

Pakistan: Why it matters to Africa

This year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, or CHOGM, is just around the corner. CHOGM takes place once every two years, and is the opportunity for the leaders of the Commonwealth to come together, discuss issues facing the Commonwealth, and set policy for the next two years. This year, the world spotlight will be on Kampala, East Africa and Africa, as Uganda hosts CHOGM from the 23rd to the 24th of November.

Membership of the Commonwealth is predicated on a promise of democracy and human rights. Every member of the Commonwealth agrees to abide by a set of principles set out in the 1991 Harare Declaration, a set of principles that affirm commitment to fundamental political values – democracy, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, just and honest government and human rights. This declaration was agreed in 1991, at a CHOGM hosted by Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth in 2002, after it failed to comply with the principles that were agreed on its own soil. In 2001, a Zimbabwean delegation had met with members of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) – a group of nine Commonwealth Foreign Ministers that monitor member compliance with the Harare Declaration – and agreed to halt land-reform related violence, stop suppression of legitimate opposition and uphold human rights. Presidential elections in 2002 were monitored by a Commonwealth Observer Mission, which found that the elections had been marred by violence, particularly targeted at the political opposition, in contravention of the Harare Declaration. Shortly after this finding, the Commonwealth suspended Zimbabwe for one year, pending the end of politically motivated violence, the restoration of law and order and the holding of free and fair elections. Mugabe attempted – unsuccessfully – to attend the 2003 CHOGM in Abuja, where Zimbabwe's suspension was extended. Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth shortly after.

Zimbabwe has continued to pose serious human rights concerns for the communities and people of the Commonwealth following its withdrawal, and is likely to be the focus of considerable civil society discussion in the lead up to this year's Ugandan CHOGM. The Commonwealth must be strong and decisive in order to protect the fundamental political, democratic and human rights that it holds dear. Its approach to the situation in Zimbabwe earlier this decade, as well as its suspension of Nigeria following a military coup in 1995, shows that the Commonwealth has, in the past, acted with strength and conviction.

A major issue that will be debated by CMAG ahead of this year's meet is the suspension of Pakistan, following the illegal, unconstitutional and illegitimate imposition of a state of emergency earlier this month. General Musharraf, who has been in power in Pakistan since he staged a military coup that overthrew democratic government in 1999 (and led to a period of suspension from the Commonwealth), declared the emergency ahead of a Supreme Court decision that was expected to find his recent re-election as President invalid. The emergency suspended the Constitution, removed judicial independence, suppressed media and free expression and has led to an upsurge in police brutality, as legitimate opposition is violently quelled. CMAG met on the 12th of November and set out a number of requirements that General Musharraf needs to comply with by the next CMAG meeting – on the 22nd of November, the eve of CHOGM – or face suspension from the Commonwealth. These requirements include the restoration of the Constitution, the return of judicial independence, the relaxation of oppressive media policies and the General hanging up his army uniform.

Pakistan has less than a fortnight to clean up its house. If it fails to do so, the Commonwealth must stand behind its fundamental values and suspend Pakistan from the Commonwealth, preventing General Musharraf and his entourage from being involved in CHOGM in Kampala. Members of Commonwealth Africa, as the continental hosts of this year's CHOGM, must lead this show of strength and support for the people of Pakistan, in the process reiterating and protecting their own commitments to democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

For more information on the current crisis in Pakistan, the Commonwealth response, and the role of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, contact Daniel Woods (daniel@humanrightsinitiative.org) or visit the CHRI website (www.humarightsinitiative.org).