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Negotiating Independence

1977–1978

After the Geneva negotiations had unraveled in December 1976, all parties retreated from the negotiating table. The situation was further complicated by continuing tensions involving the United States over Cuban and Soviet influence; the inability of the PF to work together in executing the war; and, most importantly, Ian Smith's efforts to proceed with an "internal settlement" that would result in his own conceptualization of the "majority rule" he had agreed to in September 1976, without involving the PF. Regional power influences again became significant, as South Africa continued to invest heavily in Rhodesia's defense, and the Frontline State presidents continued to offer their national territories to the liberation movements. The Rhodesians continued to use their air force in cross-border raids to attack ZIPRA and ZANLA bases in Zambia and Mozambique, increasing the possibility that Cuban and Soviet forces would intervene. The Frontline State presidents were also aware that increased Cuban or Soviet assistance would generate more South African military assistance to Rhodesia and, as in Angola, bring even more overt participation by the South African Defence Force (SADF) into their countries.

These Cold War and regional tensions allowed Ian Smith enough space to move forward with what South African diplomats had suggested might happen after Geneva. By achieving an internal settlement with those African leaders not allied with the PF – Bishop Muzorewa, Reverend Sithole, and Chief Chirau, Smith could try to sell his settlement as "a majority rule" government. After such recognition, it was hoped international sanctions would be lifted and the Rhodesian economy could improve. It would then be possible to fight a "civil" war between an African-led government and what they hoped would be an increasingly marginalized minority radical position of the PF. As the next two chapters will argue, the process did not turn out as planned for the Rhodesians, and the South African regime would add its own

twists to the equation late in the process. But at the outset of 1977, the idea of the internal settlement was not yet fully on the table. The immediate task for the British and Americans after the failure of Geneva was to regroup and attempt to concentrate their combined leverage toward moving the negotiations forward before the Cubans and Soviets became more involved in the war.

Before discussing the impact of the internal settlement talks on the negotiations, it is worth noting another significant assassination of a liberation war leader on January 22, 1977. This time it was ZAPU's Jason Moyo, the second vice president for external affairs, who was killed in Lusaka by a letter bomb addressed to him as "personal" from a friend in Botswana. Moyo opened the bomb himself and was killed immediately. Once again, an African nationalist leader was killed dishonorably in this war. In a period of a few years, both ZANLA and ZIPRA had lost key leaders by bombs in Lusaka. Joshua Nkomo returned from Yugoslavia and Robert Mugabe came to Lusaka for the funeral. The speeches by the two leaders are a revealing contrast. Nkomo thanked Mugabe for attending and made references to the differences between Moyo and Mugabe in Maputo when they had met to form the PF alliance before the Geneva conference. Nkomo also referred to Mugabe as "Robert," commenting, "I call him by his first name because I have worked with this young man, I know his heart."¹ This sort of public display of paternalism, in front of President Kaunda, must have annoyed Mugabe. In return, when it was time for Mugabe to speak, he only recognized Kaunda and had nothing to say to, or about, his elder Nkomo.

Mugabe, in his speech, praised Moyo as a personal friend to him and his wife, someone who had made his mark in Bulawayo trade union politics. Mugabe said that in September 1976, Moyo had come to Maputo to negotiate the PF. Mugabe told the mourners that Moyo "warned us all that we should not pretend to each other, but rather that we should recognize the difficulties in our way and the differences which could not be solved immediately." Although Mugabe went on to say that all Zimbabweans needed to carry on Moyo's fighting spirit, he never mentioned any need for ZANU and ZAPU unity. Instead, he

¹ "Speeches by J. Nkomo and R. Mugabe at the Burial of J. Moyo," Doc. 242, in Goswin Baumhögger, *The Struggle for Independence: Documents on the Recent Development of Zimbabwe (1975–1980)*, vol. 2 (Hamburg: Institute of African Studies Documentation Centre, 1984), 253–54.

criticized entering into any further negotiations with Smith and the Rhodesians. “How many times, since 1974, have we sat at negotiating tables and draw naught?” Invoking the objectives of Moyo, Mugabe asked everyone “to rededicate ourselves to an immediate intensification of our armed struggle as the only way to achieving our true independence.”² Moyo had told a reporter from *Afrique* magazine earlier in January 1977 that there was no cooperation between ZIPRA and ZANU. In the interview, Moyo was asked if he was going “to continue the guerrilla [war] side by side with ZANU.” He bluntly answered, “No.” He said that ZANLA and ZIPRA had “battled together from November 1975 to April 1976.” But then “problems arose in Mozambique and Tanzania and ended with the murder of fifty disarmed recruits.” Moyo did not rule out future cooperation, saying they were doing all they could to overcome their differences.³

At the time of Moyo’s murder, Nkomo had been in Belgrade once again making requests to the Yugoslavian Government for military assistance. A report from the Yugoslavian Department for International Relations describes Nkomo’s talk with Stanet Dolanc, of the Executive Committee of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the Yugoslavian Communist League. The meeting was held on January 25, 1977. Nkomo thanked Dolanc for the continued support of the Zimbabwean liberation movements. The summary of Dolanc’s reply suggests some impatience with the PF: Dolanc emphasized “that he has no intention of inferring or giving advice . . . underlined the importance of unity, the need to overcome particularist interests.” The Yugoslavian’s were providing aid to both ZIPRA and ZANLA. The accounts from this time period showed that some care was given to provide equal amounts of weapons and cash to both parties and armies. Nkomo gave a history of the division between ZAPU and ZANU, blaming the breakoff of ZANU on “external influences.” He argued that he was currently under pressure from external forces. “Someone [in the meeting] made it known that it was the USSR.” Nkomo suggested that the non-aligned allies were more to his liking, “to whom we will belong when and if we become free.” He argued that the non-alignment policy enabled them to “work together, think and create, but also to be our own.”

² Ibid., 253–54.

³ “Interview with Jason Moyo,” *Afrique Magazine*, January 7, 1977.

Nkomo was careful, however, to make a distinction between his dependency on the Soviets and Mugabe's aid from the People's Republic of China. Acknowledging this fact of different sponsors, Nkomo added, "However, ZAPU managed to prevent the Soviets from penetrating their camps as instructors (they only accepted Africans as instructors) while ZANU did not prevent the Chinese." Nkomo argued that this Chinese influence "had a particularly negative effect on young people who did not know how to set boundaries and who succumbed to promises from outside." Interestingly, Nkomo then defended Mugabe, as suggested by the following from the notes of the meeting: "Mugabe, the leader of ZANU, understands the problem, and Nkomo believes that he will not succumb to pressure, especially from young people." He called ZANU an "undisciplined organization" but one that ZAPU "cannot ignore." Nkomo said he, along with Mugabe, "will manage to form the organization they want in Zimbabwe." Nkomo said there was no need to "go too fast ... because of the situation in the movement and because of the dependence on the forces that help them." He also said they could not act without the support of the Frontline State presidents. Most importantly, he said there was no chance of a ZIPRA and ZANLA merger. "That is why now there are two organizations with joint leadership that will merge with one 'diplomatic' action, but there will be no parallel merger."⁴ Even with this growing gulf between the two parties, Nkomo and Mugabe would continue to carry out international diplomacy with the Western powers as coleaders of the PF.

Nkomo visited Moscow from February 28 to March 7 to request further military aid and training for ZIPRA after the failure of Geneva. John Holmes, a British diplomat, reported what he could about Nkomo's visit from the Zambian diplomats in Moscow. The Zambians did not have much information to share, only that "the object of his visit was to ask for arms."⁵ Holmes translated and summarized Nkomo's comments in the Soviet press, including a passage

⁴ "Note of a conversation between Stanet Dolanc and Joshua Nkomo," Department of International Relations and Relations of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the Communist Yugoslavia, Part of 1406/86, Pov broj 109/1, Belgrade, February 3, 1977 *Arhiv, Centralnog Komiteta Seveza Komunista Jugoslavije*. (Thanks to Sarah Zabic for providing me this file and others related to Zimbabwe from the Archive.)

⁵ Moscow to FCO, "Nkomo's visit and strong possibility of arms deals with ZAPU," February 28 to March 7, 1977, item 53, FCO36/1926, BNA. The

from *Pravda* on March 5, where Nkomo reportedly “claimed that Britain and the US, the creators of the Anglo-American Plan, had been concerned least of all about the fate of the Rhodesian people. The failure of the Geneva conference meant the end of Western plans for a settlement favourable to the West and harmful to the people of Zimbabwe.” Nkomo then, according to Holmes, thanked the Soviets. “The Patriotic Front had decided on a broad campaign of military action against the racist regime. They were satisfied with the support they were receiving from the Soviet Union and the ‘socialist’ countries.”⁶

Evidence from Soviet documents in the Bukovsky Archives includes a formal request, dated March 6, 1977, from Nkomo for weapons and supplies from the Soviets. Nkomo submitted a letter informing his Russian comrades that at that time ZAPU had “about 600 activists who have received military training who are awaiting transfer to Zimbabwe; 1,200 people who are undergoing training; 1,000 people who are starting training in a new camp, and 3,000 recruits who are in transitional camps in Zambia and Botswana.” Nkomo remarked that they were planning to start new training in Angola. “Together with the governments of Angola and Cuba, we have reached an agreement to establish a ZAPU training camp. The Cuban comrades took over the logistical support of the camp at the initial stage for a period of 2 to 4 months.” Nkomo reported how ZIPRA was “experiencing an acute shortage of some vital supplies” and asked for food item, tents, clothes, and blankets. Nkomo noted problems with sending supplies through Mozambique and Tanzania and said he would “discuss with President K. Kaunda the possibility of the Zambian government receiving the property intended for us through Mozambique or Tanzania.” A statement was issued by the Communist Party’s Central Committee approving the provisions for the training camp in Angola and sending 200 “activists for military training in the USSR at the end of 1977, including 20 people for training military pilots.”⁷

“Anglo-American Plan” referred to by Nkomo is also known as the Anglo-American proposal.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Document CT50/131: “Joshua Nkomo to General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,” March 6, 1977 and “On requests from the leadership of the African National Council of Zimbabwe,” April 4, 1977, Bukovsky Archives, <http://bukovsky-archives.net/pdfs/terr-wd/ct50-77.pdf>. (Thanks to Ben Allison for locating and translating this document for me to use here.)

Internal Settlement Negotiations

An important theme for 1977 and most of 1978 is that the two PF leaders did their best to keep their own differences out of their diplomacy, while emphasizing that the failure of the talks rested on the shoulders of the British and Ian Smith. It was, of course, not difficult for word to get around of the lack of unity between Mugabe and Nkomo. Reports from diplomats in Nigeria and Egypt related Nkomo's displeasure in Geneva with Mugabe's more prominent role as a "partner" of the PF. One British diplomat was told by a Mr. Raid how the Nigerian ambassador to Egypt had noted, "that in conversation with him, Mr Nkomo took a very hard and uncompromising line. He seemed to be asking the other groups to dissolve themselves and accept his leadership without any give and take."⁸

Mugabe's public views, based on an interview in the Tanzanian *Sunday News* on January 2, 1977, were summarized by the British in Dar es Salaam. From his perspective at Geneva, Mugabe explained, "The PF's achievements were firstly, convincing [the British government] of the seriousness of the Front's intention to secure a transfer of power, and secondly exposing British and American intentions to 'establish a puppet government which they call moderate' and which would 'forestall the armed struggle.'"⁹ Asked about ZANU and ZAPU unity, Mugabe explained that the Geneva conference had shown they could "think and act as one," and that "if we are to unite, we have to unite on the basis of the armed struggle." Geneva had "brought the political leadership together, it had been agreed that 'we must look into the possibility, if not the probability of bringing the two armies together'."¹⁰

By late January 1977, after consolidating the support of the Frontline State presidents and the OAU post-Geneva, and utilizing the assistance of Tanzania and Mozambique to remove the ZIPA elements by arresting them in Mozambique, ZANU signaled to the British they were still interested in continuing talks. At the end of January 1977, Varcoe met in Lusaka with Rugare Gumbo, who Varcoe found "surprisingly

⁸ Cairo to FCO, "Visit to Cairo of Joshua Nkomo," January 7, 1977, item 4, FCO36/1926, BNA.

⁹ Dar es Salaam to FCO, "Sunday News Dar interviews Mugabe," January 2, 1977, item 1, FCO36/1926, BNA.

¹⁰ Ibid.

affable.” They discussed what ZANU sought in future negotiations. Varcoe said Gumbo criticized the British at Geneva by stating that “it would be essential for the British Government to do more ground work first” in future negotiations. “By this he seemed to mean that we should first convince, persuade or pressurise Mr Smith into accepting that there must be an effective transfer of power to the black majority.” Lewen replied to Gumbo by saying “that it was quite impossible for us to be able to ‘sell’ to Mr Smith (or to Mr Vorster) an immediate transfer of power.” Varcoe stressed that the PF “must recognize that there is a point beyond which Mr Smith simply would not be pushed. To make concessions yes, to commit what he regarded as suicide no.”¹¹ Gumbo asked Varcoe, “Why should we have struggled for 12 years to take power from Smith simply to hand it over to the British who would then in turn hand it over to us?” Varcoe concluded his report to the FCO: “I did not get the impression from our talk that the ZANU Executive have totally ruled out further negotiations. The difficulty is their insistence that they should be on their terms.”¹²

The British were also debriefed by ZAPU after Geneva. Josiah Chinamano of ZAPU visited the FCO and had an interview with its assistant undersecretary for Africa, Philip Mansfield, in early February 1977. According to Mansfield, Chinamano explained that Smith and Bishop Muzorewa had begun negotiations on the “internal option.”¹³ Chinamano told Mansfield that there was a “consistent campaign in Rhodesia to brand Mugabe as a Marxist who would introduce extreme policies.” Chinamano said that “[t]his campaign had also affected Nkomo by extension.” Chinamano also suggested that if Smith held a referendum for an internal settlement, “the authorities would no doubt detain large numbers of people who were prominent in the PF.” Chinamano was “in favour of reconvening the Geneva Conference without Smith.” Mansfield also relayed, based on his conversation with Chinamano, “that the military situation was deteriorating from Smith’s point of view. The number of guerrillas in the field was increasing steadily and they were able to enter villages when the security forces were elsewhere and to hold meetings with villagers to plan the

¹¹ J. R. Varcoe, “Note for the Record ‘Rhodesia: PF,’ January 31, 1977, item 26, FCO36/1926, BNA.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ P. R. A. Mansfield to Mr. Harrison, “PF,” February 18, 1977, item 36, FCO36/1926, BNA.

future.” Chinamano told Mansfield that “young white Rhodesians were leaving the country. Two had been on his flight to London. They had introduced themselves to him and explained that after five years of intermittent service they saw no future for themselves in Rhodesia and were going to Scotland to work on an oil rig.”¹⁴ Chinamano’s pessimism about the future of the negotiations was perhaps tempered by the increasing capacity for ZAPU to recruit and train soldiers for the liberation war effort.

As the British weighed their options for restarting talks with the PF and Smith, they began receiving news at the end of February questioning Mugabe’s control of the guerrilla forces, the same forces who had offered their endorsement of Mugabe as their political leader at the Geneva conference. Julian Marshall from the BBC reported to British diplomats in Maputo after meeting with ZIPA leaders at Geneva. He believed ZIPA would not survive the remainder of 1977, especially given the assassination of ZAPU’s Jason Moyo, who had been a strong advocate of a combined military force. In the aftermath of Moyo’s death, “no one could hold ZANU and ZAPU together for long.” Marshall’s assessment of Mugabe was also pessimistic. A British diplomat in Maputo, C. R. L. de Chassiron, described how “Marshall was quite adamant that Robert Mugabe would also be ‘finished’ in a few months. It was plain that Tongogara, Gumbo, and Hamadziripi had plans for ZANU which took no account of Mugabe’s self-proclaimed leadership. . . . Marshall felt that Tongogara definitely aims to replace Mugabe as ZANU’s head.”¹⁵ De Chassiron noted that he had yet to meet with Mugabe, although he lived across the street from him when he was in Maputo. The British were dealing primarily with Edgar Tekere for the moment.¹⁶

In the early months of 1977, both ZANU and ZAPU were working to consolidate their competitive position with each other in the PF. Mugabe and his comrades were removing those in ZIPA who threatened the consolidation of ZANU and the leadership of ZANLA. Publicly, Mugabe repeated his commitment to the military cooperation of ZANLA and ZIPRA. The British high commissioner to Zambia, Stephen Miles, reported what Mugabe had said at a press conference in

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chassiron to Harrison, “Rhodesia Department, Maputo,” February 28, 1977, item 50, FCO36/1926, BNA.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Beira, Mozambique on March 15. The Zambian press indicated Mugabe had told reporters that “[t]here is a grave danger in having separate liberation armies which could erupt in a civil war in a free Zimbabwe. One of the main tasks of the coordinating committee of the PF is to reconstitute ZIPA so that we can bring our freedom fighters together to fight as one on all fronts.”¹⁷ The perception of unity among the PF was furthered at the FRELIMO conference in March 1977 where “Nkomo and Mugabe both read formal messages of greeting to the FRELIMO Congress on behalf of the PF and embraced on the rostrum.”¹⁸

This orchestrated perception of greater unity in the PF may have created some optimism for the Anglo-American proposal post-Geneva, but the Smith government’s initiative to negotiate the internal settlement with Bishop Muzorewa, Reverend Sithole, and Chief Chirau would throw a spanner into the works in 1977. Talks of an internal settlement rattled the confidence of Nkomo and Mugabe. At a press conference on March 18, 1977, Nkomo addressed the press about his socialist leanings, saying, “The people of Zimbabwe have decided to associate themselves with the masses of the socialist countries because they are more human and understand the problems facing the Zimbabwean in their just struggle. By contrast the West have lost direction.” Nkomo added a humorous note, suggesting the West’s concern that because they had “read the red book” they were Maoist was ridiculous. “We have been reading British history for a long time but we have not turned British.” On a roll, Nkomo responded to a question about Bishop Muzorewa and Reverend Sithole forming a “possible alliance,” by asking rhetorically, “What are they trying to form, another church?”¹⁹ Nkomo’s typical humor, however, glossed over the growing concern among the PF leadership and the Frontline State presidents that Smith could manage to create an internal settlement government that would be recognized internationally, resulting in the lifting of sanctions, and thus prolonging the war.

¹⁷ Lusaka to FCO, “Rhodesia: Patriotic Front,” March 16, 1977, item 59, FCO36/1926, BNA.

¹⁸ Lewen to FCO, “Rhodesia: Nkomo Press Conference,” February 7, 1977, item 29, FCO36/1926, BNA.

¹⁹ Miles Lusaka to Priority FCO, “Rhodesia,” March 18, 1977, item 56, FCO36/1926, BNA.

At the same time Mugabe and Nkomo were in Mozambique, ZAPU's Josiah Chinamano was in New York at the United Nations, briefing Britain's mission there. Chinamano told the British they were certain Bishop Muzorewa was secretly working with Smith to develop an internal settlement, with Smith hoping that "he would be able to demonstrate to the world that the internal option was massively supported by the African population." Chinamano told Britain's UN ambassador, Ivor Richard, who he knew from the Geneva talks, that ZAPU was willing to continue talks, "but not as a continuation of the existing Geneva exercise." Chinamano also said "ZAPU felt strongly that there was no longer need for the British to invite as many delegations as they had to Geneva. Now that the four [Frontline State presidents] and the OAU had decided that the liberation movement should be consolidated around the PF, it would be logical for Britain to avoid casting their net more widely." Chinamano hoped to make it clear that ZAPU and the PF were irrevocably opposed to allowing the Rhodesian-based nationalists to continue participating in negotiations. Richard was not willing to accept this second demand, stating that "the British Government had already indicated that it was not at present prepared to withdraw the existing invitations to Muzorewa and Sithole."²⁰

Two days later, in an address to ZAPU members, according to High Commissioner Stephen Miles in Lusaka, "Nkomo made clear his opposition to any attempt at an internal solution to the Rhodesia problem." Nkomo called "Smith's overtures to the moderate Blacks as 'an attempt to usurp the rights of the people of Zimbabwe'." Miles quotes Nkomo further, on the internal settlement: "He also described it as – 'A challenge to the black people of the country and any others who will fight against an evil system even if it is in black hands'. 'The war is not against white people, it is against an evil system.' He warned that those who joined the system would be 'face to face with the Katusha' [Katyusha] (A type of Soviet Rocket)." Nkomo also indicated that the war was about destroying the racialized privilege of whites: "We don't want to build a state for a privileged few (i.e., whites)." He added, "When we talk about rights of people, we don't mean any particular group of people."²¹

²⁰ UK Mission to the United Nations, A. D. Brighty, "Call by Josiah Chinamano to the UK Mission to the UN," March 18, 1977, item 58, FCO36/1926, BNA.

²¹ Miles Lusaka to Priority FCO, "Info Dar es Salam, Gaborone, Maputo, Cape Town, Washington, UK Mission New York," March 21, 1977, item 59, FCO36/1926, BNA.

Nkomo labelled those waiting to come to power through a referendum as “vultures” and accused the British of supporting the idea. Nkomo “questioned when in the history of colonialism a referendum had ever been held to choose a leader.” Nkomo did not believe that any negotiations or conference would be successful unless it resulted in a transfer of power to the Zimbabwean people. “Until this happened it was pointless to hold a further conference, and that intensified armed struggle was the only way left to solve the problem.”²² This notion of a nationalist leader coming to power without an election would become problematic for Nkomo. Even though he talked about the need for an election, by 1978 and 1979 there were indications he would accept the idea of the transition to majority rule occurring with a transitional government led by himself, rather than having elections first.

This would be a central element of Nkomo’s rivalry with Mugabe during the next three years – how to maintain a commitment to majority rule elections without splitting the PF into two parties where Mugabe would have an advantage in voting. The problem for Nkomo was that since the early 1960s, he and others were beholden to the notion of a majority rule election before independence. Nkomo could not go against this notion now, nor could the Frontline State presidents. Smith and Muzorewa’s internal settlement, on the one hand, would create a crisis for the Frontline State presidents and the PF in negotiating, while adding more pressure to go beyond a partial manifestation of a majority rule government, given the restrictions on the franchise and the protection of whites built into the internal settlement.²³

The prospects of an internal settlement also forced Nkomo and Mugabe to address white Rhodesians. Nkomo, as noted above, was careful to say the fight was against an “evil system” and not whites per se, but that black leaders would become enemies of the struggle once they joined Smith. Mugabe also reassured whites that ZANU was not a party fighting against whites but against the Smith regime. In an interview published in *Tempo* in Maputo, Mugabe stated that he would protect their rights in an Independent Zimbabwe: “We do not

²² Ibid.

²³ Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 233–54.

fight to defend individual interests. This is why in our contacts with the whites we have told them this, and it has also been necessary to tell them that we are not fighting to expel them from the country.” Mugabe elaborated that ZANU sought “to construct a system where there is justice for all regardless of their colour or personal inclinations. This is the message which we have to constantly relay to them; because they think that we are carrying out a racial war and wish to expel them.”²⁴

In March of 1977, as the internal settlement talks were just getting underway, both PF leaders appeared to share the same public message. Both stressed the need to concentrate on the war effort. By contrast, the propaganda campaign inside Rhodesia made sure that those in Rhodesia were not given a chance to consider the nuances of Nkomo’s and Mugabe’s claims to universal rights, or to consider that the war was a liberation struggle to create rights for those left out of the minority, white-rule definitions of citizenship. From the Rhodesian propaganda perspective, the war continued to be fought against an external enemy. Afro-Asian communists funded by the Soviet Union and China were out to destroy, from the Rhodesian Front perspective, “white civilization” in southern Africa.²⁵ However, the war and Smith’s earlier concessions toward majority rule in 1976 made it difficult to maintain this “othering” of the Zimbabweans fighting for majority rule. Anglo-American support for their efforts – at least diplomatically, but also in terms of humanitarian aid to both ZANU and ZAPU – made it difficult to also maintain a less interventionist policy into 1978.

The Question of Cold War Interventions

On May 19, 1977, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, met with Mugabe at the Nigerian High Commission in Maputo. Accounts of the meeting suggest that Mugabe was tough on Young for not offering anything new, beyond saying the United States would pressure South Africa to put more pressure on Smith and the Rhodesians. According to the account of the US ambassador to

²⁴ “Interview with Mugabe in ‘TEMPO,’” March 20, 1977, item 60, FCO36/1926, BNA.

²⁵ White, *Unpopular Sovereignty*, 1–36. See also Donal Lowry, “The Impact of Anti-communism on White Rhodesian Political Culture, ca.1920s–1980,” *Cold War History* 7, no. 2 (2007), 169–94.

Mozambique, Willard Depree, Mugabe and others in his party “appeared unimpressed, saying this sounded like more of the same.” Young and the other Americans then “explained [the] difficulty which [the] U.S. would have in considering military aid.” Mugabe and others “objected to what they sensed to be excessive U.S. concern over potential communist influence with [the] liberation movement.” After asserting and defending “their right to accept aid from any source”, Mugabe added, “It is an insult to our intelligence to believe we will become the pawns of the Russians.” Ambassador Depree added his own comment that “Mugabe is an intelligent, articulate person. While firm in his views, he proved willing to listen and to understand U.S. constraints.”²⁶

Somewhat paradoxically, increased Soviet and Cuban involvement in the Rhodesian war actually became more of a possibility created by Nkomo’s growing lack of confidence over his chances to become the first leader of Zimbabwe. The British therefore believed they could bring Nkomo into a direct negotiation with Smith to transfer power to him and the more moderate leaders in Salisbury, thereby circumventing Soviet influence. The British floated strategies in the summer of 1977, such as enlisting the Frontline State presidents and the Nigerians to “ensure that they take a reasonable line towards a settlement in Rhodesia,” while at the same time taking a position that “neutralises Cuban and Russian influence.”²⁷ The British were also concerned that Mugabe’s position was “under challenge,” and that he saw “backing from the Soviet Union and China as essential for carrying on the armed struggle.” They did not, however, think he was so committed to “communist ideology,” and thought his links were “essentially based on the need for practical support.”²⁸ The Botswana and Zambian governments were pressing Britain to become more involved in negotiations to forestall more extensive Cuban and Soviet involvement.

The British report also noted that the Frontline State presidents had difficulties exerting their influence on the PF leaders. Additionally, the

²⁶ Ambassador Depree to State, “Meeting with Mugabe,” May 21, 1977, Maputo00666, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973–1976, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, USNA.

²⁷ Excerpt from “Minutes of the Gen 12 Meeting of 8 July, 3,” 1977, item 231, FCO 36/1929, BNA, in which it is mentioned that “there is a call for a study of ways of reducing Soviet and Cuban influence in the PF, through Kenya and Nigeria.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

report cited the difficulties Joseph Garba, a Nigerian brigadier, had communicated in working with Nkomo and Mugabe: “The Nigerians were unhappy about the Nkomo–Mugabe alliance and that they found the leaders difficult people who ‘could not be pushed and one had to take their word’.”²⁹ This comment foreshadows the difficulties Garba would face as he tried to force a political unity between Nkomo and Mugabe in 1978. Such a move would ultimately fail, indicating the intractable nature of the divide between ZANU and ZAPU leaders by August 1978.

Nkomo Confronts the West

The minutes from Nkomo’s meeting with British prime minister James Callaghan and his foreign secretary, David Owen, on July 27, 1977 at 10 Downing Street show Nkomo taking a tough line with the British. Callaghan opened with the suggestion that the time had arrived when “we had got Smith, and that he would last only for a matter of months.” Callaghan went on to say, “What we needed now was African unity if we were to avoid a situation such as had occurred in other parts of Africa.” Nkomo replied that he “could not accept this comment.” Callaghan responded by arguing “that it was a fact that unity did not at present exist which was necessary to make Zimbabwe a viable country.” Nkomo suggested that “nobody could achieve this; the British could not achieve it in their own country.” He then argued that the PF had “come a long way” toward unity. Owen said that “if ZANU and ZAPU could work together, that would be fine.”³⁰

Nkomo replied by expressing his disappointment over “Dr. Owen’s recent reference to ‘tribalism’”. There was no question of this. He knew very well how to handle it.” He told Owen that “public references to tribalism were divisive and that we should recognise, publicly if possible, that he had spent his life fighting for unity.”³¹ The spark for this criticism was a BBC report claiming that the divisions the Frontline State presidents were trying to heal in the PF were “tribal” differences. In a press conference in Lusaka on July 26, Nkomo is reported to have “inferred that in Rhodesia itself, Britain was trying to create a tribal

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Note of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Mr. Joshua Nkomo,” July 27, 1977, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

³¹ *Ibid.*

problem that doesn't exist in the country."³² The discussion at 10 Downing Street turned to the question of integrating PF forces with Rhodesian forces. Callaghan suggested if this could be done, it could constitute "one of the most effective armies and air forces in Africa." Such armed forces would also help to "re-assure those Europeans who might wish to stay behind – many, of course, would leave." Nkomo responded to this idea by stating it was a "very difficult question" because "these were people who had been fighting against each other; many brutalities had been committed. . . . The white forces could not imagine themselves working in cooperation with terrorists; the PF forces could not imagine themselves working with fascists."³³

The meeting's discussion moved on to the question of an internal settlement. Callaghan asked Nkomo how the British should respond "if Smith were to fix up an election on the basis of 'one man, one vote' in collaboration – for example – with Muzorewa and Sithole. Should the British government recognise the outcome?" Nkomo answered, "If people started to play that kind of game, many things could happen; it would be very dangerous. The PF could not simply sit and watch." Callaghan asked Nkomo how they could "fight against 'one man, one vote'." Nkomo responded by saying the fight would not be against "one man, one vote," but against a "puppet government." Callaghan stressed that the British government needed Zimbabwean leaders to help. Callaghan prefaced his next remark by saying "Mr. Nkomo would probably jump down his throat," and then suggested that what might be the "best solution" would be for Nkomo and Muzorewa "to agree to work together." Nkomo responded that this was "not possible," and that "Muzorewa was a liar." Callaghan replied that "he had himself worked with worse liars than Bishop Muzorewa. The fact was that, together, Mr. Nkomo and Muzorewa would sweep the country." Owen interjected that he had told President Carter that "Mr. Nkomo was a true politician." This last comment seemed to get Nkomo off the hook from answering any further questions about the British interest in getting him to compromise, stressing that Muzorewa "amounted to nothing politically." Owen asked if Nkomo could work with Sithole. Nkomo said that he did not know.

³² American Embassy Lusaka to American Embassy London, "Nkomo Press Conference, Lusaka" July 26, 1977, item 197, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

³³ "Note of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Mr. Joshua Nkomo," July 27, 1977, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

“He was working with Mugabe. He had told Sithole that he was destroying himself: he had no hope of winning a seat in a free election.”³⁴

This meeting, without ZANU representatives, shows Nkomo committed above all to the winning of the war and to the transfer of power to the PF. He gave no indication, even after having it raised at the top level of the British government, that he would be willing to break off ties with Mugabe in order to accept a compromised role with Muzorewa, Sithole, or Smith. When asked by Prime Minister Callaghan if there was a role for the others, Nkomo said he had “discussed the problem” with Mugabe. “But there was no basis for discussion with Muzorewa and Sithole: he could not deal with liars. Both Muzorewa and Sithole were incapable of telling the truth. He himself had told his people how things were and they recognised the truth. But Muzorewa was a liar who had been rejected by his party.”³⁵

Nkomo travelled next to Jamaica at the beginning of August 1977 where he took a very tough line on the British, the Americans, and the internal settlement talks. He emphasized that the Americans should only play an observer role in future negotiations since “Zimbabwe was a British colonial problem.” He continued the claim that both the British and Americans were only “looking for an acceptable black face to protect their Rhodesian investments.” Nkomo went on to characterize Bishop Muzorewa and Reverend Sithole “as black weaklings with whom there could be no reconciliation.” Responding to a question about the role of US ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young, in African diplomacy, Nkomo said that he had an “open mind” about this. “But it should be recognised that Young was a black man being used by the Carter Administration and that as an American he was by definition an imperialist.”³⁶ A few days later, the British reported from Georgetown, Guyana, that Nkomo had met with Andrew Young. Nkomo reportedly told Young he wanted “to ensure that there was no joint Anglo-American plan for Zimbabwe” but said the United States could support a British plan. Young apparently explained that “if Americans did not sponsor [the] plan jointly with

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Note of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Mr. Joshua Nkomo,” July 27, 1977, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

³⁶ Kingston to FCO, “telno 364 of 5/8,” August 9, 1977, item 216, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

Britain the U.S. Government might have difficulty in providing funds for Zimbabwe.”³⁷

Nkomo next met with Cyrus Vance, US secretary of state, a week later in Washington, DC, where he repeated his objections to the idea of an external peacekeeping force, especially from the United Nations. According to US reporting of the meeting, Nkomo used the example of the Congo as support for his case against the United Nations presence. “He referred to the alleged partiality of UN forces in the Congo which may have caused Lumumba’s fall. He argued that the departure of foreign troops at the time of independence or ‘at one minute before midnight’ would open a dangerous gap.”³⁸ The Americans were aware of British hopes to separate Nkomo from the PF and were starting to develop doubts about the idea. Briefing notes for Vance’s meeting with Owen and the South African foreign minister, “Pik” Botha, state: “The British continue to believe that the Patriotic Front will fall apart and that Nkomo will accept the settlement package and participate in elections. Mugabe could then be isolated and lose Frontline support. This may be the case, but we should not imply to Botha that we are actively encouraging or expecting such an eventuality.”³⁹

Vance told the British, after meeting with Nkomo on August 15, that he did not believe “Nkomo’s acceptance of the UK/US proposals would come easily,” because Nkomo opposed the UN force during the interim period. Nkomo also told Vance he opposed a joint Anglo-American proposal. Most importantly, however, the note from this meeting states that “Vance told Nkomo the U.S. would not support an internal settlement.”⁴⁰ By this stage, both Owen and Vance had assured Nkomo that their governments were not willing to support the “internal settlement” solution. Therefore, both the United States and

³⁷ Georgetown to FCO, “telno 133,” August 11, 1977, item 218, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

³⁸ Bridgetown [sic] for Ambassador Young Only, “Secretary’s Meeting with Nkomo,” August 16, 1977, STATE194950, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973–1976, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, USNA.

³⁹ Georgetown for Ambassador Young, White House for Brzezinski, “Briefing Memorandum: Vance, Owen, Botha meeting,” August 10, 1977, STATE188690, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973–1976, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, USNA.

⁴⁰ Washington to FCO (telno 3546), “My 3 IPTS,” August 15, 1977, item 220, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

the British had given the PF their promise to not support an internal settlement government at the expense of the PF in future negotiations.

ZANU, Mozambique, and the Anglo-American Proposal

Mugabe and ZANU were aware of Nkomo's contacts with David Owen in London and in October 1977, ZANU's Didymus Mutasa, described by the FCO as "an old friend of the Rhodesia Department," relayed this when he paid a visit to the FCO. He said, "Mugabe has [the] impression Secretary of State [Owen] disliked him personally. Mugabe was always reading that other nationalists had met Dr. Owen in London but he had never been invited to London himself."⁴¹ So while Mugabe kept up the public image of the intransigent leader who was not seeking out the British, he did have ways to get the message to London that he did not appreciate the greater attention given to Nkomo. Nor was ZANU immune from letting others know their feelings about ZAPU. An interview with two Zambian journalists in Lusaka revealed that ZANU leaders were telling them they feared civil war with ZAPU, and "accused Nkomo of holding back ZAPU (ZIPRA) until civil war – Russians would help."⁴² This was the "zero-hour" theory that ZANU had begun to circulate in 1976. It became a convenient way of painting ZAPU and ZIPRA as secretly waiting to carry out Soviet plans once the war was over. The same journalists told the British on October 5, 1977 that Mugabe had survived "a sticky phase recently," when his leadership was challenged by Hamadziripi, Gumbo, and Mudzi. The story went that "Kangai and Mtende (recently killed in a motor accident in Mozambique) had exposed the plot and at the ensuing meeting held by ZANU in Chimoio in mid-September Mugabe had emerged in a stronger position than ever before." The reporters said that Mugabe was now ZANU's president, and Tongogara was now secretary for defense.⁴³

While the threat of a "black civil war" loomed in the future, the immediate threat that heightened the risk of Cuban and Soviet involvement were the continued raids into Mozambique and Zambia by the

⁴¹ Hurr to Harrison, October 19, 1977, item 279, FCO36/1929, BNA.

⁴² I. C. Ross to Mr. McLoughlin, "Rhodesia: the Aftermath of the Kaunda/Smith talks and the future of the Patriotic Front," October 5, 1977, item 289, FCO36/1929, BNA.

⁴³ Ibid.

Rhodesians with South African military assistance. Mozambique's foreign minister, Joaquim Chissano, pressed the Americans and the British for military aid to defend against Rhodesian raids. After Chissano's meeting with the British ambassador John Lewen in Mozambique, in December 1977, the problem remained one of weapons. "The military answer was of course for Mozambique to ask for aircraft and other equipment from those friends who were already willing to supply them. They still did not wish to do this, however, since that would mean internationalising the war which was precisely what Smith wanted to happen."⁴⁴ Ambassador Lewen also reported a meeting with Samora Machel where Machel chastised the British for "our sluggishness in failing to get rid of Smith, whom he described as our 'nephew', and for failing to solve the Rhodesia problem."⁴⁵ Lewen noted that Machel did this with good humor, but that Machel also stressed that he wished the war could be ended as soon as possible.

A key reason for Machel's lack of patience with progress on the Anglo-American proposal was the Rhodesians attacks against ZANU and ZANLA bases and refugee camps in November 1977, as they had done previously in November 1976 during the Geneva talks. British diplomat Charles de Chassiron, based in Maputo at the time, reported to the FCO the serious losses such raids created in terms of loss of life for both ZANLA personnel and for Zimbabwean refugees. While indicating there was confusion over whether the attack on Chimoio had resulted in mostly the deaths of civilian-refugee or guerrilla fighters, it was clear to everyone the losses were substantial. De Chassiron noted the Mozambicans attempted to claim that Chimoio was solely a "civilian refugee transit camp" when updating "a skeptical U.S. Congressional aide." The British understood the camp was a "major ZANLA base, though there were civilians there – the ones for whom ZANU had been diverting UNHCR relief supplies." De Chassiron also noted that ZANU people interviewed after the raid had "thought that Mozambican army was protecting them."⁴⁶ De Chassiron described other Rhodesian attacks on November 26 far from the Rhodesian

⁴⁴ Maputo to FCO, "telno 400: Rhodesia," December 7, 1977, item 190, FCO36/2020, BNA.

⁴⁵ From Lagos to FCO "Rhodesia: Possible visit by Field Marshal Carver to Maputo," December 9, 1977, item 194, FCO36/2020, BNA.

⁴⁶ De Chassiron to J. C. Harrison, "Rhodesian attacks in Mozambique," December 14, 1977, item 212, FCO36/2020, BNA.

border, at Tembue, a camp “250 kilometres North West of Tete city.” Based on Mozambican intelligence reports, the Rhodesian raids there, which involved “anti-personnel bombs and helicopter-borne troops,” resulted in “245 refugees killed and 147 wounded.” Even though journalists were allowed to visit only one of the two camps at Tembue, de Chassiron concluded: “There seems little reason to doubt that here too the guerrillas suffered a heavy toll, but there is no doubt either that once again the Rhodesians have killed civilians indiscriminately.”⁴⁷ Such inability to defend civilians and combatants from air raids made it all the more important for Machel and the Mozambicans to press for a negotiated transfer of power, ideally by 1978.

Smith, the Executive Committee, and the Rhodesian War Effort

Evidence from the SADF archives shows that the SADF Commander was telling Rhodesian general Peter Walls, in no uncertain terms, that the war was unwinnable. The meeting was held on August 17, 1977, at Defense Headquarters, to discuss with the Rhodesians joint plans “to ensure the evacuation of SADF equipment from Rhodesia should the necessity arise.” Most importantly, the SADF Commander “emphasised that he saw no military solution to the problem, but only a political one, and that this political settlement was vital for the future of the country.” He told Walls that there were three possible future scenarios, one where Ian Smith stays in power, one where Bishop Muzorewa becomes prime minister, and one where Mugabe becomes prime minister. With Mugabe, the SADF Commander, predicted “one could foresee only chaos and a vast outflow of refugees from Rhodesia and a general situation of instability.”⁴⁸

While the South Africans were pushing for an accommodation between Smith and Muzorewa, the internal settlement talks moved slowly in Salisbury. Evidence of the meetings among Smith, Muzorewa, Sithole, Chief Chirau, and others demonstrates the difficulties internal settlement leaders were having. One issue that caused

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Notes of a Meeting held by C SADF with the Commander Combined Operations, Rhodesia, at 15H00 on 17 August 1977,” Rhodesia I, H SAW 3 168, SADF Archives, Pretoria, Defence Intelligence Declassified, 2011.04.04.

lengthy debate was over new franchise rules to continue giving whites what was referred to as “a blocking third” in parliament, to protect white minority interests.⁴⁹ An example of the difficulties in the internal settlement talks is contained in the minutes of a meeting in Salisbury on December 23, 1977. Professor Stanlake Samkange argued with Ian Smith; he was critical of Smith for what he called bad negotiations – the one-third reserved for whites and the two-thirds for blacks did not respond to a concept of majority rule. Smith replied that the reason he needed guarantees for whites was he wanted to guarantee whites they would be able to live in a future majority rule country “without recrimination.” Samkange replied that the problem with Smith and the Rhodesian Front was they thought only in racial terms. He suggested the United African National Council likely would run white candidates, so it was possible there could be more than thirty-three white representatives in parliament. Samkange added, “So many whites were leaving the country that there might no longer be enough whites to give the 33 seats to.” He then criticized Smith: “The government should get away from its racial stand. I appeal to the government, the longer we delay the more perilous the situation gets. If this fails we throw this country into chaos.”

Smith’s response to Samkange shows the contempt Smith held toward African independent states in the region: “The Professor thinks we think racially. He must know that here in Rhodesia the whites think racially, that is a fact of life here. We live next to Mozambique, Angola and Zambia, what happens there has not helped the racial thinking in this country.” Smith then insisted that he had only agreed to the concept of majority rule in his negotiations with Kissinger because he believed that his decision had come with safeguards. He also responded to Samkange’s jibe about whites leaving the country in large numbers. Smith argued that this started when he made the announcement based on Kissinger’s offer in September 1976. Smith concluded, “The whites tell me that all I have to do is say I no longer accepted majority rule, then we can stop this exflux and start seeing more whites coming here. What I can’t do is to accept a settlement which won’t solve the problem.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For of debates over voting mechanisms during the UDI and the Zimbabwe-Rhodesia state, see Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty*, 149–79 and 232–49.

⁵⁰ “The minutes of the 9th meeting (Friday December 23rd 1977) of the settlement talks between Smith, Muzorewa, Sithole, and Chirau.” SANA DFA 1–151, vol. 2.

At this point, Gibson Magaramombe interjected into the debate: “It is enjoyable to sit at conferences and hear politicians argue.” Smith replied, “Speak for yourself.” At which point Magaramombe suggested that they all needed to remember that “people lose life by the day while politicians are arguing and drinking tea. We don’t want to talk of the past and no one wants to be blamed for the past mistakes. I also want to tell you that the men in the bush are not ours. We may be the first to face the firing squads.” This dose of reality may have brought the discussion further, but it would take another four months until the March 3, 1978 internal settlement was finally agreed upon by the major players in what would become known as the “Executive Council” or “Exco.”⁵¹

British and American Attempts to Restart Negotiations

As the news of Smith’s and the African leaders’ internal settlement talks became more widely known, the British and Americans tried to see how they could best take advantage of this development to push for all-party talks and hopefully bring the PF and Smith back to the negotiating table.⁵² The internal settlement talks gave the PF sufficient reasons to break with future negotiations, as they could now argue that Smith was doing what observers had predicted he would do since the failed Geneva talks, thereby using negotiations to buy time while he put together the “puppet” black government. A key Anglo-American goal was therefore to gain the support of the Frontline State presidents in not giving up on negotiations when confronted with the internal settlement. Evidence of the Frontline State presidents’ resolve to try to force the PF to negotiations came out one of their meetings in April 1977 in Lusaka. The British had sent long-time Southern African expert Dennis Grennan to interview the PF leaders on the sidelines of the meeting to see where they stood on continued negotiations with the Anglo-American proposal. Grennan met with T. G. Silundika, representing ZAPU, and Mugabe, representing ZANU. He reported that he took Mugabe, Tongogara, Muzenda, and Gumbo “to drinks” as well. Information on what was discussed in the Frontline State presidents’ meeting with the nationalists was not easy for Grennan to obtain,

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Pret WPGR1563 to EXTODD GAA, “Southern African Affairs-Views of South African Sec for Foreign Affairs,” November 19, 1976, FCO36/1803.

although he did note that after a three-hour meeting, the Frontline State presidents told Nkomo and Mugabe that while they were willing to “acknowledge the role of the PF as the sole liberation movement they did not endorse the Front’s claim to be the sole representative of the people of Zimbabwe in negotiating a political settlement.”⁵³ The Frontline State presidents were taking advantage of the reality of the internal settlement talks to pressure Nkomo and Mugabe by withholding their support for the PF as “sole representatives.” As described in Chapter 3, Muzorewa and Sithole had failed to create any meaningful links between themselves and the military leaders in Lusaka and Maputo, making the PF’s military role all the more important in terms of leverage. As time went on, the Frontline State presidents would express greater opposition to a role for the internal settlement. In this earlier period, however, while the internal settlement was still not fully developed, they seemed to be using it as leverage to force greater unity among Nkomo and Mugabe, and to increase the level of military engagement with the Smith regime.

ZAPU’s George Silundika told Grennan that they objected to American involvement in future negotiations “which would bring the superpowers into the Rhodesia situation.” Grennan emphasized that “we were not asking them to stop the armed struggle until an agreement had been concluded.” In response, Msika added that “another objection to the British proposals was they would distract the PF’s leadership from the prosecution of the armed struggle.” Grennan retorted that he “found it an astonishing argument for them to claim that they had the resources to win the war but cannot devote any time or effort to win the peace.” According to Grennan, ZAPU’s secretary general, Joseph Msika, “laughingly said he thought it was an argument that might go down well with the Presidents!” This was further indication the Frontline State presidents had pushed at the meeting for both parties in the PF to engage in negotiations or find themselves left out.

Grennan was pleased to report to British foreign secretary David Owen that he had got on well with Mugabe, who he found to be “more like the friend I knew 15 years ago than the man at Geneva.” Grennan reported Mugabe to be interested in what the British had heard from their meetings in Salisbury and what Owen “really thought” about the

⁵³ Grennan to Sec of State, “Meeting of Front Line Presidents and Patriotic Front Leaders,” April 22, 1977, item 98, FCO 36/929.

chances for a peaceful settlement. “At no time did he reject your proposals and indeed made several flattering references to the way you had conducted your discussions during your trip.” Mugabe let Grennan know that Owen had “certainly seemed to have impressed” the presidents. At the end of the meeting, Mugabe told Grennan that he expected they would be “seeing a lot of each other in the near future.” Grennan characterized Mugabe as a leader who wanted to make sure the British knew he was keen to negotiate, even to the extent of sharing flattering comments about Owen.

Grennan was also aware that ZAPU and ZANU leaders were uneasy about the future of negotiations after meeting with the Frontline State presidents. The inclusion of the United States into future all-party negotiations and its acceptance by the Frontline State presidents gave them reason to worry. Grennan observed they were worried about a future all-party conference without the PF which would “prove an independence constitution to be acceptable to all the other parties including the Presidents.” The internal settlement threat had given the Frontline State presidents leverage, as this development left the door open for Bishop Muzorewa and others to negotiate for the “people of Zimbabwe,” even as Muzorewa and others lacked any direct link to the liberation forces.

While Mugabe was careful to remain in good books of the British, Nkomo was active diplomatically in this period to build a case for a turnover of power from Smith to the PF. Not only was this done to try to circumvent the internal settlement, it demonstrated Nkomo’s hopes to push a negotiated transition that would provide a role for him as the leader of the PF. Since the Geneva talks, Nkomo was aware that in the first independent election, given the strong likelihood that Mugabe would stand separately as the ZANU candidate, that he and ZAPU were unlikely to win a nationwide election. His dealings with the Americans and British in this period show he was eager to move the process along before Mugabe and the ZANLA leaders could consolidate their power in ZANU. Nkomo began to request direct meetings with the British and Americans. Nkomo called a meeting with Stephen Low, the US ambassador to Zambia, in late April 1977 to arrange a face-to-face meeting with Cyrus Vance. Low’s assessment of the meeting indicated that Nkomo, while wanting to meet with Vance, was interested in expressing his concerns that the United States should not be part of the next constitutional conference, and that non-PF

nationalists should not be invited. In his report of the meeting, Low said there was likely more flexibility in Nkomo's positions on these points and that they were less set in stone than he would like to admit. Low concluded: "One was left with the impression that he [Nkomo] sees no way of coming out of the conference presently proposed as the leader of an independent Zimbabwe and that he is not prepared to accept any process short of this."⁵⁴

Although Nkomo often mentioned that he was following the Frontline States Presidents' firm conditions that he must always negotiate with the British in Mugabe's presence, Nkomo attempted once again to meet independently with Secretary Owen when he was in London to meet with US secretary of state Cyrus Vance on May 6, 1977. The correspondence in the British FCO files concerning this proposed meeting reveals Nkomo's trademark attention to logistics. He wanted the British government to pay for a suite plus four single rooms at the Park Tower Hotel in Knightsbridge. He also wanted immigration to be notified so that he and his entourage could pass quickly through immigration at Heathrow. On the morning of his arrival from Ghana, however, he and his team had to wait more than an hour and a half in immigration because Nkomo refused to have one of his bodyguards surrender his gun, although he eventually did before they were allowed to leave the airport.

Nkomo's May 6 morning meeting with Secretary of State Vance, according to American accounts, show that Vance kept a positive line with Nkomo. It would seem that Nkomo's goal in the meeting with Vance was to receive Vance's promise that the United States would not co-sponsor the next conference, once it was arranged. Nkomo opposed American involvement, arguing that "U.S. participation in a conference would open the door to big power politics." But he diplomatically added, "If the U.S. can assist by means other than getting into a conference, please do so." Vance was willing to concede this demand, saying that he and Owen had discussed what the United States could do, short of co-sponsoring the next conference, and therefore it was not necessary for them to serve as a "co-sponsor." Nkomo and ZAPU's deputy for external affairs, Daniel Madzimbamuto, argued a bit that consultations leading up to a Lancaster House conference would still be

⁵⁴ Low to State, "Nkomo on the Owen Proposals," April 26, 1977, item 135, FCO 36/1927, BNA.

“internationalized.” Nkomo said that he welcomed American assistance but “along the lines of the present meeting”: “We cannot have a conference in bits and pieces.” Vance warned Nkomo that if the United States were not involved in consultations, “Britain might not be willing to begin the process.” In addition, Vance reminded Nkomo and his colleagues that “if a realistic process is not commenced, then there will be no Independence in 1978.” In the end, Nkomo seemed to have received Vance’s assurance that American “co-sponsorship” had been ruled out. As Vance agreed, he added, “There was too much concern about the word and that our real purpose was to assist the process.”⁵⁵

Nkomo did not manage to meet with Owen, who was busy with a Commonwealth heads of government meeting in London that week. Nkomo did meet with John Graham, the FCO’s deputy undersecretary of state, in Nkomo’s hotel suite on the evening of May 6, after his meeting with Vance. This meeting was also attended by the FCO’s assistant undersecretary for Africa, Philip Mansfield. In his report, Graham expressed Owen’s “regret” over not meeting Nkomo in London. Nkomo explained that he “intended no disrespect, but he was bound by his agreement with Mr. Mugabe not to have official talks with Britain on his own.” He said he “would have been glad to see Dr. Owen ‘over a glass of beer’ in his hotel, but a call at the Foreign Office or the House of Commons made the thing official.” After explaining that the agreement between him and Mugabe did not apply to US secretary of state Vance, Nkomo added, “However the PF was united, one body: it was not a case of ZANU and ZAPU.” Getting to matters concerning negotiations, Graham reiterated what Vance had offered in terms of a new joint British and American initiative toward a negotiated settlement. Nkomo said he was delighted to say that Vance had agreed with him earlier in the day to drop the US role as a co-sponsor. Graham said, diplomatically, that it was up to “the US to speak for themselves” but that he had been in a meeting that morning with Vance and Owen where the two “had agreed one again to pursue the approach as a joint endeavour.” Graham said there was no interest in calling a new conference now, but when it did happen, “it

⁵⁵ USDel Secretary in London to Sec State WashDC for Tarnoff and Lake, “Secretary’s Meeting with Nkomo,” May 6, 1977, 1977SECTO04004, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973–1976, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, USNA.

would be co-sponsored by Britain and the U.S.” Nkomo repeated the potential problems formal US involvement would create, including a reference to the United Nations Security Council, and potential problems there. Graham related to Nkomo some of the advantages of US involvement, including influence with South Africa, Smith, “and their contribution to the Zimbabwe Development Fund.” Graham reported that Nkomo “erupted” at the mention of the development fund. “His country was not to be bought, ‘was not to be shackled like Cyprus.’ They would need investment, but they would get it for themselves.”

Nkomo further complained about British strategy, especially over their decision to include Bishop Muzorewa and Reverend Sithole in future negotiations. “There was a war on and only those who were fighting it should be consulted. There could be no ‘peaceful’ transfer of power: if there were to be a transfer of power it would be as a result of the end of the war.”

Nkomo went on to say that “Britain always tried to complicate things and make difficulties, in Cyprus, in the Middle East, in South Africa, and now in Rhodesia: she tried to set one group against another so as to maintain the troubled waters in which she could fish.” Nkomo reportedly characterized Britain as a spider that would come out of its lair and “devour each of the nationalist leaders separately.” Graham responded to each of Nkomo’s criticisms, and added, as seems typical of diplomats from Britain, his own “ethnic” interpretation of Nkomo’s spider analogy. Graham said:

As a Scotsman, the spider stood for me for persistence: if we were thwarted in our search for a settlement in one way, we tried another. What had Mr. Nkomo to lose? We did not want to divide: we were not interested in picking the leaders of an independent Zimbabwe. That was their affair. He should not be so suspicious.⁵⁶

Nkomo’s final comments, according to Graham, were his usual welcoming of further talks. “It was not their way to turn people away – and they would receive me.” He was, however, “frankly discouraged” by what Graham had said, having been “encouraged” by Vance in what Graham presumes to be a reference to the question of co-sponsorship.⁵⁷ So, after a long day of meetings with Vance and then

⁵⁶ “Rhodesia: Call on Mr Nkomo,” May 6, 1977, FCO 36/1927, BNA.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Graham, it seemed that Nkomo had not gotten as much as he had hoped from his own shuttle diplomacy to London en route to Paris. He had not managed to meet directly with Owen, and the major concession of non-US involvement he thought he had obtained from Vance turned out to be less concrete after talking to Graham. For Nkomo, an added pressure came from his ties to the Soviets, who were supportive of negotiations but not if the United States was to take a leading role in them, hence Nkomo's attempts to gain assurances from Vance that the United States would play less of a role in future talks. As the next chapter will argue, the longer negotiations took, and the more nationalists leaders were involved in the negotiations, the greater the difficulties were for Nkomo's goal of becoming leader of the PF in a transition government before majority rule elections.

Diplomacy Leading Up to the Malta Talks

The Malta talks were an Anglo-American initiative to keep the PF in negotiations by meeting with Mugabe and Nkomo while Smith and the internal settlement group continued on their own path. In November 1977, Owen sent letters to both Nkomo and Mugabe inviting them to London to discuss transitional arrangements. The jointly signed response from Mugabe and Nkomo is illuminating in terms of the distain they expressed toward Owen and Britain's position on the internal settlement talks. The PF leaders' letter stated that they refused to meet with Owen. Their reasons had to do with the perception that Owen had changed Britain's intentions for the next talks. Rather than having a serious discussion of the transition period, according to Nkomo and Mugabe, Owen was now wishing for the PF to meet with Ian Smith "to consider with the PF their ideas about the transition period."⁵⁸ Mugabe and Nkomo were dissatisfied: "In a situation of such grave drain to human lives what time do we have to indulge in endless processes of trading with ideas when we must urgently reach agreed decisions to secure the transition towards ending the war and independence?"⁵⁹ They accused Owen of duplicity with Smith, stating that the "hesitation as to whether to hold the meeting in Malta or not

⁵⁸ J. N. N. Nkomo and R. G. Mugabe to Dr. Owen, "The Zimbabwe Patriotic Front," December 8, 1977, item 379, PREM 15/1171, BNA.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

coincided with Ian Smith's announcement on 'adult suffrage' and the so-called Internal Settlement as if you [Owen] anticipated this." The letter then quoted Owen's own words, based on his comments made about "Smith's election plans." Owens had said: "The elections must be conducted in a manner which is demonstrably free and fair and all peoples and parties who intend to live in a future Zimbabwe should be free to participate if they wish to do so, whether they are at present living inside or outside Rhodesia."⁶⁰

The two PF leaders interpreted Owen's remarks as indicating he was more concerned with defending Smith than removing him – with the latter a precondition, they declared, for future negotiations. The criticisms of Owen continued, this time in relation to a remark Owen made on the BBC on December 2, 1977, in response to attacks in Mozambique by the Smith regime. The jointly signed Nkomo and Mugabe letter stated the attacks by the "racist regime of Ian Smith" occurred between "23–27th November and massacred scores of Zimbabwean women and children." Critical of Owen, they accused him of not only failing to condemn the attacks, but of demonstrating "a gleeful attitude at them" and lending priority to Owen's "enthusiastic anticipations of the plans of the murderer Ian Smith." They quoted Owen's comment made to the BBC, where he had said that the attacks "also might show the PF, [which] may have some advantages in getting overall compromise, that the Rhodesian defence is not on its back." Nkomo and Mugabe equated this statement with Owen saying Smith's forces had showed "the British colony's armed forces are not weak." They also accused Owen of suggesting that the internal settlement plan offered Smith a way to bring the PF into it "or at least he [Smith] must give them an offer or involve them in an arrangement which they can honourably come inside and be involved in."⁶¹ This latter observation was not far from Owen's intentions, as he would promote such a move in 1978. After accusing Owen of having a "double-faced outlook," they concluded: "We hope you can sort yourself out soon for us to know definitely which direction you are following – that of your 'Proposals' or that of Ian Smith." They concluded that they needed "to know whether or not any meaningful discussions can be held with

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Maputo to Dr. Owen, "The Zimbabwe Patriotic Front," December 8, 1977, PREM 15/1171, BNA. (Source: Letter to Dr. David Owen from the Zimbabwe PF, December 8, 1977.)

you to secure finally and fully arrangements for an unalterable advent of the independence of Zimbabwe, our motherland. Our armed liberation struggle continues.”⁶²

In December 1977, Mugabe responded to Owen’s invitation for further talks while meeting with Ambassador Lewen in Maputo. Mugabe told Lewen he wanted to know Owen’s true intentions, because “some of your [Owen’s] recent remarks implied support for those talks, the real aim of which was to keep Smith in power.” Mugabe wanted Owen to provide a “denunciation of Smith’s internal talks as being contrary to the course of action you had started towards a settlement, and a statement that the conclusion of those talks would not receive the blessing of HM Government.”⁶³ Owen replied to Lewen, telling him, “There can be no question of a denunciation in advance of the kind requested by Mugabe. Alternatively, a refusal to do so might be seized by him as a pretext for advising Nkomo . . . to reject the proposed meeting.” Owen instructed Lewen to “do his best to avoid further discussion with Mugabe on this question” and, if Mugabe was to ask about it, Owen told Lewen to tell him that “the Secretary of State is on holiday at present” and that the question could be put to Owen in person if Mugabe and Nkomo agreed to meet.⁶⁴

As 1978 began, the British and Americans felt more confident that the PF leaders would agree to a new round of negotiations even though the conditions discussed above put everyone on edge. A number of factors kept all parties interested in future talks: the internal settlement option; the increased raids into the Front Line States by the Rhodesians; the internal challenges to Mugabe’s leadership in ZANU; and Nkomo’s own realization that a negotiated settlement might forego the necessity of elections before the transfer of power. Delays in creating the internal settlement government played into the hands of the Anglo-American proposal and the PF, allowing the four actors to meet separately from the Smith regime and the internal settlement nationalists. The result was a series of meetings at the end of January 1978 in Malta organized by the British and Americans. A follow-up meeting in Dar es Salaam in mid-April 1978 attempted to negotiate an agreement on military concerns within the framework of the Anglo-American proposal, with the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Maputo to FCO, “telno 423,” December 23, 1977, item 360, FCO 36/1930, BNA.

⁶⁴ FCO to Maputo, “Telno 244,” December 28, 1977, FCO 36/1930, BNA.

British and Americans negotiating with the PF without Smith present. The hope was that such a meeting would move everyone to “all parties” talks with Smith at a Lancaster House-style conference to iron out the new constitution and the transfer of power. At this point, the British, the Americans, and the PF leaders believed majority rule was still possible in 1978, as originally discussed at the Geneva conference. The historical perspective that comes from knowing that the Lancaster House talks would not be convened for almost another year and ten months must not get in the way of appreciating how pressed for time the various parties understood themselves to be in early 1978.

Mugabe's Leadership Challenged Again

Before examining the diplomacy at the Malta talks in Chapter 6, and the ways in which these direct talks with the PF demonstrated the considerable negotiating skills of Nkomo and Mugabe, it is worth reflecting on Mugabe's further consolidation of power in ZANU at the time of the Malta talks. Once again, the long document prepared by those ZANU leaders who were arrested and jailed in January 1978 is useful. Although authorship is listed as “Detained ZANU Leaders, HIGH Command, ZIPA Military Committee and other Senior Commanders in Mozambique,” the authorship of the document is attributed to Rugare Gumbo. The nature of the text, twelve single-spaced pages with many typographic errors, seems to indicate that it was typed quickly, which could also reflect that conditions were less than ideal for the prisoners to write and then send out this document to the British high commissioner.

The main theme of the document concerns the breakdown of democratic decision-making in the ZANU central committee and the continued use of arrests and detentions to silence opposition within the central committee. The authors characterize themselves as “progressives” and those who opposed them, and who had them arrested, as “the conservatives.” The authors are careful not to list many names of those who arrested them, although they do name Edgar Tekere and blame him for going “about in the camps carrying out a smear campaign against the progressives” and against the four members of the Central committee, Rugare Gumbo, Matuku Hamadziripi, Crispen Mandizvidza, and Ray Musikavanhu, all of whom were arrested on

January 24, 1978, a few days before the Malta talks. The authors claim that “Tekere’s campaign sparked off violence [in the] camps exactly seven days after the arrest of the four Central Committee members.” Violence in the camps on January 31 reportedly resulted in “the mass arrests and torture of the fighters who supported the line of the progressives.” On March 9, the four Central Committee members were turned over to the “conservatives where they were imprisoned [and] severely tortured and stories concocted [sic] to the effect [that] they wanted to take the Party and the army to ZAPU.”⁶⁵

According to the text, the divide between the “progressives” and the “conservatives” occurred at the September 1977 central committee at Chimoio and at another central committee meeting held in October 1977. According to the account, the September meeting had seen an attempt by the progressives to return to “democratic centralism” as the core of ZANU’s decision making. This push had failed, and at the October central committee meeting the progressives were informed of their erroneous thinking. “Our genuine demand to achieve political unity within the PF was interpreted by the conservatives [sic] elements in the Party leadership as efforts to undermine the party and to surrender the party to ZAPU.” The report indicated that, in fact, the “formal decision was taken” at the October meeting, “[n]ever genuinely to unite politically with ZAPU” and that “ZANU was to be preserved until independence.” What follows is an important confirmation of ZANU’s and Mugabe’s strategy from late 1977 until independence: “To avoid pressure from frontline states and [the] OAU concerning political unity, the party formulated a strategy and tactic of everything humanly possible to avoid a political merger with ZAPU. The name of the strategy is *tamba wakachenjera*’ literally translated ‘play it carefully’.” The logic of this strategy would be repeated for many years. “Since ZAPU’s thesis was that political unity should come first before military unity, ZANU’s strategy would be to start from military unity, so that there is a deadlock and unity would not materialized [sic].”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “The Truth about the Recurrent ZANU Crisis and the Emergence of a Two Line Struggle,” August 13, 1979, FCO 36/2409, BNA. For Edgar Tekere’s perspective, see his autobiography: Edgar Tekere, *A Lifetime of Struggle*, (Harare: SAPES Books, 2007) 85–86; see also Wilfred Mhanda, *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* (Harare: Weaver, 2011), 172–200.

⁶⁶ “The Truth about the Recurrent ZANU Crisis and the Emergence of a Two Line Struggle,” August 13, 1979, FCO 36/2409, BNA.

Interestingly, Blessing-Miles Tendi, in his 2012 interview with Mugabe, was told by Mugabe that “*tamba wakachenjera*” had also applied to ZANU’s approach to diplomacy in 1975 around the Lusaka Accords. That is, to remain connected to détente negotiations, while also, at the same time, intensifying the war effort.⁶⁷

This document provides an important foil to the public optimism both PF parties presented to diplomats. The authors suggest the intransigence about possibly unity was explained to them in terms of Chinese Communist Party history. Given that most of the “conservative” leaders in ZANU had studied in China, this is not surprising. The progressives went to some lengths, however, to argue in the document that while the Chinese Communist Party was rightfully wary of unity with the “Koumintang” based on class differences, they saw no similar differences between ZAPU and ZANU. They argued that “ZANU is not a party in the true sense of a class vanguard. ZANU is composed of different democratic and patriotic forces coming from different strata of society. So also is ZAPU.” The authors conclude that the decision to never unify had more to do with the “desire to preserve personal power by the anti-unity elements in the Party.” They refer to the dishonesty on this question as “tragic,” because “as revolutionaries we should try to be truthful.”⁶⁸ It was clear to anyone around ZANU and ZANLA that dissent, especially on the question of working with ZAPU, was not to be tolerated.

It is interesting to consider how the British heard of this power move within ZANU. At the end of January 1978, the British were starting to get word that Henry Hamadziripi and Rugare Gumbo had been put under “house arrest” and were “being investigated for alleged links with ‘the CIA and British’, for having received funds from ‘Tiny’ Rowland, and for promoting unification with ZAPU in opposition to the rest of the ZANU National Executive.”⁶⁹ It is worth noting that this leadership crisis, like the ZIPA challenge in 1976 and 1977, showed

⁶⁷ Blessing-Miles Tendi, *The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru, the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 55.

⁶⁸ “The Truth about the Recurrent ZANU Crisis and the Emergence of a Two Line Struggle,” August 13, 1979, FCO 36/2409, BNA. See Fay Chung, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute 2006), 179–80.

⁶⁹ This intel came to the British from “John Borrell, a local freelance journalist.” FM Lusaka to FCO, “Rhodesia: ZANU,” January 30, 1978, item 125, FCO36/2122, BNA.

again just how much Mugabe relied on his military leaders, particularly Rex Nhongo and Josiah Tongogara, to secure control of the party and enforce discipline among the fighting forces in Mozambique and Tanzania. The British were concerned about the loss of more moderate voices in ZANU given that the arrested leaders had demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with ZAPU in the PF. Keeping with this trend when the British commented on such internal power struggles, they noted that at least Mugabe's faction had handed over the purged leaders to the Mozambicans to imprison rather than the alternative. Hamadziripi, Gumbo, and the others accused of supporting cooperation with ZAPU and ZIPRA would spend most of the remainder of the war held in Mozambican custody, and in mid-1979 they were transferred to join with the ZIPA leaders arrested in 1977.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Mhanda notes that many of this group were severely malnourished when they joined the ZIPA prisoners, including Hamadziripi. See Mhanda, *Dzino*, 191–93. For the wider context and details of ZANU's disciplinary actions, see Gerald Mazarire, "Discipline and Punishment in ZANLA: 1964–1979," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37, no. 3 (2011), 571–91.