

Final days - the decay of Robert Mugabe's personal rule in Zimbabwe: *Sifting through the rumours*

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Predicting the demise of Robert Gabriel Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe and one of the last *Big Men*, the tyrants who emerged out of Africa's decolonisation process, is a fool's game.¹ In March 2012 rumours splashed across the internet that Mugabe was dying in Singapore, and had handed power to Emerson Mnangagwa.² The substance of the story was thin, though Mugabe's prolonged absence from the cameras added credence to the unfounded claims. ZANU (PF)'s³ official response was so unsure, so ill-conceived and so poorly executed that it

added to the rumour's credibility further.⁴ When Mugabe finally resurfaced, the rumour was put to bed, leaving the online community with egg on its face.



Mugabe is always said to be dying. Sometimes it is said more fervently, as if wishing it will make it so. Whenever Mugabe is seen visiting his “dentist” in Singapore, his “daughter” in China, or “having a holiday” in Malaysia he must be dying. Each time that the rumour mill has cried wolf, each time that the whispering becomes fantasising, the event has meant less, and Mugabe has become less real, less human, less mortal. ZANU (PF)'s propaganda has spent considerable time, money and effort conflating the personalities and interests of the Movement for Democratic Change, white Zimbabweans, the Zimbabwean Diaspora, Western governments with one another, and casting the global media (both formal and informal) as tools of this supposed grand neo-colonial conspiracy. Any loss of credibility by an

¹ Mugabe was inaugurate as Prime Minister in 1980, and in 1987 became executive President with the powers and office of the Prime Minister subsumed into that of the Presidency, the post previously being titular.

² Defence minister and leader of the hard-line camp.

³ The Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) party: the result of the violent forced marriage between Mugabe's party ZANU, and the (Patriotic Front) Zimbabwe African People's Union ((PF) ZAPU) during the 1980s. ZAPU components are broadly sidelined and unhappy in the united party, but largely unwilling to break free. The disparate original parties drew largely from different ethnic groups, the majority Shona and minority Ndebele respectively; they had different backers during the Rhodesian Bush War/Liberation Struggle – China and Russia, and they backed different anti-Apartheid movements in South Africa: PAC and ANC respectively.

⁴ It is not beyond possibility that the rumour was started within ZANU (PF) and the response was purposefully inept to aid or undermine the Presidential aspirations of Emerson Mnangagwa. However, absent reasonable evidence or sustained gossip, the prudent assumption must be that cock-up and not conspiracy is the driving force here.

individual, group or sector, is almost automatically portrayed as evidence of the perfidious nature of all opposition – tainting and discrediting by proxy – even when, as in March, most of Zimbabwe’s opposition ignored, or refuted, the claims.

For every seasoned journalist who through painful experience (or uncommon sense) has learnt to give these periodic stories (including, occasionally, those about a supposed *coup d’état*) a wide berth, there are now dozens, if not hundreds of bloggers and Twitterers who will take up the story and run with it whenever it resurfaces, embellishing as they spread the message. If the rumour gains enough momentum or lasts long enough, a reasonably reliable newspaper will always eventually run it – moderated, and with caveats, and yet with baited breath – most likely the *Daily Mail* in London, the *Age* in Australia or one of the struggling metropolitan papers of the US. Officials in Harare will claim, as they always must, that Mugabe is well, in his own words, “as fit as a fiddle”.

It is not news; except one day it will be true, one day it will be news. It may even be ‘the news’, if it doesn’t clash with a royal wedding, congressional sex scandal or the Olympics. Mugabe is eighty-eight years old – that alone validates suspicions about his health. The US State Department emails, ‘liberated’ and published by *Wiki-leaks*, inform us that the Americans have been told,

by Dr Gideon Gono no less,⁵ that Mugabe has prostate cancer and only until 2013 to live. Gono’s assertions should be considered suspect due to his many competing motivations, but they were given to American officials in the expectation that his name would never be publically attached to them. Regardless of the veracity of any one particular rumour about Mugabe’s health and death, the rumours as a phenomenon will only go away *after* they have been true.

It must be the case that everyone in the Zimbabwean political environment sees this fact, even if they are not yet ready to deal with it. While Mugabe sits in isolation, behind a screen of ministers, advisors and aides, we must assume that they are all positioning themselves for this eventual end point.

When his reign ends, it is possible that a new, promising Zimbabwe may emerge.

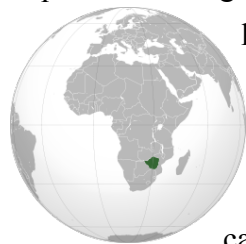
Potential and risk

Zimbabwe is one of the great untapped centres of economic growth in Africa; potentially as wealthy as most mid-range economies outside the continent. In 1980 Mugabe “inherited the jewel of Africa”,⁶ that fed itself and much of the Southern

⁵ Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Mugabe’s personal banker and, it is regularly rumoured, Grace Mugabe’s lover. Grace Mugabe is Robert Mugabe’s much younger, and deeply unpopular, wife.

⁶ Julius Nyerere, President of Tanzania, at the 1980 inauguration of Robert Mugabe as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe.

African region. That Rhodesian economy,⁷ and by extension its early Zimbabwean counterpart, was a hybrid, a war economy whose chief functions were survival and the acquisition of legitimacy, not the spread of



prosperity. It was driven by a dynamic cohort of buccaneering businessmen and civil servants who added a capitalist culture and ethos to the tools of a command economy, with mechanisms straight out of a Marxist state's rulebook.⁸ It was highly successful,

existential economics which had no qualms about using criminal networks and practices in pursuit of national interest.⁹ In 1977 the economy faced a crisis, not because of sanctions, but because Rhodesia's infrastructure was insufficiently well developed to shift the goods being produced. So bound into the global market place was Rhodesia (though often by proxy, or illegally) that the global downturn in the late 1970s probably did more to end the Smith regime than either fighting or official sanctions (arguably the greatest factor was the settler regime's support in Washington and Pretoria that recognised that the war could not be 'won' without unendurable sacrifices and unacceptable, unmanageable escalation).

Mugabe failed to reform that economy to peace time realities, and his second and third governments discarded many of the best Rhodesian civil servants (those who had chosen to stay on) because of their racial backgrounds and war time loyalties. Into their place stepped political placemen, some of whom brought with them experience and expertise from the West or the Soviet Bloc,

⁷ Since 1980 the country has been officially known as Zimbabwe. Previously it was formally known as Southern Rhodesia (1890s-1960s), informally Rhodesia (particularly after Northern Rhodesia was renamed Zambia, as the self declared Republic of Rhodesia, unrecognised but commonly used), and briefly Zimbabwe-Rhodesia (under Bishop Able Muzorewa's premiership, unrecognised and not commonly used). Unless stated, Rhodesia herein refers only to pre-1980 Zimbabwe and not current Zambia.

⁸ Legislation mandated that most primary goods (e.g. corn, pork or coal) were sold to the state via 'para-statal corporations' at fixed prices (set by ministers in consultation with business and the civil service), and then sold on by the state either to secondary producers, whose goods thereafter were sold back to further para-statals or to foreign companies via proxies in the outside world. Domestic consumption was regulated by selling goods on to citizenry via para-statal and regulated supermarkets. Those outside the system were often in niche production, or the black market (which the state regularly dabbled in); the many small unregulated supermarkets kept profit margins in line with regulated stores in order to compete. Competition took place throughout the system, but it was over small margins which demanded greater scales of production. Mediation between all sides allowed shocks to the system to be managed, and wages regularised. Under Mugabe's rule bribery replaced mediation as the core lubricant in the system.

⁹ One, possibly apocryphal, example: the Victoria Falls casinos paid out in Rhodesian Dollars, but compelled clients to buy-in using foreign currency; to offset this drawback the casinos paid out very handsomely and regularly. Hospitality was particularly lavish too. The healthy chances of making a fortune drew in the newly wealthy from across southern Africa, even from those states that did not recognise Rhodesian statehood. Ultimately, the casinos' losses were subsidised by government operational budgets whose chief objective was access to precious US dollars which it could use to buy spare parts for aircraft and other essentials for the war.

but many of them brought a sense of entitlement and an ideological antipathy to capitalism and its conventions.¹⁰ Despite this, the ‘Rhodesian economy’ lingered.

Zimbabwe has many advantages but she is constrained by the prevailing political order and the legacies, real and perceived, of the previous (Rhodesian) system. There should be little doubt about Zimbabwe’s natural resources, potential for tourism, and in time resuscitated agricultural and industrial sectors, but more importantly Zimbabwe (and Harare in particular) is subject to the same appetites and fashions as the Western world. Given sufficient economic stability and access, the consumer in Harare is likely to abandon what he or she views as suspect Asian “Zhing-Zhong” goods in favour of Western products with greater kudos and respectability. In Zimbabwe, as with much of English-speaking Africa, Mercedes Benz, Manchester United and 50 Cent (the rapper) trump cheap plastic, Sino-African friendship conferences and the Maoist ascetics.

Moreover, Zimbabwe’s adult population is, by the standards of the region, disproportionately well-educated and

¹⁰ The ZANU party was seen as so anti-capitalist that the British negotiators wrote in a ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ clause covering land sales into the *Lancaster House Constitution* (the peace treaty and subsequently the constitution of Zimbabwe). Today this clause is seen, incorrectly, as a constraint of economic growth and the establishment of a wealthy black farming class – urbanisation, lack of title deeds on ‘communal’ land (excluding the poor, overwhelmingly black, from loans on assets), rampant state corruption and a vindictive tax system are the true culprits.

skilled. Youth in their early-mid twenties have struggled with a collapsing education system, but living through hyperinflation will have instilled in them skills, resilience and importantly a degree of hedonism which will make them ideal, voracious consumers in a more stable system. Zimbabwe’s Western Diaspora is large, well travelled, and like their White Russian, Nationalist Chinese, and South African predecessors, exceedingly (even excessively) well credentialed, often with multiple degrees and experience working in the corporate sector across the globe.

However, the rule of law, and in particular property rights, has been made as close to obsolete as is possible, while retaining the pretence of a legal system, in the last decade and a half. Mugabe has in decline legitimised, even glorified theft when directed for ideological purposes or towards political enemies and those of different racial and tribal backgrounds.¹¹ It will take considerable effort to rebuild respect for the law, law makers and law enforcers.¹² This

¹¹ One of the more shocking components of Zimbabwe’s decline has been the commoditisation of women’s bodies. Prostitution has become commonplace in many of Zimbabwe’s district, and rape has become epidemic. While sexual violence has always been common, it has now been made normal. One cause of this has been the return of the army from the Congo, where rape was used as a weapon of war by all parties.

¹² The Zimbabwe Republican Police originated as the British South Africa Police, the constabulary and paramilitary levy raised to protect the assets of the British South Africa Company. It is only after the Second World War that the police force was superseded by the Army as the senior service in the then Rhodesias (both Zambia and Zimbabwe).

kleptocracy has created a class of rent seeking bullies (particularly amongst serving and ex-military officers), some of whom may survive as large and important actors in a post Mugabe age. Their ability to legitimise their activities, and acquire the managerial skills needed to prosper in a more open system must be considered suspect. The difficulty lies in the possibility that external investors, chiefly Westerners, may find few palatable and powerful actors with whom to collaborate in the early years unless the Diaspora can be convinced to return in significant numbers.

A returning Diaspora brings serious problems itself. The chief risk is, as with any émigré community, that they will acquire political, economic and social power and positions out of all scale with their numbers. They run the risk of becoming a *de facto* ruling class, or at least swamping what remains of the existing ruling class, and generating resentment amongst those who stayed behind and endured (a condition exasperated by the proportion of white and mixed race Zimbabweans in the Diaspora). They will bring with them foreign wives, husbands or partners, multi-racial, multi-cultural children (who have always struggled in Zimbabwe's education system), liberal

Throughout its history, the service has struggled to perform 'crime fighting' functions, been far more comfortable in public order roles and never been able to shed its paramilitary culture. A post-Mugabe Zimbabwe may need a new national police service, or a collection of metropolitan services (as exist in Harare, albeit with little power and kudos), and regional constabularies to augment or replace the ZRP.

western views on homosexuality, religion and sexual emancipation. More especially, unlike those who did stay behind, this community has been radicalised, therefore it is unlikely to accept a *modus vivendi* with the remnants of the outgoing (dis)order.

The prevailing (dis)order

Before any reasonable assessment of "what happens next?" can take place however, the international community, investors in particular, must understand what the prevailing condition is now, and how much that may inhibit the emergence of a Zimbabwe that is ready and able to join the rest of the world.

Most importantly, we should dispel notions of a 'Mugabe regime' presiding over Zimbabwe. There is no such thing; it is a façade. This is not to exonerate the President; his record over the last 50 years speaks volumes about mendacity and complicity. For most of his reign Mugabe has dominated the political scene in Harare, arguably even in SADC (the Southern African Development Community), but now the President holds very few of the levers of power, and fewer still directly. That is not to say that he is powerless; he still retains the capacity to reach out occasionally and personally obliterate an individual,¹³ but that

¹³ The discrediting of Archbishop Pius Ncube, Catholic primate of Bulawayo in a honey-pot sex trap demonstrates acutely Mugabe's *modus operandi*. The fact the story was slipped to news agencies was interesting, arguably proving that Mugabe recognised Ncube could not be 'bought', even with blackmail.

power is constrained, the fact that he must do so, periodically, is in many ways evidence of weakness, not of strength.

The President is a leftover now, not just of the past, but to the bulk of the population, born after 1980 and struggling to find employment and feed families, of a mythological, ancient, fanciful past. He is a monolithic ruin, both too big to shift or ignore, and for everyone, in the way. More than ever Mugabe is dependent upon his allies, aides and advisors (and especially the Central Intelligence Organisation) to bring him the raw material from which he can spin political capital. Once Mugabe knew all the actors, which strings to pull, which to cut, which to avoid. He could collect that raw material himself, and assess its value in the process.

Subtle alliances based on the tribal identities and defunct Marxist ideologies of fathers and grandfathers cut little ice in the snake pit that is modern Zimbabwean politics. He can no longer reach out beyond his court to harvest in the political space, the gossip, intrigues, the back-stories and skeletons. He must now increasingly deal with men, women and interests that did not exist when he had his greatest energy. He no longer knows instinctively the prices of men, their

By contrast, the support given to ex-communicated Anglican Bishop Nolbert Kunonga demonstrates Mugabe's failure to understand larger social movements. Backing Kunonga's has not translated into the capture of the Anglican church, rather most of the Anglican communion has simply abandoned their fine cathedral and churches and set up afresh, leaving the Bishop with largely empty pews.

utility and expendability – in part because he is in too vaulted a position, in part because he has simply outlived the vast bulk of his contemporaries and confidantes. That lack of knowledge has meant that he has had to pursue increasingly unsubtle methods, and follow in the slipstream of the often ill-conceived policies and practices of his juniors.

Mugabe has never been a great strategist, though his tactical abilities, even now, allow him to mitigate the majority of the most pressingly existential side-effects of strategic mis-steps. Since the mid-1990s, Mugabe's powers have been on the wane, the mis-steps are growing in number and seriousness. While following the machinations of ZANU (PF)'s internal politics is fraught with difficulties, something between Kremlinology and discerning what of the public love-lives of D-list celebrities is fact and what is PR; but measured by policy and narrative some trends can be discerned. The occupation of commercial farms in the period after 1998 is just one example of this. While Mugabe has appeared the instigator of the process, he has in truth been little more than a begrudging cheerleader. No doubt, Mugabe has used the farm invasion process to attack those individuals who are the most eager backers of his political rival Morgan Tsvangirai, but there is little reasonable evidence that Mugabe sought a general breakdown of law and order in the commercial farming districts, or the predictable outcomes. The Second Congolese War (1998-2003/4/5/present) is another example;

having sent the ZNDF¹⁴ to prop up Laurent Kabila's regime, and show himself as a more proactive leader of SADC than Nelson Mandela and offset some of Zimbabwe's dependency upon South Africa, Mugabe was unable to compel the army and air force home in the face of resistance from the Colonels and General staff who made personal fortunes strip mining Congo's natural resources. Only when electoral and economic oblivion faced the ZANU (PF) and the ZNDF hierarchies did the army agree to a general drawdown from Congo, in part leading to the militarisation of Zimbabwe's civil institutions. It is clear that Mugabe, being unable to stop any of these processes, chose not to look weak in opposing them, and instead opted to validate them.

Three Governments

Instead of a Mugabe regime, Zimbabwe is today laden with three non-governing governments, three competing *demi-regimes* held in check only by each other's ambitions and their own weaknesses in a grand Mexican standoff. Mugabe sits at the top of the edifice as a key stone, balancing the appetites and energies of two of these

¹⁴ The Zimbabwe National Defence Forces are composed of the Zimbabwean National Army, Air Force of Zimbabwe and the paramilitary Zimbabwe Republican Police. In recent years the Central Intelligence Organisation and Zimbabwe Republican Prison Service have been *de facto* branches of the ZNDF. These are in practice often augmented by the ZANU (PF) youth militia, 'Liberation War Veterans' associations (most too young to have served) and the National Youth Service militia ("Green Bombers").

factions and parrying the demands of the third with the others' combined strength.¹⁵ He 'rules' chiefly through his staff. His only true power lies in choosing who follows him into State House. The problem therein is, while Mugabe's staff is qualitatively better than at least two of the three main pretenders waiting in the wings (serving Tsvangirai requires, chiefly, bravery), their loyalty to Mugabe must be considered suspect because of his age. Each individual must be assessing which way to jump, and when.

Waiting in the wings

The three *demi-regimes*, might fairly be described as representing the past (the hardliners in ZANU (PF)), the present (their pragmatic counterparts) and the future (the mainstream MDC).¹⁶

At the head of the first, composed of the most ideologically driven or criminally compromised, is Emerson Mnangagwa. This

¹⁵ Prior to the 2008 parliamentary and Presidential elections, Mugabe only had to balance the competing factions within ZANU (PF). While Morgan Tsvangirai almost certainly won the first round of President election outright, massive intimidation, electoral fraud and the collusion of SADC leaders, particularly Thabo Mbeki allowed Mugabe to retain the Presidency, albeit with Tsvangirai as Prime Minister (a post in abeyance between 1987 and 2009) in a co-government (and not a government of national unity as ZANU (PF) propaganda portrays it).

¹⁶ The MDC underwent a protracted schism during the middle of the last decade and have emerged as two parties, divided largely along ethnic lines, but united against ZANU (PF). Both components are in the current government, though the long term future of the smaller component is suspect, their political base being undermined by an attempt to resuscitate ZAPU outside ZANU (PF).

cohort has gained the most out of the land invasion process, the hyperinflation of Zimbabwe's currency¹⁷ and the military's occupation of the mineral rich provinces of Congo and subsequently the Marange diamond fields.¹⁸ Behind Emerson Mnangagwa, in the shadows are the politicised generals: paid and risen (dragged might be more appropriate) through the ranks, not because of their capacity on the battlefield, but because of their loyalty to Mugabe and his system. Care should be taken when assessing these men, though the route to the top was smoothed through patronage, they have been bloodied in one of the most gruesome conflicts the world has seen since 1945 – the Second Congolese War.

It is hard to imagine Mnangagwa not becoming president after Mugabe; the other candidates lack the military's support and its capacity to organise itself. However, Mnangagwa will never be acceptable to the West,¹⁹ or the people of Zimbabwe. They

¹⁷ The standard manner in which money was made appears to be: buying foreign currency at the official pegged prices (which most citizens were excluded from by bureaucratic inefficiency/connivance) and selling it on in the thriving black market, then transferring the profits into goods not subject to inflation (gold, land, foreign government bonds etc).

¹⁸ The legal owners of the fields are African Consolidated Resources, though they have been excluded from the area by the army.

¹⁹ Zimbabwe already has full Chinese support, ZANU being the only Beijing supplicant to win power in the Cold War. Resentment of China and the Chinese people in Zimbabwe grows dangerously; the Chinese in Zimbabwe are regularly accused of being even more racist than all but the most extreme Rhodesian settlers.

may endure him, begrudgingly, but they will never love him while he is chained to the generals and zealots. He will never win an election without them, and yet with them comes a level of violence and electoral fraud which will delegitimise his regime automatically. It is ironic, considering he is the most presidential of the three pretenders, the most ready to govern, possibly the most able, the ministers he would have available to him are, largely, the least adequate and able to serve.

The second faction within ZANU (PF) is composed of political survivors. It is the faction of 'getting out alive'; those who, uncharitably, might be described as rats who do not intend on going down with the ship. These men and women represent the party system and the scions of *realpolitik* within state bureaucracy. It is headed by Joyce Mujuru,²⁰ Vice-President, widow of General Solomon Mujuru.²¹ There is little way to



assess the true size of this faction, its members being, understandably,

fickle. The diplomacy of the ANC under both Presidents Zuma and Mothantse

²⁰ She fought in the Rhodesian Bush War/Liberation Struggle under the *nom-de-guerre* Teurai Ropa (spill blood), and according to legend, is supposed to have shot down a Rhodesian helicopter while the men around her fled.

²¹ Killed in a suspicious fire in 2011. Rumours abound about whom (if anyone) is responsible for the death of Gen. Mujuru – some semi-official conjecture stemming from within the ZANU (PF) hierarchy include his widow as main suspect because of marital difficulties.

however, would imply that the ‘Liberation Struggle regimes’ in SADC²² would prefer a Mujuru government to a Tsvangirai or Mnangagwa alternative.

Mujuru’s weaknesses are many: her gender and class (or lack therein) are the most striking. As a man she would be praised as a war hero and someone who has risen above the rank assigned by birth, but Zimbabwe is a deeply misogynist society at the best of times. Her ambition, laudable in a man, is deeply suspect in a woman. Her experience of public office, having served in almost every Mugabe government, and rising to be Vice President, are often attributed to plotting, or the influence of her late husband (and even of being his proxy in government). While a Mujuru government is plausible, it is unlikely to be long – she must come to power at the expense of either the hardliners or the MDC, and having helped dispatch one, she would be at the mercy of the other.

The last is the camp of Tsvangirai, and the mainstream Movement for Democratic Change.²³ He is the people’s man, the people’s hope. He represents the future, an inevitable, softer, safer, less driven future. To many he is a granite man, a giant, monumentally brave, but even so, he has been monumentally naïve and ultimately inadequate. Tsvangirai’s party has no true or

coherent narrative, except to rid Zimbabwe of ZANU (PF) and Mugabe. It is a Social Democratic party with hard core capitalists funding it, a secular party with a thick strain of religious absolutism just below the surface, but in short, those traits mean that the MDC reflects Zimbabwe’s personality more accurately than ZANU (PF).

Tsvangirai suffers chiefly from being leader of the MDC, a party unacceptable to the ANC because like ZANU (PF), the South African ruling party has no cultural capital from which to draw on when, or if, it becomes an ordinary opposition. By delaying the transition from Mugabe to Tsvangirai and in striving to find an alternative to Tsvangirai, South Africa has sought to contain demands for change at home, missing the point that it was South Africa’s transition away from Apartheid that allowed Zimbabweans the freedom to contemplate a world without ZANU (PF). As long as the hard men of the Afrikaner dominated National Party ruled in Pretoria, a hard man was reasonably acceptable in Harare. The ANC’s own defeat at the polls is inevitable. It will have its roots in corruption and economic decline, and it will be driven by young men and women who will have been too young to remember Apartheid, just as Zimbabwe’s was driven by those too young to remember the Bush War. In the end, an “MDC” and a “Tsvangirai” will come to power in South Africa, regardless of what happens in Zimbabwe. The reason is that neither the ANC, nor any faction within ZANU (PF) could ever create a new untainted leader;

²² ANC in South Africa, SWAPO in Namibia, MPLA in Angola and FRELIMO in Mozambique.

²³ The breakaway MDC has some immediate relevance, but, it is reasonable to deduce, little in the mid-long run.

their hierarchies are too thickly populated by people who believe their legitimacy is absolute, earned by action once and forever therein owned, rather than on loan from the people and periodically snatched back.

Conclusion

Mugabe's heart is a ticking time bomb. When it stops the underlying political order in Zimbabwe will be revealed in its stark naked awfulness. Meanwhile, transition is impossible, no one can yet govern because to do so one needs enough of the state, the army and the people to form a critical mass. The army, the state and the people are fundamentally at odds with one another. Mugabe's death, alone, will force transition, sooner or later.

Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International

Images accessed 17/05/2012 –

Robert Mugabe:

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