

Mugabe: From secret Jesuit to grieving father to embittered tyrant

Bereft by a son's death, harshly handled by white supremacists, Mugabe proved a crueler leader still

By David Owen

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Whatever Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's leader, may claim in the coming days, there is no way that the country can have anything like fair and free elections. His ruthlessness became clear to me when, as Foreign Secretary, I was negotiating with him over Rhodesian independence between 1977 and 1979. But in none of my dealings with him did he tell obvious lies, nor did I see any sign of mental instability. He was, however, an ideological zealot of Jesuit upbringing, implacable and obdurate. I judged in 1978 that Joshua Nkomo, rather than Mugabe, would make a better first – interim – leader of Zimbabwe as it prepared for truly free elections.

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For a while I helped to pursue secret negotiations with Nkomo to bring this about, eventually concluding in a meeting between Nkomo and the then prime minister, Ian Smith, held in total secrecy in Lusaka. The meeting should have ended with Nkomo flying straight back to Rhodesia to be saluted as prime minister and bringing illegal independence to an end. It was not to be: another Lusaka meeting was planned, but before then the initiative became public and the meeting never reconvened. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Mugabe were totally against the whole concept.

I was somewhat embarrassed in the early 1980s that I had done this secret diplomacy, because against my predictions, Mugabe as the new prime minister appeared to preside over a remarkable period of reconciliation. Given what he and other black leaders had had to endure after Smith's illegal declaration of independence, Mugabe's reconciliation with the white rebels inside Zimbabwe appeared both generous and enlightened. But, sadly, Mugabe's conciliatory phase was fleeting, and in October 1980, only six months after independence, Mugabe secretly signed an agreement with North Korea to train a new 5 Brigade, composed almost entirely of Shona-speaking former guerrillas, to deal with internal dissidents. Compared with the Zimbabwean army, 5 Brigade had different uniforms, better equipment and weaponry and a different chain of command. Mugabe authorised 5 Brigade to use indiscriminate force, with beatings, arson and mass murder in January 1983 against the Matabele people. Mugabe slowly started to become ever more personally corrupt and progressively destroyed parliamentary democracy.

By the start of the 21st century, Zimbabwe was in the grip of an ageing fanatic. Mugabe had managed to decimate the country's once-flourishing agricultural production, gravely damage its economic stability and undermine the democratic basis of the 1980 constitution. The world faced the moral dilemma that aid workers have wrestled with elsewhere: by helping to provide food one boosts the survival in office of those who have brought about the very humanitarian disaster one is trying to alleviate.

Mugabe for some years had been labelled "mad" by the British and US press, an all too glib diagnosis to pin on him. Over 30 years I had resisted calling him that, believing that what Mugabe was doing was mirroring the brutality and destructive nature of Mao's form of communism, which he so admired.

Then, in 2006, I saw a remarkable play by Fraser Grace called *Breakfast with Mugabe*, which featured just four characters: Mugabe, his second wife Grace, a white psychiatrist called in by Grace and a bodyguard, also a secret policeman. It gave a special African insight into what may be the root of Mugabe's troubles, in some way analogous to the role of superstition in Pol Pot's character. Historically accurate, the play is in part an exploration of W H Auden's famous observation "those to whom evil is done do evil in return". It emphasised the implacable hatred Mugabe felt for Ian Smith for being refused compassionate release from prison to see his three-year-old son before he died of malarial encephalitis in Accra in 1966.

However, the play then goes on to depict the bitter departed spirit, a ngozi, having died violently, coming back in the shape of Comrade Josiah Tongogara to haunt and bring terror to Mugabe, according to Shona tradition. Tongogara was a charismatic guerrilla leader and colleague of Mugabe who died in a motor accident shortly before independence. Mugabe tells the white psychiatrist, "We should have done more to avenge Tongogara's death." The play leaves one wondering about the deeper traditional forces that may be driving Mugabe.

That the new post-apartheid South Africa did not combine with the UN Security Council to ensure Mugabe's removal from power in Zimbabwe from the early 1990s may leave a lasting scar on both countries and the region as a whole. It was understandable that Mandela and Mbeki believed they could influence Mugabe, but when they failed they should have allowed the UN to apply pressure for proper reform. How ironic that in 1965 a Labour government with a small majority, and with a Conservative opposition against the use of force, had felt unable to take military action to restore legality in Rhodesia – because a racist

minority white South African government was supporting Smith and was refusing to help to topple him through military intervention. Yet from 1997 a Labour government, with a large parliamentary majority and a Conservative opposition that wanted tougher action on Mugabe, still felt unable to intervene militarily, because this time a democratic South African government was refusing to help to topple Mugabe.

One last attempt at mediation by the African Union is worth a try if, as expected, Mugabe claims victory. Kofi Annan's hopefully successful mission to Kenya might be a model, but we need to be frank: behind the Annan mission, President Kibaki knew, lay the certainty of US and EU sanctions that would have been vigorously applied to Kenya. The army and police leaders in Zimbabwe, who announced before the election that they would not accept a democratic result, need to be singled out for mandatory UN sanctions now, before and during mediation.

This article is based on an extract from Lord Owen's book, 'In Sickness and In Power: Illness in Heads of Government During the Last 100 Years', to be published on 10 April by Methuen, price £25

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