

A warm welcome but little money

So far Morgan Tsvangirai's ground-breaking tour of America and Europe has brought plaudits rather than cash for Zimbabwe's battered economy.



Getty Images

It is Monday, so it must be Berlin. Or is it Stockholm? Morgan Tsvangirai may be forgiven for occasionally losing track, so crammed has his schedule been on his first official tour abroad as Zimbabwe's prime minister. On June 15th it was the turn of Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel (pictured above), to meet him in Berlin, after he had spent a few days in Washington, DC, where he met President Barack Obama. Then he headed north to meet the Swedes, before flying across to Norway. He was also due to meet the leaders of Belgium, Denmark and France, plus officials from the European Union. Finally, on June 19th, he is to visit Britain for several days to hobnob with the prime minister, Gordon Brown, plus various other politicians and would-be investors.

Mr Tsvangirai always knew that this first official visit would be tricky. Tendai Biti, his finance minister, had already done the rounds of Western capitals with his begging-bowl and had come back empty-handed. So although the former opposition leader naturally hoped he would drum up a bit of extra cash for his shattered country, it was not the main aim of his trip. Rather it was to gain international support and recognition for himself and his Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in their uneven power struggle with President Robert Mugabe and his Zanu-PF.

To that extent, the trip has already been a success. Anxious to boost Mr Tsvangirai at the expense of Mr Mugabe, foreign leaders have showered him with praise. Mr Obama talked about his "extraordinary admiration for the courage and the tenacity that the prime minister has shown in navigating through some very difficult political times." Ms Merkel said Mr Tsvangirai was a symbol of democracy and deserved support. He was also sure to get a warm reception in London, where successive British governments have led international opposition to Mr Mugabe's rule. In this respect, Mr Brown is as fiercely anti-Mugabe as his predecessors.

However, it is no surprise that the man who was beaten up, jailed and threatened with death by Mr Mugabe and his security forces is finding it hard to persuade his foreign hosts that the "period of acrimony" between himself and the despotic president is "over" and that Zimbabwe is now "on an irreversible transition to democracy". Few seem convinced. Some have even accused him of trying to deceive his interlocutors by painting too rosy a picture of the new Zimbabwe, perhaps out of a misplaced sense of patriotism.

Yes, there have been some improvements. The hyperinflation of recent years, for instance, has been brought under control. But Zanu-PF is already warning its people to prepare for a snap

election, perhaps as early as next March, in an apparent attempt by Mr Mugabe to block the introduction of a planned new constitution, with clear limits on executive power and strict rules for elections. Four months after the unity government was set up, Mr Mugabe still completely controls the armed forces, the police, the intelligence service, the media and criminal justice. Political opponents and human-rights campaigners are still arrested and thrown into the country's jails on trumped-up charges.

White-owned farms are still being seized and invaded. Gideon Gono, the central-bank governor who oversaw the hyperinflation that helped destroy the country's once-flourishing economy, is still in his job. And the 85-year-old Mr Mugabe continues to call the shots in what is supposed to be a partnership of equals.

So Mr Tsvangirai got little change when it came to winning direct financial support for his power-sharing government. Likely donors still fear that too much of their cash would be stolen and squandered by Mr Mugabe's entrenched cronies. Mr Obama pledged \$73m in humanitarian aid when he met Mr Tsvangirai. But most of this is not new money and the American president stressed that it would go "directly to the Zimbabwean people" and nowhere near the government.

Don't give it to the bad guy

Mr Obama also refused to lift the personal sanctions imposed on Mr Mugabe and other members of his regime nine years ago. Ms Merkel promised €25m (\$35m), but this was also earmarked for education, health and farming. Zimbabwe already gets about \$1 billion a year in humanitarian aid, which bypasses the government. A little of this already does go on what could be termed development projects, but for the moment Western governments are keen to spend most of this money on basic help for people who need food, medicine and clean water.

Zimbabwe's government-controlled media are belittling Mr Tsvangirai's tour, first describing it as merely an MDC fund-raising mission, then claiming he was just "on assignment" at the president's behest to press for the removal of sanctions and the restoration of the country's lines of credit—both untrue. None of Mr Obama's praise for the prime minister was mentioned in the state media, which failed even to show pictures of their meeting.

That he has been welcomed by some of the world's most powerful leaders and given a red-carpet treatment wherever he goes is itself a notable advance for Zimbabwe. But at this stage Mr Tsvangirai can hope for little more.

A warm welcome but little money. **The Economist**, New York, June 18, 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 25 jun. 2009.