

WATCH: Remembering Robert Mugabe, the loner who became a dictator

Independent Online opinion by Brian Raftopoulos

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A man pushes an empty cart past a portrait of former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe in Harare, Friday, Sept. 6, 2019. Robert Mugabe, the former leader of Zimbabwe forced to resign in 2017 after a 37-year rule whose early promise was eroded by economic turmoil, disputed elections and human rights violations, has died. He was 95. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi)

Robert Mugabe, former Prime Minister and President of Zimbabwe from 1980-2017, until his overthrow in a coup, passed away at the age of 95 [in Singapore on 5 September 2019].

The name of Robert Mugabe is synonymous with both Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and its post-colonial politics. His role and that of his party Zanu PF have been central to the dynamics of both processes and have marked the legacies of Zimbabwean politics for the foreseeable future.

However, to speak the name Mugabe is to invoke highly polarised political debates characterised by a raft of tensions including, hope and despair, demonization and adulation, contempt and fealty, dissent and loyalty, sometimes interchangeable and overlapping, while at other moments forming more lasting binaries.

Watch the Reuters' video: 1min 42 secs

<https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/watch-remembering-robert-mugabe-the-loner-who-became-a-dictator-32500697>

Residents react to the death of Robert Mugabe

A hero of African liberation from colonial rule or a power-obsessed autocrat? Opinions of Robert Mugabe were split on Friday as the former President of Zimbabwe died in Singapore.

These divisions are constitutive of the violence, fissures and closures that have made up the modalities of Zimbabwe's post-colonial political spectrum and left their painful traces on the political imaginaries of the Zimbabwean citizenry.

For much of his life as a political figure Robert Mugabe has often been viewed, in the words of one of his biographers Martin Meredith, as 'secretive and solitary' an 'aloof and austere figure.' Born on the 24th February 1924 at Kutama Mission in Zvimba District west of what was then called Salisbury, the capital of Southern Rhodesia, Mugabe received a Jesuit education.

By many accounts he was an exceptional student, a loner who preferred the company of books to the comradery of his peers, and readily imbibed the disciplinary logic of his Jesuit schooling. At the age of seven Mugabe's father left home to find employment in Bulawayo. He remarried and never returned to his first family. Unsurprisingly the loss of his father left Mugabe deeply affected.

In 1945 Mugabe left Kutama Mission with a teaching diploma and in 1949 he won a scholarship to Fort Hare University in South Africa where he interacted with other emerging nationalists and a range of radical ideas. Armed with his degree Mugabe returned to Southern Rhodesia in 1952 but moved to Lusaka in 1955 to take up a teaching post. In 1958 he moved again, this time to take up another teaching post at Takoradi Teacher Training College in Ghana.



FILE - In this Friday, Dec. 7, 2012 file photo Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe clenches his fists as he delivers his speech at his party's 13th annual conference, in Gweru about 250 Kilometres south west of the capital Harare. On Friday, Sept. 6, 2019, Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa said his predecessor Mugabe, age 95, has died. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, File)

In Ghana, Mugabe experienced the thrill, excitement and sense of possibility of a newly independent African state, and this was a seminal political moment for him.

Mugabe returned to Southern Rhodesia in 1960 on a long leave to introduce his new wife Sally Hefrom to his family. Instead of returning to Ghana he became involved in the politics of successive nationalist movements, including the turmoil of the split between the two major Nationalist parties Zapu and Zanu.

In 1963 Mugabe, along with many other nationalist figures was arrested, and after 14 years in prison was released during the Détente period in 1974.

Mugabe and his colleague Edgar Tekere escaped to Mozambique in 1974 to join the liberation war against the Smith regime being conducted from bases in that country.

There have been different accounts of Mugabe's rise to the top of the leadership in Mozambique, with that of key liberation war veteran Wilfred Mhanda particularly critical of Mugabe's abuse of the trust placed in him by the military figures who supported his rise to the top.

In Mhanda's account their support for Mugabe was premised on his commitment to building unity between the rival nationalist movements, a promise that Mugabe reneged on in pursuit of the supremacy of his own party Zanu. In his biography Mhanda expressed his disappointment with the words 'we lived to regret the day we put forward Mugabe's name.'

Following the turmoil in Zanu in the mid 1970's, by 1977 Mugabe had outmanoeuvred his rivals and established his position as head of Zanu and its armed wing.

Following the Lancaster House settlement and the 1980 elections in which Mugabe and Zanu PF emerged as the dominant party, Mugabe set out his policy of Reconciliation with the White population.

In effect this policy allowed the existing property and economic relations from the Rhodesian period to continue while the politics of state control was transferred to Zanu PF. This period therefore witnessed the consolidation of Mugabe's control of both his party and the state.



FILE - In this Tuesday, March 18, 2008 file photo, Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe addresses party supporters at a rally in Gweru, about 250 kms. (155 miles) south of Harare. On Friday, Sept. 6, 2019, Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa said his predecessor Robert Mugabe, age 95, has died. (AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, file)

The massive violence perpetrated against the competing party of liberation, ZAPU, through the Gukurahundi massacres, also signalled that while these years marked a period of reconciliation with the white population, they also registered Zanu PF's violent intolerance of opposition. However, the 1980's were also evidence of Mugabe's commitment to social policies such as health and education.

The expansion in these sectors during this period was second to none on the continent. It was also interesting to note that David Coltart who held the post of Education Minister during the Government of National Unity between 2009-2013, observed that he could always count on Mugabe's support for his programmes during this period.

As Zimbabwean politics polarised increasingly during the neo-liberal period of the 1990's and the opposition movement grew in size and influence, both Mugabe's ideological assertions and his political trajectory became clearer.

Faced, from without, with the real possibility of political defeat from an emerging urban based opposition, and within his ranks from dissent from the war veterans, Mugabe drew on the long-standing grievances around the land question and reconfigured the politics of the state and Zanu PF.

Drawing on a narrative of anti-imperialism and Pan Africanism, the Fast Track Resettlement, not only radically reconstructed the land relations from the settler colonial period, it also created a massive rupture between human and redistributive rights in the politics of the country. The politics of the land process unleashed many questions around citizenship, belonging, and assertions of identity. Mugabe's often valid critique of imperialist duplicity was accompanied by an unacceptable authoritarian intolerance of dissent within Zimbabwe.

These two threads of his politics were inextricably linked and created both dilemmas and possibilities for opposition voices. The land reform process will remain one of his most lasting legacies, and the challenges of dealing with the opportunities and constraints of the process will ensure that land issues remain unfinished business.

In November 2017, Mugabe was overthrown in a coup led by Emerson Mnangagwa and former commander of the armed forces Constantino Chiwenga. The coup was a culmination of a long series internal factional struggles within the ruling party that eventually threatened the future of key sections of the military along with their ill-gotten economic gains.

At first the removal of Mugabe was met with widespread euphoria within Zimbabwe, the Southern African region, and internationally. The new narrative of the Mnangagwa regime around economic and political reform as well as international re-engagement, generated a certain amount of optimism about the future of the country.

The international players, including the International Financial Institutions, actively sought to drive the dialogue of re-engagement forward, with the G7 pushing for an IMF staff monitored programme as a prelude, though not guarantee, to further movement on Zimbabwe's large debt and future financial injections.

Thereafter the violence that followed the 2018 elections, as well as the repression and human rights abuses that met the protests of citizens in January and August 2019 against the rapidly deteriorating economic conditions in the country, quickly depleted the goodwill that Mnangagwa has garnered after the November 2017 coup.

The British Government that had been at the forefront of championing the cause of the so called 'new dispensation', took on a more critical stance as did the EU which had enthusiastically sought to move the re-engagement process forward. For its part the US never moved very much on its position on sanctions legislation since the early 2000's, with its stance only hardening in the face of the ongoing abuses in the country. It also appears that the initial hopes of the IMF have dissipated.

The Mnangagwa regime now finds itself treading in Mugabe's footsteps. In the face of persistent opposition against his administration, Mnangagwa has taken the repressive politics of his predecessor to new heights. Numerous civic and opposition activists have been arrested and their human rights abused. Once again, the government of Zanu PF faces increased international isolation, consoled only by the solidarity and support of SADC.

For its part the South African government is in a much weaker position than in the Mbeki years to lead a new initiative on resolving the Zimbabwean crisis.

With the ANC mired in its own internal factional battles, facing the familiar corruptive corrosion of post-colonial states, and losing political capital on the African continent because of the persistent Afrophobia in the country, it seems unlikely that there will be any progressive movement from the region on Zimbabwe. Mugabe's legacy continues to mark the current trajectory of Zimbabwe's politics.

For many Zimbabweans, Mugabe will remain a contested figure. For those who lived through the humiliations of settler colonialism, his strident critique of its legacies will continue to resonate.

However, his often essentialist and exclusivist assertions of national belonging and authoritarian intolerance of dissent will be a reminder that an anti-imperialist critique that negates a democratic political project remains unacceptable. After all, both the land question and democratic accountability were fundamental demands of the liberation struggle.

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