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Africa's Mess, Mugabe's Mayhem

Robert I. Rotberg

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Summary -- Venal leaders are the curse of Africa, and Robert Mugabe is a walking reminder of how much damage they can do. No mere thug like Idi Amin, the gifted Mugabe created modern Zimbabwe and then robbed it of its enormous potential. The comparatively well-run, well-off country that he inherited is now a corruption-riddled, autocratic mess sent into economic free fall by its kleptomaniacal president's whims -- including tampering with elections, sending troops to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and hiring goons to invade white-owned farms. An indulgent world contributed to Mugabe's sense of invincibility. Instead, he and his ilk should be ostracized.

Robert I. Rotberg is Director of the Program on Intrastate Conflict at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and President of the World Peace Foundation. His books include Suffer the Future: Policy Options in Southern Africa, The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa, and The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power.

A CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

Venal leaders are the curse of Africa. If sub-Saharan Africa is "in a mess," to quote Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's founding president, it is a mess made by its leaders. To be sure, Africa has its geographical constraints, a cascade of tropical medical ills, and a complex colonial legacy. But where visionary leadership lifted Asia up out of poverty since the 1960s, too many African heads of state in the same period presided over massive declines in African standards of living while carefully enriching themselves and their cronies.

Some of Africa's current and recent leaders are capable, honest, and effective. But kleptocratic, patrimonial leaders -- like President Robert Gabriel Mugabe of Zimbabwe -- give Africa a bad name, plunge its peoples into poverty and despair, and incite civil wars and bitter ethnic conflict. They are the ones largely responsible for declining GDP levels, food scarcities, rising infant-mortality rates, soaring budget deficits, human rights abuses, breaches of the rule of law, and prolonged serfdom for millions -- even in Africa's nominal democracies.

These authoritarians, many of whom win or manipulate elections and thereby claim a democratic façade, have proved hard to control and harder to oust; witness the Kenyan failure to vote out President Daniel arap Moi and this summer's only partially successful attempt to reduce Mugabe's dominance of Zimbabwe's parliament.

The elected autocrats, sometimes termed illiberal or quasi-democrats, have built-in advantages that are hard for even popular opposition movements to overcome: incumbency; state financing for official political parties; state control of television, radio, and newspapers; friendly security forces; crackdowns on opposition rallies; control over the voter rolls; and such tricks as gerrymandering, stuffing ballot boxes, and fiddling with the election count itself. Most of all, ruling parties know how to intimidate voters, particularly semiliterate rural voters acquainted with only one ruling party since independence.

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