C2017: A Reassessment. ." *Afro-Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (2018): 1–22.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. "The Zimbabwean Nation-State Project: A Historical Diagnosis of Identity and Power-Based Conflicts in a Postcolonial State. ." Discussion Paper 59. , 2011.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. "Making Sense of Mugabeism in Local and Global Politics: 'So Blair, Keep Your England and Let Me Keep My Zimbabwe.'" *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 6 (2009): 1139–58.
- Nkomo, N. "Praise from Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei for Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. ." <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/irans-supreme-leader-ayatollah-khamenei-admires-zimbabwean-president-mugabe-for-anti-western-stance-94181294/1469147.html> , 2010.
- Ntseane, Peggy Gabo. "Culturally Sensitive Transformational Learning: Incorporating the Afrocentric

- Paradigm and African Feminism.” *Adult Education Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2011): 307–23.
- Rusere, R. “Life after Mugabe(Ism): The Legitimacy of Mugabeism in Contemporary Zimbabwe. .” University of Birmingham, 2015. <http://www.academia.edu/25430484/life-after-Mugabe-ism-theLegitimacy-of-Mugabesim-in-contemporary-Zimbabwe>.
- Schreiber, Lisa. “Overcoming Methodological Elitism: Afrocentrism as a Prototypical Paradigm for Intercultural Research.” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 5 (2000): 651–71.
- The Guardian. “Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Arrives in Zimbabwe to Meet New Friend Robert Mugabe.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/22/Ahmadinejad-Visit-Mugabe-Zimbabwe>, 2010.
- The Mail & Guardian. “Mugabe Sets Sail for Iran to Beef up Ties. .” <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-11-20-Mugabe-Sets-Sail-for-Iran-to-Beef-up-Ties/> , 2006.
- Tinarwo, Joseph, and Suresh Chandra Babu. “Chinese and Indian Economic Relations and Development Assistance to Zimbabwe: Rationale, Controversies and Significance.” *Journal of International Development* 35, no. 4 (2023): 655–67.
- Youde, Jeremy. “Why Look East? Zimbabwean Foreign Policy and China.” *Africa Today*, 2007, 3–19.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Dominic Maphaka is a master's graduate and emerging scholar specialising in International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis. The author has published several articles on domestic development policies and foreign policy. He worked as a Junior Researcher at the University of Johannesburg Pan-African Institute for Thought and Conversation. He is currently a Lecturer at the North West University, Mafikeng Campus.