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Zimbabwe

Mugabe is dead: remember Chiadzwa

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The death of Robert Mugabe (1924-2019) is being celebrated by Zimbabweans around the world. The 2008 massacre at the Chiadzwa minefield deserves to stand as a testament to his rule, writes Leo Zeilig.

Around the world tens of thousands of Zimbabweans are celebrating the death of Robert Mugabe. The media has resounded to a chorus of clichés – that either condemns him in racist terms as an African ‘monster’, or laud his liberation of Zimbabwe. Neither comes close to the truth about the man. Mugabe neither liberated Zimbabwe, nor was he a ‘monster’.

When independence came to Zimbabwe in 1980, Robert Mugabe led his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union, and defeated opponents within the liberation movement – Joshua Nkomo, who led the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), the historic leader of African nationalism, was decisively beaten.

At independence Mugabe promised reconciliation and brotherhood, where he had previously preached an uncompromising liberation. On 17 April 1980, in front of an international crowd in Harare that included Prince Charles and Bob Marley, Robert Gabriel Mugabe reassured the country:

If yesterday I fought you as an enemy, today you have become a friend. If yesterday you hated me, today you cannot avoid the love that binds you to me and me to you.

However, in almost all of his first steps, he was celebrated by the left. The radical African review, the Review of African Political Economy, celebrated Mugabe and the fall of the white minority regime in Rhodesia in the following terms:

Of all the political movements in Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF stands out as the most progressive and patriotic organisation fighting for the true interests of the labouring masses.

Meanwhile Alex Callinicos wrote in a study of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa at the time, of ‘this remarkable man’.

Yet the 1979 Lancaster House agreement that led directly to independence the following year guaranteed the property of the small white population. Ian Smith’s regime conceded to black majority rule on the basis of a promise that the property rights of the white majority would be safeguarded, and that when land reform eventually came white farmers would be fully compensated. The contradictions could not hold.

Who was Mugabe?

Mugabe was born in a Roman Catholic mission in British controlled Zimbabwe, or Southern Rhodesia as it was known at the time. He became a student in 1949-51 at Fort Hare College in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, where much of the region’s black elite was educated. Mugabe was destined to play a junior role in the colonial apparatus of the Rhodesia state.

Instead Mugabe joined the ANC's Youth League, and made his first contact with a Stalinised Marxism under the influence of mostly white members of the South African Communist Party.

Teaching in Ghana in 1958-60, Mugabe witnessed the first years of Kwame Nkrumah's independent rule in the country. Ghana was the first country on the continent to win independence – the experience on the young teacher was electrifying. He was clear what he needed to do.

Returning to Rhodesia in 1960, Mugabe embraced the nationalist movement and in 1963 became a vital figure to the formation of the ZANU, becoming its secretary-general. ZANU was formed as a radical alternative to the Zimbabwe African People's Union, ZAPU, led by Nkomo.

In 1964, however, he was arrested and thrown in jail, and used his time to study, acquiring three degrees. While he was in prison his only child died. Released ten year later, he threw himself into the war being waged against the Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front. Before long the writing was on the wall.

Independence

By the end of the 1970s the fight against white minority rule was led by a left-wing intelligentsia informed by Maoist and Stalinist ideas. They focused on guerrilla war in the countryside and were reasonably successful; by the end of the decade Mugabe's ZANU-PF forces were somewhere between 35,000 and 40,000 strong. The government was engaged on approximately six fronts, with martial law imposed throughout the whole country. Yet for the armed struggle to be fought urban and working-class resistance in the cities and towns had to be systematically side-lined.

In the first years of independence there were some significant achievements. In the early 1980s, ZANU-PF reforms in education and health transformed life for a generation. For example, between 1980 and 1990 primary and secondary schools were built across Zimbabwe. Enrolment increased in primary education from 1.2 million in 1980 to more than 2.2 million by 1989, and in secondary schools from only 74,000 to 671,000 in the same period.

But the ZANU-PF faced both ways – offering (and occasionally delivering) reforms in education and health, but also pursuing a campaign of brutal repression against ZAPU – 'terrorists' in Matabeleland in the south of the country. From 1983 ZANU-PF forces murdered more than 20,000 people, with the help of the North Koreans.

Through this period of reforms and brutality, Mugabe was wined and dined as a trusted figure on the continent who could be welcomed onto the international stage. Knighted by the Queen in 1994, she praised him as a statesman in contrast to the 'African norm'. Mugabe was her very own blue-eyed boy. He was happy to play the role.

By the end of the 1980s Zimbabwe's rural economy looked unchanged. Less than 5 % of the population, mostly white families and businesses, monopolised almost 70 % of the nation's income and most of the productive land. Meanwhile, approximately 70 % of the population lived on or below the poverty line. Even before the 'crisis' Zimbabwe was one of the world's most unequal societies.

Structural Adjustment and resistance

As reforms gave way to economic crisis and structural adjustment in the early 1990s, resistance began to emerge.

Loans from the World Bank, happily and greedily accepted by the government, caused foreign debt to rise from \$786 million in 1980 to \$3 billion in 1990. The government pursued policies including privatisation and the closure of state companies deemed unprofitable by Western donors, the IMF and the World Bank. The year after the implementation of the first round of structural adjustment saw a huge 11 % fall in per capita GDP. More than 20,000 jobs were lost between January 1991 and July 1993. In 1993 unemployment had reached a record 1.3 million from a total population of about 10 million.

From the mid-1990s protests rippled across the country and eventually coalesced into the political coalition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), founded twenty years ago. The period after 1995 was crucial for a new generation of militants and trade unionists. As the lawyer and activist, Tendai Biti, argued:

It was the first time people criticised the legitimacy of these heroes. It showed you can make noise and not get killed.

Working class power, activists recalled, could be smelt in the streets.

In elections in 2000, Mugabe's ZANU was almost defeated. This was the first time since independence in 1980, that the country's president faced a serious opposition movement. In the elections, held in June the worker-backed MDC won 57 out of 120 elected seats, with Mugabe's party, the ZANU-PF securing 62. Had the election been free and fair, the MDC would have won more constituencies than ZANU-PF. Since the party had only existed for 16 months, this was a remarkable achievement.

Zimbabwe's plunge

In the 2000s the country plunged deeper into crisis, in part generated by Mugabe's efforts to shore-up his support base. He denounced colonialism, and British interference and became a figurehead on the continent of an anti-imperialism, promoting a 'Third Chimurenga' or uprising, to complete the unfinished anti-colonial revolution. As part of this process, ZANU-PF pushed through land reform which fundamentally and permanently altered Zimbabwe's political economy.

What became known as Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform formally got started in 2002. ZANU-PF had promoted the occupation of farms owned by white Zimbabweans by the poor. 'War veterans' – who had fought in the liberation wars of the 1970s, though frequently the unemployed poor – were the praetorian guard of Mugabe's politics at the time: occupying farms, breaking up demonstrations in towns and terrorising MDC communities. Land reform failed to improve the prospects of the rural poor. Instead, larger, productive estates were awarded to cronies of the regime.

Zimbabwe's plunged continued unabated. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the country was soon awash with multinationals, from China, America, and the UK, seeking quick, expatriated profits. The ZANU-PF government frequently facilitated the looting, with terrible consequences.

In 2008 the Chiadzwa mining area in the east of the country, was the scene of a massacre. Following the end of the London based De Beers mining licence in 2006, hundreds of informal workers who had come to the area were murdered by the state. Clearing the way for a 'looting' frenzy that took place between government bureaucrats, the Chinese and other foreign companies.

Zimbabwean activist Raymond Sango, reported:

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unemployed youths descended on Chiadzwa in 2008 to pan for diamonds were brutally massacred by the military and police ...approximately four hundred miners were killed in 2008 through indiscriminate volleys of gunshots fired by mounted police accompanied by dogs and helicopters.

Once the bodies were cleared away seven private entities began operations at the site: all joint ventures between the state and foreign capital.

Mugabe must be remembered for Chiadzwa – there can be no more devastating testament to what Mugabe's rule really meant for Zimbabwe's poor. In the last two decades of his life, thousands died, and millions fled as the country was systematically plundered by the state, mining capital and international business.

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