

Open Letter – “Battle For The Soul of Zimbabwe“

Opinion by Larry Norton [an internationally renowned Zimbabwean artist]

16 August 2018

As we sit in the sullen twilight of another bitterly contested election the battle, for the soul of our country continues. I am not a politician, I am simply a Zimbabwean, in the vortex of uncertain cross currents between the Zambezi and the Limpopo, bewildered, saddened and full of deep rage at recent events. Etched in our minds are the murderous scenes of soldiers shooting people in Harare days ago in the aftermath of the second ‘Harmonized Election’ The term sounds like it was borrowed from The Hunger Games or George Orwell’s ‘1984’. It lived up to both scenarios. Choreographed peace and light followed by ruthless murder, thuggery, arrests and bloody madness. Classic, beloved, weeping Zimbabwe...

In the midst of the confusion there are things I am certain of:

- That when hundreds of thousands of people marched in November 2017 it was not in support of [Emmerson] Mnangagwa or [Constantino] Chiwenga or ZANU or [Nelson] Chamisa or MDC. It was to rid the country of the despotic [Robert] Mugabe. It was with a deep hunger for relief from tyranny, corruption and economic hell.
- That when soldiers opened up it was an attempt to bring back the fear that lurks beneath the sunlit skin of the country. A vicious and desperate attempt at reminding us that there are consequences for daring to believe that this country can be free of the people and things we have come to despise.

There are a few things I wonder about:

- If someone wins a national election, even with a narrow margin, how is it that there is barely a sign of celebration or cars hooting in the streets of the entire country? Personally, I saw nothing. The day after the midnight announcement by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission’s Chairperson [Priscilla] Chigumba, of a Mnangagwa victory, a dark depression seemed to pervade the land.
- How it is that the South African ANC government seems to continue to protect their fellow liberation movement, ZANU, with impunity and complete disregard for the will of Zimbabwe’s people ? The duplicitous ex-President Thabo Mbeki did it blatantly in the midst of widely documented political violence and electoral manipulation in 2002, 2005 and 2008. South Africa rushed to congratulate Mnangagwa after Chigumba’s announcement of results. It remains to be seen what [President] Cyril Ramaphosa will do after the court ruling.
- One wonders how it is, that uniformed soldiers shoot multiple people, beat people in open view without any known arrests or responsibility but plain clothes ‘authorities’ speed to the Chirundu border to attempt to physically grab an opposition leader fleeing perceived threats to his life ? It is believed that Tendai Biti was tortured by the state in during detention in 2008. (It is interesting to see how the members of the public physically dragged Tendai Biti out of the clutches of the ‘authorities’, to the Zambian side, to foil his arrest). We are told that there is a commission of enquiry into this shooting but nothing has come to light as yet.

- How does a bomb go off at a political rally on June 23rd with casualties reported, without any suspects coming to public trial, but police rapidly pursue and arrest 27 members of the opposition, rushing them to court to be charged with public violence? Again we are told that bombing suspects exist but nothing has come to light.
- How does the opposition get blamed for what happened with the unrest in Harare and no one is publicly charged, as yet, for instructing the army to open fire with live rounds on unarmed civilians? The elephant in the room remains. Who ordered this?
- How does Zambia manage to return Tendai Biti to the Zimbabwean authorities so swiftly without a full hearing of his asylum application despite a high court order barring his deportation ?
- How is it that the diaspora-made up of so many of our best qualified and most loyal citizens, whose contribution to our current GDP is more than substantial, get denied the right to vote in an election that was supposed to be a break with the past?
- How is it, that since the events of November and promises of uprooting of corruption in 100 days, we have had a cabinet which includes the ex-minister of mines Obert Mpofu, who was interrogated by parliament over the disappearance of \$15 billion of diamonds, (a figure confirmed by Mugabe's own admission) who is now acting minister of Home Affairs. How does a minister of mines not know where \$15 billion of diamond revenue went? How has the same minister been able to acquire so many properties, reported to be in his name, in Victoria Falls and Bulawayo? This would be an incredible fiscal achievement on a ministerial salary. [<http://nehandaradio.com/2012/11/16/from-rags-to-riches-the-obert-mpofu-story/>]
- Why was it so difficult for Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, if they were balanced, to provide full information before the election, on the voters roll and polling stations. Why was this of so little importance to observers?
- Why does Chigumba , the ZEC Chairperson, assume that we will simply believe what she says without full evidence of the results including all V11 forms? [The V11 form summarises everything that would have taken place at a polling station.]
- What prompted the circus, when the MDC Alliance were about to address to the world's press at the Bronte Hotel and the occasion was shattered by the sudden appearance of Riot Police in full gear. It broke up in panicked disarray... only for the participants then to be reassembled and told its all fine, carry on?
- How is it that Robert Mugabe, the man who (with ample assistance) has stubbornly and brutally destroyed our country and the lives of its people, is suddenly a hard done by victim? He who stole and rigged countless votes in various elections , whose military, police, Border Gezi Youth, War Vets and Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) agents have haunted our lives and our shattered our hopes and dreams since 1980?...His comment "The country has not been free since November...." made one nearly weep tears of bitter mirth.
- How the political chameleon, Jonathan Moyo, spin doctor and architect of so much of our suffering, whose machinations in the government megaphones of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation , Herald and Chronicle newspapers, have kept the evil fist to our head, is now in exile, a convert to the winds of change and a key informer on the rigging process ?

- Like many others, I wonder what the gutless and partisan Southern African Development Community (SADC) - with the exception of ex-President Ian Khama of Botswana - and African Union (AU), who have so disdainfully rubber-stamped Mugabe's doubtful elections in the past, will do if the opposition actually proves it has won?
- How bizarrely-masked, ragtag individuals in camouflage uniforms, reminiscent in appearance to the savage militias in Liberia in the 1990s, are photographed being driven in army lorries through the streets of Harare to beat and intimidate people?

Clearly, not everything is on the surface. It is not enough for some observers, embassies and apologists to wring their hands pathetically to say 'The voting was peaceful', as if that was even half the story. That is like saying in the exam hall pupils wrote the exam quietly, with no attention to the results that emerged and the possible evidence of crib notes under the table etc. I have seen the opinion polls and surveys and cynical justifications of this having been a close race. State media did their utmost to help ZANU. The courts, one assumes, will be informed on the reported use of food and inputs to sway votes. Personally, I believe that there was something visceral happening beneath the surface, particularly in the rural areas. It seemed obvious that there was a deep and rolling sense of desire for substantial change. To me it has been tangible everywhere. With apologies to William Shakespeare, something seems to stink in the failing State of Zimbabwe ... One asks whether the diplomatic referees of this questionable process will have the courage to call it. We hope the courts will deliver justice but we have been terribly let down before.

My main reason in writing this is to thank and pay tribute to those whose lives have inspired us and to give encouragement not to give up. I have listed individuals, please understand that this list simply relates to my personal experience. Each of us will have a different list which I think is worth taking the time to acknowledge and compile.

None of these people were or are perfect but they were brave. My opinion has at times differed with theirs, many of them have disagreed with each other. They have often been right and I have been wrong. Not all of them have been motivated by politics, many have simply acted and worked for what is right. We have so often been chided by the saying: 'In order for evil to succeed all that is required is for good people to do nothing'. These people did something. They stood and some still stand, in the face of an implacable State. Many paid a terrible or an ultimate price.

Any list must be prefaced with tribute to the countless numbers killed, burned, beaten, bludgeoned, raped, razed, run out, ripped off, evicted, jambanja'd, jailed and threatened. The millions forced to leave the country of their birth. What of the completely vulnerable children of these casualties of political mayhem? In short, to every Zimbabwean who has suffered under this regime, wherever you are, I salute you.

There are too many brave lives to mention but those whose circles intersected with my own or whom I have felt most personally inspired by are Itayi Dzamara (disappeared) , Martin Olds (murdered), Mrs Gloria Olds (murdered), David Stevens (murdered) , Alan Dunn (murdered), Roy and Heather Bennett (both deceased), Morgan and Susan Tsvangirai (both deceased), Mike Mason (deceased) and Sharon Mason, Nelson Chamisa, Tendai Biti , David Coltart, Douglas Mwonzora, Evan Mawawire, Welshman Ncube, Margaret Dongo, Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga, Father Pius Ncube, Pastor Tim Nield, Biggie Chigonero (deceased), Hugo and Alice Firks, Rob and Amanda Millbank, Craig and Anne-Marie Bone , Chris Ndiweni, Dumiso Dabengwa, Mags and Leon Varley ,Sylvester Ndlovu , Iain and Kerry Kay, Hendrik O'Neill , Simon Spooner, Sharon and Andy Kockett , Mike Campbell (deceased), Ben Freeth , Peter Steyl , Gordon and Mandy Chance, Mark Chavanduka (deceased), Ray Choto, Owen Maseko, Gerry Jackson, Dr Helen Godwin (deceased) , Peter Godwin, Georgina Godwin, Geoffery Nyarota, Trevor Ncube, Danielle Connolly, Marie Connolly (deceased)

and Paul Connolly, Chris and Eleanor Shepherd, Clive Midlane, Ephias Mambume, John Robinson, Eddie Cross, Henry Olonga, Andy Flower, Nigel Hough, Nick O'Connor, Peter Bowen.

We must also acknowledge the immeasurable contribution of countless journalists, editors, church leaders, lawyers, N.G.Os, diplomats, politicians and ordinary citizens who have tried to shine a light in dark places.

Some of the bravest cannot be named, some have asked not to be named and others may never be known. They know who they are, God knows who they are. There are too many that have not come to mind in time or have been out of my limited knowledge. I apologise sincerely and acknowledge the sacrifices of them all.

I hope that somewhere there is a true list of all who have dared to face the evil and immense theft that we have witnessed in this country and that one day they will be recognised. It is important to honour what so many brave people have tried to do for all of us. We must beware of forgetting and an expedient acceptance of what has happened.

What of the unbelievable courage and desperation of so many of our people who have voted with their feet and crossed the Limpopo, at terrible risk with no security and no resources? This is real unspoken bravery, choosing lives of quiet desperation and separation from home and family in the simple hope of the possibility of finding work, because our country is too broken to provide even basic employment for 95% of its citizens. Its hospitals in a parlous state and most schools dilapidated, battling and neglected. No recognised national currency in existence, bond notes that are generally perceived as a joke, with US dollars or rand as rare as convictions for corruption.

Each of us has a different list of those we admire for differing and even contradictory reasons. We are all entitled to that. What no one is entitled to is the theft of the popular vote. This cannot be minimized or normalized or allowed. We have yet to see how the courts digest the disputed facts and what conclusions emerge.

In March 1965 Martin Luther King said: "I know that you are all asking today, "How long will it take? ... I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long because truth pressed to the earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no one lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice."

This is a sacred land. The beauty of its changing seasons, each of which never seems to last quite long enough. In their passing wake, always a sense of longing and nostalgia for a time past. I have attached two photos below. The first is a view of from Chimanimani National park. In the distance, across the valley is the farm "Charleswood", seized from Roy and Heather Bennett, whose stand for all of us must never be forgotten. The photo shows the farm beneath evening storm cloud, backlit by rays of light. Chimanimani is also the place where Dr Helen Godwin did much of her remarkable medical work for the poor people of this country. Another photo shows the Zimbabwean flag flying over the nearby National Parks Dead Cow Camp.

To those who feel that they can dictate or manipulate our fate I would suggest: Do not underestimate the weight of the conscience of the nation both here and abroad. It is massive. It is actually the soul and custodian of our land. It will ultimately preside. You cannot stop it. It will come

upon you in its own way, as surely as the coming rains. Do not underestimate the season nor the lateness of the hour.

To the judges who will decide whether this election was just or rigged, the country is watching and you must live long in the midst of the people of the land with your conclusions. The world is also watching and history will record for all time, how you measured the facts, as it is already doing with the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission.

What do we do with our despair at what has happened here? I was recently given this advice by a young, experience-weary child of a late champion of the country : “ You can’t let it get to you...it changes nothing but creates bitterness within one’s soul which is then put into the rest of the world...let it go...”. I appreciate the practicality of this advice but I know that we must never give up...ever...I have an unshakeable feeling that this evil will end-We are told that faith is ‘the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen “. Our hope must spring eternal.

A friend from Africa, living in Europe said: “That march in November was what hope looked like, what this country could so easily be. “Deep down we know this. We all know very well what this country can become, what we can build. It is not a naïve hope. It is an incredibly simple truth that has been stolen from us. We have the best people in the world, the best country. There is a massive restlessness in the land, a growing awareness that the long and terrible lie is over.

We rightly look up and have long asked: “Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? ” (Job 21 v 7).

The psalmist said: “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.” We pray that God will watch over our people and deliver us from the evil that holds this country hostage.

Not everything is seen, not everything is on the surface. The answers may yet surprise us.

God bless Zimbabweans everywhere and all who love and serve this incredible country.

Larry Norton - Please share or publish



(Left): Chimanimani National Park; (Right): Chimanimani - National Parks’ Dead Cow Camp

In November 2015 Larry Norton, a renowned Zimbabwean artist, visited Gonarezhou National Park on a field painting expedition. Here is the story behind his masterpiece 'Long Sands of Gonarezhou'. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJb_K3h4Lhk&t=310s

An image of ‘Long Sands of Gonarezhou’ is copied below, as well as brief information on Larry.



'Long Sands of Gonarezhou'

Born in Zimbabwe in 1963, Larry Norton grew up on a game farm in north-east Zimbabwe. He started drawing as a boy and in 1988 began a professional career. Since then he has exhibited around the world, including several successful exhibitions in New York and London.

Larry Norton works in oils, water colour, charcoal and pencil and specialises in African subjects, including wildlife, landscape and people of the continent.

For further information, visit Larry Norton's website and Facebook page:

<http://www.larrynorton.co.za>

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/The-Larry-Norton-Gallery-233081913374431/posts/>