



Freedom Fighter or Ruthless Dictator? Unravelling the Tragedy that was Robert Gabriel Mugabe

By Tinashe L. Chimedza



Robert Gabriel Mugabe, Zimbabwe's leader for nearly four decades, died on the 6th of September 2019 in a hospital in Singapore. Mugabe's death, like his life, has generated animated debate, the very first irony being that after nearly four decades in office he died in a foreign hospital. Some have praised Mugabe for being a "liberation icon", and a "great Pan-Africanist". Former South African president Thabo Mbeki called him "a fellow combatant". Others have charged Mugabe with being a "tyrant" who collapsed his country and fanned "genocidal" ethnic divisions.

However, in order to fully understand this complex character, we have to put Mugabe into a broader historical purview. Mugabe was educated by Jesuit Catholics. Initially trained as a teacher, he would remain deeply religious his entire life. It was in the maelstrom of liberation contests that Mugabe's oratory skills came to the fore and he became the target of the vicious Rhodesian state that threw him and other nationalists, into detention.

Mugabe used his time in jail to get qualifications in law and economics. With his release from the Rhodesian jail, after almost eleven years, he headed straight to the liberation war front by escaping the country and crossing into Mozambique. There he became the voice on Radio Zimbabwe, and

fronted media engagements. His star was shining as he became the forceful voice leading liberation delegations first at the failed Geneva Conference of 1976 and then at the Lancaster House settlement in 1979 in London.

When Mugabe was prime minister and then president, there were geopolitical factors that worked against the success of Zimbabwe. South of the Limpopo, apartheid South Africa destabilised the whole region. Importantly, the Rhodesian political economy was constructed for a few white settlers and the black majority government that Mugabe led had inherited an economy that was stable but very parochial.

The 1980s, considered by some as the happy years, were also full of contradictions. Education and health were expanded but in the western part of the country, Mugabe's comrades were brutalising a whole region into subservience. Young men labelled "dissidents" were tortured, murdered in cold blood, and buried in mass graves. The violence was so macabre it brought nationalist leader Joshua Nkomo to near tears. He escaped to London and wrote *The Story of My Life* (1984). This was only settled in Mugabe's favour when they signed the Unity Agreement of 1987.

That sordid part of Zimbabwe's post-colonial history provided a script into the 1990s and 2000s. But what most political biographers of Zimbabwe leave out is that the Rhodesian settler-state inherited by the nationalist movement was a war machinery built to defend white settler interests. Ken Flower, who was the first director of the vicious Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), wrote about the "exploits" of the white-security state apparatus in a book titled *Serving Secretly*. The 1980 Lancaster House Constitution at Zimbabwe's independence left this state-security apparatus unreformed and years later Mugabe would boast that "he had degrees in violence" and that the "gun was mightier than the pen".

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The ruling political class dealt with opponents ruthlessly and Mugabe's rise and demise as leader was tightly linked to the military. Professor Jonathan Moyo argued that Mugabe was the victim of Zimbabwe's "militarists". It was a military declaration in 1975 called the *Mgagao Declaration* that put Mugabe at the apex of the liberation movement in Mozambique. It was the military that kept him in power and that took him out of power via the putsch of November 2017. He was replaced with a man chosen by the military - Emerson Mnangagwa aka the crocodile, a name bequeathed to him because of his ruthlessness.

Scattered ideological orientations

Mugabe blundered from one political ideology to another but at the core of the project was power retention at any cost. In the 1970s Mugabe preached socialism and dabbled in some incoherent half-understood Marxist-Leninism. But when young guerillas attempted to build a Marxist political movement, they were thwarted and thrown into prison.

One young military commander from then, Wilfred Mhanda, wrote about the experience in his memoir *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* (2011 - Weaver Press). In the early 1980s, Mugabe articulated variant forms of socialism and Marxism but only to court allies, given the global geopolitical contests of the Cold War era. The ZANU-PF manifestos of the 1980s discussed socialism in theory but there was no attempt to build a socialist economy and by the end of the 1980s any pretence to building socialism was abandoned - the road to socialism was closed off. In another

memoir, *Re-living the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (2006), Fay Chung would state that Mugabe was a devoted Roman Catholic and it's possible that this closed off any concrete inclination towards Marxism or Maoism.

In the 1990s Mugabe walked into neoliberalism, embraced structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), and took loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But the policy move was disastrous. Social and public services collapsed, informality set in and the industrial base melted away, provoking resistance from the labour, women and student movements. The crisis of falling incomes, unemployment, inflation, adventure into the DRC war and the increased debt levels knocked the economy down. This was made more acute by the seizure of white-owned farms, which led to the collapse of the agriculture sector.

Mugabe then veered into a radical indigenisation programme. To keep all these threads from exploding, he entrenched a political system of shredding the Constitution and making himself an imperial, almost feudal-aristocratic president. Zimbabweans mass migrated into the region and a passport, to escape anywhere, became a prized possession in a country that has become what Dambudzo Marechera called "The House of Hunger".

The 2017 coup and the militarists

When Zimbabwe's generals staged a coup in 2017, they pointed out that ZANU-PF was corrupt and needed to be rescued from itself. The whirlwind that consumed Mugabe was in the seeds that he had sown. When the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) emerged in 1999, he had allowed the chief of defence forces to say "the presidency was a straightjacket" and in 2008 he had allowed the military to take over the running of the election under the Joint Operations Command (JOC) - a relic of the Rhodesian military state.

The political nose that Mugabe had used to strangle the opposition and to brutalise civil society into subjugation was now turned on his neck. Professor Jonathan Moyo, now in exile, has argued that Mugabe was a mere "spokesperson" of the military system that harbours, in his words, the "repugnant ideology" that the "gun commands politics". To claim that Mugabe, after almost half a century at the helm of the nationalist movement, was a mere "mouth" of the military is the grandest of revisionism.

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But Mugabe also went beyond violence as a means of political rule. Using his oratory skills, he presented himself as a Pan-African liberation fighter, and often riled against imperialism and stirred the ideological support of nationalist movements. In Zimbabwe, the political system became dominated by what Professor Ranger called "patriotic history". In a way the system of political rule was a complex combination of authoritarianism, ideological narrative and patronage networks. Jonathan Fisher and Nic Cheeseman have pointed out more clearly that "authoritarian regimes rely on ideas, not just guns":

"The more resilient of Africa's authoritarian regimes, for example, have bought support from powerful local elites, soldiers, particular ethnic groups or political influencers through building them into extensive patronage structures where state resources are cascaded down chains of

patron-client links. In so doing, they may assemble a large, and often diverse, group of communities who rely on the regime's survival for their prosperity." (*Mail and Guardian*, 6 November 2019)

In dealing with his opponents within and outside his party, Mugabe was scheming and coldly ruthless, but he also built ideological narratives and patronage networks, and controlled the public memory to place himself - not other nationalists - at the centre of history. Mugabe compared the nationalist leader Joshua Nkomo to "a snake whose head must be crushed".

In the 1990s, when his former comrade Edgar Tekere opposed the "one-party state", he was thrown out of the party and his supporters were accusing of "courting death". Years after that the famed guerilla leader, Rex Nhongo, Zimbabwe's first army general, died in a suspicious fire. Rex Nhongo was suspected of first supporting Simba Makoni and then his wife Joyce Mujuru to challenge Mugabe. A few years later, Emerson Mnangagwa was kicked out as Mugabe played one political faction against the other in Machiavellian style. Nearly all of Zimbabwe's opposition leaders were charged of "subversion". (Morgan Tsvangirai has written about his trials and tribulations in his memoir *At the Deep End*.)

When Mugabe was president, the opulence of his and his family's lifestyle was on display at their home called "The Blue Roof". Nepotism and cronyism were rife. Those networked with the Mugabes worked their way into economy. In Mazowe, just outside Harare, poor farmers who had been allocated land were kicked out and some were only saved by High Court orders. Nephews, nieces, uncles, children and the president's immediate family amassed vast amounts of wealth. Mining claims, multiple farms, fuel cartels and contracts with the government is how this wealth was amassed. One of Mugabe's nephews boasted "if you want to be rich join ZANU PF". Public enterprises were looted with reckless abandon. Before being deposed, the Mugabes were going to build a Robert Mugabe University to the tune of US\$1 billion. Even in death Mugabe will be buried in a mausoleum possibility costing millions.

Of Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Nyerere and Nelson Mandela

Robert Mugabe left no condensed publication of his thoughts, which means his intellectual footprint is only found in speeches and scattered interviews. For a president whose education varied from law, economics and education, this is rather disappointing.

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It was at continental and global forums that Mugabe attracted the affinity of Black Africa, and where he mesmerised the Global Pan-African movements and other social and political forces. He went to United Nations General Assembly meetings religiously. There he made scathing comments about racism, demanded equality at the UN Security Council, railed against economic exploitation of Africa and raised his voice to throw spears at imperialism. An articulate black president from a small former African colony who repossessed land, who was placed under sanctions, and who made stinging statements against inequitable global power relations is what the Pan-Africanist movement was lacking and some sections praised Mugabe for this.

Compared to the other towering intellectuals, theorists and revolutionaries of Pan-Africanism, Robert Mugabe's legacy withers. Kwame Nkrumah was a thinker and an intellectual who penned

treatises that dealt with the African condition. Mwalimu Nyerere was a nation-state builder who forged the disparate social groups of Tanzania into a cohesive stable polity and who retired into a modest life. Nelson Mandela pulled the strands of a nation traumatised by the violence of apartheid into a “Rainbow Nation”. Having had a “long walk to freedom”, Nelson Mandela subjected the country to constitutional democracy. Thomas Sankara forged an everlasting revolutionary legacy. He placed women at the centre of politics and development, tackled illiteracy, and invested in health. The young captain lived a modest life, shunned decadent opulence and boldly set into motion the belief that the “future can be invented”.

Broad strokes of history

They say history is written in broad strokes. Mugabe’s anti-colonial credentials will shine; he stayed in prison for over a decade, the radical land repossession will also burn bright but this will be blighted by the brutality, the ruthlessness, the corruption and the repugnant politics of polarity authored by Mugabe. Of Mugabe’s politics, the Pan-Africanist Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem had this to say:

“Zimbabwe and President Mugabe are a situation we cannot in all good conscience continue to pussyfoot about anymore. It is indefensible that one man, no matter his contribution to the country, should be holding the people to ransom...Mugabe is no longer the part of the problem of Zimbabwe: he is now *the* problem (*Speaking Truth to Power: Selected Pan-African Postcards*, 2010)

Mugabe built a surveillance state of Stalinist proportions that was littered with impunity, arrogance of power, extrajudicial killings, a rapacious propaganda system, and a personality cult that exacted worship and fear from the man and woman on the street. The long motorcade, ambulance in tow, imported cavalcade of cars, gun-toting soldiers, loud police sirens, police motorbikes, traffic cleared from the road and armoured cars that ferried Mugabe have died down. The putsch of 2017 ushered in the country’s militarists who remain in control of a vicious *perpetuum mobile* - a kleptocratic military class that has melted away any respect for the constitutional edicts of the country.

We from Zimbabwe will remember Mugabe for a dream that could have been possible but instead was collapsed into what Professor Sabelo Gatsheni-Ndlovu called “grotesque nationalism”.

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