



Obviously They Are Fine With Mugabe

By Zukiswa Wanner



My identity straddles African borders.

I was born in Zambia to a Zimbabwean mother and a South Africa father.

Of the three countries, I carry South African citizenship.

On social occasions I have often been at loggerheads with my compatriots who self-identify as pan-African. There are, you see, African politicians they will not brook criticism of. And one of them is one Robert Gabriel Mugabe: truth-speaker to the West, the man who had enough gumption to take land back from the whites and whose *truth-telling* videos, in this age of social media, they shared every year after the United Nations General Assembly. Any attempts at telling these, my fellow 'woke' South Africans how rhetoric did not match action and how the man, his family and his political party had often treated Zimbabwe and its citizens with contempt was always met with disbelief and what my friend and writer Petina Gappah calls Zimsplaining from my fellow South Africans. Why, they would ask, was I taking aspirin for someone else's headache? Obviously Zimbabweans are fine with Mugabe. If they weren't, surely they would object, toyi-toyi and overthrow him? This was the criticism that brooked no comeback as it was something that I wondered secretly sometimes. I had grown up in a Zimbabwe that protested: not just university students full of pent-up early adult hormones but notably, the teachers' strike of 1990. What had happened to that fire? And then last year I decided to have my 40th birthday party in my mother's

country en route to South Africa by road from the country I now call home, Kenya.

In Zimbabwe in the days after my birthday, I found out that the two currencies which had created some sort of stability, the US dollar and the South African rand, were now going to be scrapped. In their place would be bond notes which, on being brought in, would be valued one to one with the US dollar. The Minister of Finance, Patrick Chinamasa and John Mangudya, Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe had decided that the bond notes would be back in circulation in October 2016.

Already, while I was there, people had started hoarding their dollars and some shops were refusing to accept South African rands.

It was in this context that on the evening of August 2, 2016 I got a poster via WhatsApp from a friend reading:

'Do you want to destroy your business that you have worked for all these years? SAY NO TO BOND NOTES. Join hands and march against Bond Notes.'

Date: 03 August 2016

Time: 10AM

From: Cnr Julius Nyerere/Jason Moyo

To: Ministry of Finance

#pullingtogether #notobondnote #Tajamuka/Sesjikile'

I had already dealt with a cash crisis in the week that I had been there. My cash crisis meant I could not go and see a lot of aunts and uncles as one cannot use a Visa or Mastercard on public transport. But my inability to visit relatives seemed minor when I heard some heartbreaking stories from people who live in Zimbabwe. I was, after all, just a guest in Zimbabwe and had other places to go. What of those who stayed there on a regular basis?

I thought of the unemployed university graduates working as vendors because of unavailability of jobs. I was thinking of a conversation with my friend Tapiwa who told me he interviewed five graduates, one of whom had twenty years teaching experience and another who had a degree in Architecture - married with children - to tutor his nine-year old twins for \$200 a month. What would happen to the prospective tutor in a city where a reasonably neat two bedroom flat in the low density areas cost \$500 a month? What would happen to the cab driver I met who had a car and wanted to survive with his four children but could only charge three dollars because no-one was willing to pay more than that for a five kilometer trip, essentially making his cab rides cheaper than Uber in Nairobi, Lagos or Johannesburg without cheaper foodstuffs? I was thinking too of my cousin Abisai telling me that because of a lack of cash, if business people needed a thousand dollars to do transactions, they had to do a transfer to illegal cash traders by the bus station for \$1,200 so that they could get the \$1,000 they wanted. And this was when the dollar was still circulating in the Zimbabwean economy but people were hogging it because of fear of the threatened bond notes.

This was a protest I would sign up toyi-toyi for.

With the Zimbabwean courts having ruled against the police and the government in their quest to ban people from marching against the return of the painful notes into the economy, taking part in the protest was the right thing to do. Half of my family is, after all, Zimbabwean and the bond notes would impact them.

I had no idea who was organizing the event but whoever they were, I agreed with the reason for their demonstration and I wanted to do more than verbally support it.

On August 3rd 2016 as my fellow South Africans went to the ballot box to vote in the municipal elections. I was north of the border at a march against bond notes.

I arrived at the march just before it began. After a prayer and the singing of the old Zimbabwean anthem *Ishe Komborera Africa* whose lyrics and tune were taken from the late South African Enoch Sontonga, the organisers informed us of the route we would be taking. I asked one of the fellow marchers why we were not singing the current Zimbabwean national anthem and the wit responded, "it would be like listening to a speech by Grace after reading one by Sallie Mugabe."

Until he was forced to resign on 21st of November 2017, when talking to many Zimbabweans, it was never quite clear who they resented more: their then senior citizen President, Robert Mugabe who stubbornly held on to power way past his sell-by date or his flamboyant and vituperative wife, Grace. Further, I sometimes wonder whether the affection that is given to the late Sallie by Zimbabweans who talk of her fondly would still be there if she were still alive. I also wonder whether Mugabe would have retired gracefully if she were alive. Random musings.

But back to the protest.

The organisers informed us of the route we would be using and we proceeded to march.

I noted that the face of protests had changed drastically. Prior to 2016, most protests consisted of either members of the opposition party or employees of non-governmental organizations who sometimes were both. While many people my age felt the pinch, they were members of what I dub *The Sandwich Parents*. When asked to boycott bread because it had become overpriced, for instance, their response would be something akin to, "Ah manje, my children need sandwiches. If I boycott bread for a week, what will my children take to school?"

But now, knowing how this may hurt them, they were among those who were taking part in the protest. A friend in the banking industry called in sick so she could take part in the protest. I encountered some high school friends during the march, among them a former classmate who, not only had actively spoken of the abuse of power by the Mugabe administration but who got thrown in jail together with her partner and others for daring to screen the Arab Spring when they took place. For her actions, Tafadzwa and her comrades were charged with attempts to overthrow the government. They received a suspended sentence "if they do not repeat it" by a court system that was largely state-captured.

Another high school friend was at the march because her brother-in-law, a former Zimbabwean liberation war veteran, was arrested and charged for speaking out against abuse of power by the political leadership of the governing party. Saner minds in Zimbabwe's High Court, which now seemed keen to no longer be puppets to the puppet-masters that are ZANU government, prevailed and the case was struck off the roll. I saw friends who had returned from the diaspora with their savings hoping to invest in the country. Among those in the crowd too were unemployed university graduates in their gowns and grandmothers. There was something about this particular demographic that I had not seen in previous marches in Zimbabwe. There was a certain unity of purpose across age, gender and class that seemed to highlight that people were fed up. I did not know it then but I had just witnessed the beginning of the end for the Mugabe leadership which would topple a little over a year later.

The government had attempted to ban the march. The organisers went to court and the courts

allowed it. Knowing that despite the court ruling, the law will not always act lawfully towards protestors, flyers were handed to the police reading:

OPEN LETTER TO THE POLICE

We are not your enemies, but we are your brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers. All we want from life is to be able to feed our families and to be able to send our children to school so that they can get jobs and do the same for their children. We want them to work in Zimbabwe, not outside the country as it is now. We want doctors and medicines in our hospitals. When we stand up to ask our government for these basic human rights, do not beat us, rather stand with us as we want the same basic human rights. Above all, we are all Zimbabwean, let us unite in demanding these rights from our government.

It was doubtful that the police would really care. They were there to do the bidding of their masters but it was good to see an attempt by the organisers to wake them up.

In Zimbabwe, there seemed to be questions about the government's relationship with China as heard from the popular song on the march:

Bobo, watengesa nyika kumaChina

Usazokanganwa

Tisu takakuisa, tichakubvisa

A song that accused Bob, the President of having sold the country to the Chinese and reminding him that they were the ones who put him in power and had the power to remove him. It was an entertaining song but I wondered just how much power these people with their energy had, to remove Uncle Bob from power.

By the time we got to Treasury, many had joined and there were now thousands in a march that began with a few hundreds. It was then that I realized that perhaps something had changed. Zimbabweans were not only talking in private about being fed up with Mugabe, they were coming out in the street and publicly declaring it.

And so, on 18 November this year, although I was at a literary festival in Nigeria, I locked myself up in my room for a major part of the day to root for and follow the #MugabeMustGo protest through updates on social media. Zimbabweans were showing, this time in the glare of international media, that they were done with their geriatric leader.

Mugabe is now gone. I heard this announcement in an anti-climactic moment while in Nairobi making dinner.

Mnangagwa is in the driver's seat.

And I.

I am cautiously optimistic for my mother's country as I reflect on the coup that was not a coup from my father's country. I like to think that Zimbabweans have realized the power they have and will not surrender it easily now to any politician.

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