

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-27 African politics in Southern Rhodesia: 2952 N. Kendale Avenue
Nkomo vs. Sithole Toledo, Ohio
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

African political parties in Southern Rhodesia have faced a more formidable foe in their country's Government than have Africans in the rest of Central Africa. In Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland African political groups have not had an easy time but, since they were British Protectorates, they could and did have Britain's help in gaining power in spite of local European reluctance.

In Southern Rhodesia, on the other hand, the European settlers have had a self-governing colony for 40 years with little British interference. They have had their own armed forces and will again with the dispersal of the Federation forces. The European population of 220,000, while small compared to 3,700,000 Africans, has been about three times the number of Europeans in the rest of Central Africa. European interest has always been paramount and Europeans are determined not to give up their power quickly or easily to Africans. Only in 1962 did Africans first gain representation in Parliament.

At the same time the leadership and strength of African nationalism in Southern Rhodesia, although it has varied, has been evaluated by observers as the weakest in Central Africa. Every time an African political organization has become at all effective the Government has cracked down and aspirations have gone begging until adequate leadership has slowly pushed forward again.

Since 1957 Joshua Nkomo has been the spokesman for that leadership. At that time George Nyandoro and Robert Chikerema revitalized the African National Congress (ANC) and Nkomo was elected President. The party has suffered many setbacks and has changed names several times; Nkomo has weathered the storms to remain for many the symbol of African Nationalism in Southern Rhodesia.

In 1959 the Government declared an emergency because of unrest in Nyasaland (Southern Rhodesia was quiet but neighboring unrest was frightening to the White electorate) and detained all the ANC leaders it could find. Among the 485 people put in jail without charge were Nyandoro and Chickerema who were "detained" without trial for four years. At the time of their arrest the ANC was also banned. But Nkomo was out of the country attending the first All-African People's Conference in Accra, Ghana. Early in 1960 the National Democratic Party (NDP) was formed to take the place of the ANC. Within a few months its offices were raided by the police and its leaders arrested. Riots resulted in the African townships and 12 Africans were shot and 500 others put in jail. Nkomo was living in England at this time as the party's official representative abroad. He came home and took over the Presidency in October, 1960.

At the time Nkomo returned officials of the Southern Rhodesian Government were busy working with England over proposals which might lead to total independence for their country and for a time then had a more relenting attitude toward African political activity. These officials were even prevailed upon to accept the presence of Nkomo, representing the National Democratic Party, at the talks in London and later in Salisbury. Nkomo appeared to accept the Constitutional proposals made at these meetings and it looked for a time as if racial differences in the country could be settled amicably.

Later, however, Nkomo denied that he had ever agreed to the proposals. The NDP opposed the adoption of the Constitution and called for a general strike in July, 1961, at the time the preponderately European electorate were voting to accept it. Although he was able to illustrate the Africans antagonism to Britain, the strike call was a dismal failure. Within a few months the National Democratic Party was banned. Again Nkomo was out of the country, attending the Independence celebrations in Tanganyika. This time he returned at once to form the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). In March, 1962, Nkomo left again, this time to testify before the United Nation's Committee of 17 investigating colonial problems. Back in Southern Rhodesia ZAPU persuaded Africans to boycott registration and voting in the election held in December and succeeded in withholding the African vote, bringing down Sir Edgar Whitehead's "partnership" Government. In August, before the election was held, ZAPU was banned and at the end of the year Nkomo was restricted to a small area in the Matopa district where he was born.

For awhile all political activity came to an end. No new political party was formed to take ZAPU's place and White-African political discussion reached a low ebb.

Then in April of this year the Southern Rhodesian Government intensified its push for independence from Britain with no strings attached concerning equal rights for Africans. If they could get it no other way, Government leaders indicated a strong inclination to declare themselves independent unilaterally. Nkomo, recently released from his restriction, and the "top ten" executives of the banned ZAPU assembled in Dar-es-Salaam to plan a Government-in-exile to block any move toward an independent White Southern Rhodesia. From Dar they made protests in the United States, at the United Nations, in London, and sought the influence of the major African states. At the same time, back home, an anti-Minority-Independence Movement was hastily organized with the blessing of the self-exiled leaders, to petition Britain not to give in to the demands of the Southern Rhodesian Government. Some 200,000 names (including only 400 Europeans) supported the petition which was presented to Lord Alport, the British High Commissioner, in Salisbury. (The letter which accompanied the petition, drafted largely by the Movement's chairman, former newspaper editor Nathan Shamuyarira, pointed out that "the signatures double the electorate and nearly equal the total White population.....")

Mr. Butler, Britain's Colonial Secretary, was most discouraging to Mr. Field, the Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister, and although there was considerable European pressure to break away, the Southern Rhodesian Government, after weighing the consequences carefully, decided against such a drastic move, at least at that time. With the dimming of White hopes for independence, however, the exiles found

themselves in Dar-es-Salaam for no dramatic reason.

But they didn't return home. By the beginning of June the African leaders had been gone for almost 2 months. The rank and file back in Southern Rhodesia were feeling increasingly neglected; they had no political organization and no leaders. Finally African leaders in Northern Rhodesia and Tanganyika nudged Nkomo critically; it was time for him to take care of the business at home. He returned in mid-June but announced that he would not attempt to form a new political party. He thought the ban on ZAPU should be lifted. If not, "the people will go without a political party." He believed "a new one would suffer the same end as the three previous ones which were banned.....We have made our stand and our stand is known. We stand by it."

There were some African leaders who felt intensely that a new party was needed for the sake of morale and, more importantly, to have a recognized body to carry on the struggle for African rights. There were yet others who believed it was time to change leadership. Nkomo had effectively pleaded the cause abroad but now his trips were considered wasted since he spent so much time with those who were already convinced. He was further criticized for lack of success on the home front. He spent too much time outside the country and didn't keep in close enough touch with local African leaders. There seemed to be a lack of direction in his immediate goals (as when he vacillated, at first approving and then rejecting the Southern Rhodesian Constitution.)

The various forces wanting a new party and a new leader combined and began quietly to build up support in the hope that by the time all the ex-ZAPU leaders had returned from Dar-es-Salaam they would have enough backing to make their demands effective.

They weren't quite quiet enough. Nkomo got wind of these stirrings and, in an astute political move, publicly denounced the dissidents before they were prepared to announce themselves. Waving his stick in the air at a meeting shortly after his return he derided the secret plan to form a new party as "a naked dirty trick to divide the people". He singled out the former deputy Secretary General of the National Democratic Party, Enos Nkala (released a few weeks before after serving two years for contravening Southern Rhodesia's notorious Law and Order Maintenance Act) as a major leader of the revolt. When Nkala, who was seated near Nkomo on the platform, rose to respond the crowd prevented him from speaking.

Nkomo went on to name others and announced that he was "suspending all further activities" of four of his ZAPU executives still in Dar: The Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, author of the book, African Nationalism, Robert Mugube, Leopold Takawira and Washington Malianga. He then called a "representative conference" where these men could defend themselves and where the people could indicate whether or not they still wanted him to lead them.

He left the surprised dissidents no choice but to air their differences publicly and to campaign openly for support. In Salisbury the ten accused Africans issued a statement supporting the deposed lieutenants in Dar and accusing Nkomo of being "bankrupt of ideas, without a plan for attainment of freedom and independence." "His emblem," they maintained, "is to do nothing, avoid jail and keep talking and flying." In Tanganyika Sithole and the other deposed leaders held what they called

a national executive meeting and, among other things, deposed Nkomo. Then they turned toward home separately to campaign for their ideas. On arrival Takawira was arrested on a number of charges including contempt of court and trespass. Sithole was picked up at the airport for carrying a subversive statement. Although both have been released on bail they may both feel a bit pressed by possible prison sentences. Mugabe, still in Dar, faces charges, along with his wife, for breaking a restriction which had confined them to the Salisbury area. All in all Nkomo had the edge at the beginning of the game.

The birth of ZANU

Nkomo's conference to judge the rebels was initially called for the weekend of August 3rd. It was postponed for a week because Salisbury officials demanded enormous insurance fees on any building that might be used in the city. It finally convened amid giant kettles of mealies and roast ox at Cold Comfort, a European owned farm a few miles outside the city. W.C. Masarurwa, ZAPU's representative in Northern Rhodesia and key arranger of the conference told me "The Reverend Mr. Sithole and his friends are still on the agenda. If they don't appear their case will be put to the delegates by Mr. Nkomo who will also present his own case. The delegates will then decide."

But with a pretty good presentiment that Nkomo's conference would be rigged, Sithole held his own the day before in Salisbury's Highfield African Township. He and his followers then announced the formation of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the election of Sithole as President. The new party's national executive includes top officials from Nkomo's ZAPU: Leopold Takawira, Robert Mugabe, Washington Malianga, Enos Nkala, Herbert Chitepo, Henry Hamazaripi, Enox Chikwore, T. Makombe.

In announcing the new party, Sithole said, "For the last eleven months we have not had a political party in this country and the result has been a political stalemate which in turn has caused confusion throughout the rank and file and the present political crisis within the nationalist movement.....ZANU opens a new chapter of politics in confrontation, foresight, inclusiveness and a willingness to suffer in order that freedom may be established." His party, he believed, would bring about African majority rule in "Zimbabwe".

As expected, Nkomo's gathering proclaimed him as leader and "the people" decided not to form a new party but to push for independence through their unofficial organization, the "National Caretaker Council". Now two major African political parties, one announced, one reluctant to proclaim itself officially, are pitted against each other as well as against the hardening attitude of the Rhodesian Front Government.

Is a united front necessary to win the game?

Many Africans and liberal Europeans fear the split will prove a set-back to the cause. They find the timing ill-advised (although, as Sithole pointed out, you can't really time a split or disagreement, they just come of themselves).

Influential non-political Africans, mainly the clergy, worked hard to bring the two men together and tried to heal the breach, but with little success.

Even our American COUNSUL General, Paul Geren, in about as ham-handed a piece of diplomacy as I've seen, tried to pressure Sithole back into the fold. Obviously irritated by the evangelical fervor of our diplomatic representative Sithole pointed out that there was really nothing disastrous in a two-party system. He recalled that independence had been speeded up in Ghana with the development of two parties; Kuanda's launching of a second party did nothing to hurt the cause of independence in Northern Rhodesia; and, while two parties had somewhat slowed the independence movement in Kenya, they were still effective. Southern Rhodesia has had splinter parties for some time. (Two other dissident African political groups, the Zimbabwe National Party and the Pan-African Socialist Union, were represented at the All-Africa Conference at Addis Ababa but they have never been significant and from all I could discover are now dead). Perhaps with two major parties working toward the same ends majority rule can be attained.

It is ironic that the very intellectuals who forged Nkomo into the symbol of African nationalism should now be damning the image they created, but it is the intellectuals and University students who are the backbone of Sithole's party.

It is perhaps significant that most of these men have connections within the Mashona tribe. At the time Rhodes discovered what is now called Southern Rhodesia, the major tribe was the Matabele. They lived in the Western part of the country and constantly raided the weaker Mashonas, living in the East, for cattle and women. All this was 70 or more years ago and the fierce antagonism between the tribes has lessened but the under-current of feeling still exists. A number of Matabele political leaders have always been jealous of the Mashona influence in present-day African affairs. They were upset when Nkomo made his headquarters in Salisbury, closer to Mashona influence, rather than in Bulawayo in the heart of Matabele country. They refused to participate in the petition campaign sponsored by the Anti-Minority Independence Movement, not because they didn't believe in the cause, but because it was "Mashona sponsored". They claimed then that only 1% of those who signed were Matabele.

Most political observers and African politicians will agree that this tribal division is at least an element in the split but they try to play it down and claim it is not in any way a major factor. Yet the fact that the major pockets of Sithole support are in the East, in Mashonaland, and that most of the intellectual supporters are Mashona is something that cannot be overlooked. It is something that Sithole will have to overcome if he is to lead African Nationalist aspirations in Southern Rhodesia.

Certainly neither he or Nkomo want party division along tribal lines. Both appeal to Southern Rhodesians in general. Among the rank and file of both tribes Nkomo has been the most successful in this respect; he is still king. The people don't know or care about his sins; his image has been too well implanted.

Sithole's image is in actuality more impressive. He has more "charisma" than Nkomo; more the mein of a statesman than Nkomo who is a back-slapping politician. His English is far more expressive and would seem to the European a far more impressive

adversary. Sithole has the general backing of most African political leaders outside of Southern Rhodesia and of influential groups in the United States and the United Kingdom. Dr. Banda, Prime Minister of Nyasaland and Tom Mboya, a Government leader in Kenya, have both come out in his support publicly. Officials of Kenneth Kuanda's UNIP in Northern Rhodesia also favor him and his new party, but do so only in private.

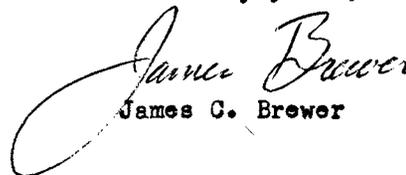
Of course all this outside support doesn't cut much ice within the country. In fact Nkomo's men have been able to use it effectively against him. At the time Sithole formed his new party, Nkomo and his lieutenants, mainly fiery Robert Chikerema, had become strongly anti-American (strong enough that after talking to some of them I actually felt lucky to get back to my car safely). They accused the American Government with supplying at least part of Sithole's money (this at the very time when our Counsel General was trying so hard to talk him back into Nkomo's fold), and that Britain and a number of African countries were also involved in a plot to overthrow their leadership.

They have intimated that Sithole would be soft on Communism, that he would even accept Communist support. They claim alternately that there will be violence if Sithole assumes the leadership and that Nkomo is the only one who has the nerve to be tough and to take violent steps if necessary. Yet no great differences over policy have emerged between the two factions. It appears to be mainly a conflict of personalities which will make it all but impossible to ever bring the men together. It is difficult to reason with emotion.

In the meantime, with the increase of violent inter-party conflict, the Minister of Justice, Mr. DuPont, has recently banned Nkomo's nebulous Caretaker Council (rather ironic since Nkomo's excuse for not forming a new party in the first place was that it would only be banned) and the new ZANU, as of this moment, is still very much alive although reaching only a proportion of Nkomo's larger following. How much the new ban will help the new party is still unknown.

In August it was predicted that Sithole would have to gain African support in three months or fail. The three months are now up, he hasn't made any great gains and tribalism is even more of an issue. ZANU isn't likely to disappear but on the other hand it does not seem destined to be more than a minority party. To be sure Mr. DuPont will not allow ZANU to become a threatening source of African resistance and because he has done no more than warn them you may be sure that they have not yet reached that status.

Sincerely yours,


James C. Brewer

Received in New York December 6, 1963.