

Japan's Zimbabwe Dilemma
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Reengaging with a kleptocratic regime carries risk for Noda

Zimbabwean Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai will travel to Tokyo this week, marking the first time a Zimbabwean leader has visited Japan since Robert Mugabe's visit in 1989. During the visit, Tsvangirai will meet with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and other members of the government as well as certain business officials.

The move had to clear diplomatic hurdles – Tokyo's relations with Harare have been blunted due to Mugabe's kleptocratic regime. However, as Mugabe gets older, the world is looking at the vacuum in Zimbabwe and trying to influence the outcome to ensure that the country shakes its status as international pariah.

Japan's willingness to reengage with Zimbabwe carries risks but also could accrue significant benefits. The risks are obvious – Zimbabwe remains a corrupt and authoritarian state making it an untrustworthy partner for business or diplomacy. The opportunities however are significant as well. Tokyo remains concerned that Africa is becoming dominated by Chinese investment and political favours. This translates into lost opportunity for foreign investment, slippage on its pole position for international assistance across the continent and a larger strategic defeat in Africa. Japan has invested too much in Africa over the past four decades to consider this option.

Relations between Japan and Zimbabwe have been limited for the past two decades. Bilateral trade has languished and Japan has minimal direct foreign investment in the country. There have been no official visits of senior Japanese officials to Zimbabwe since 1997 when former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was the Minister of Health and Welfare. But there are positive signs lately that the trajectory of bilateral ties is improving. Japan's Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Yonezo Fukuda, recently remarked that Tokyo needs to "accept hardships including 'the African typical problem' such as daily power cuts and the deficit of basic infrastructure. Nevertheless, I am confident enough to admit that Zimbabwe is now on the ladder of development again."

While Japan's overseas development assistance to Zimbabwe has remain limited relative to other countries in Africa, there are indications that this trend is fading. The turning point was 2009 when Mugabe accepted the General Political Agreement of power-sharing with his rival Tsvangirai. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined the world in viewing this rapprochement with skepticism, but admitted that the political situation achieved "some equitability" and the economic system, which was on the verge of catastrophic breakdown, had improved and prices somewhat stabilized.

Tsvangirai's visit is significant for a number of reasons. First, on a bilateral level, the trip will allow Zimbabwe the diplomatic space to push Japan for greater investment and attention. During the meetings, Japan is likely to express that its willingness to support Zimbabwe's reconstruction with development assistance, if the inclusive government implements reforms and positive developments are observed with respect for human

rights, the rule of law and rational economic management. Second, on the multilateral stage, Tsvangirai has the opportunity to promote the democratization process in his country and in Africa as a whole. During his visit, he is slated to speak at the United Nations University in Tokyo on democracy in Africa.

This trip also has the potential to enhance people-to-people ties between Japan and Zimbabwe which could provide significant benefits to Harare considering the wealth of tourist sites in the country. Zimbabwe boasts five UNESCO world heritage sites including Victoria Falls and Mana Pools National Park. Finally, there is the potential that Tsvangirai can use a bolstered relationship with Japan to re-engage with Europe and the United States.

The outcomes of the meeting are important for Japan too. Japan can gain traction on its strategic footprint in Africa from jumpstarting relations with Zimbabwe and can work to ensure that the continent does not take a Sino-centric approach to Asia. This also allows Tokyo to get back to what it has been traditionally excellent at in Africa - maintaining influence through soft power and savvy, inventive diplomacy.

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