

MUGABE'S ZIMBABWE: FROM REDEMPTION TO DICTATORSHIP

Jeremy Kinsman

Robert Mugabe's brand of dictatorship is uniquely corrupt, as Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman observes: "He stage-manages a perverse parody of democratic choice, by organizing utterly unfair elections whose excesses in violence, intimidation, and propaganda would make Tammany Hall ward bosses blush." And Zimbabwe, post the white supremacist Rhodesian regime, represented the hopes of many in the West for racial harmony and democracy on the modern African stage. In that sense, Kinsman writes, Mugabe has not only let down the side, "he taunts us in unique ways." What is to be done about this modern dictator who makes such a mockery of democracy? Kinsman offers some reflections.

La dictature de Robert Mugabe atteint un degré d'avilissement sans égal, affirme notre collaborateur Jeremy Kinsman, qui écrit : « Il a mis en scène une parodie perverse de la démocratie en organisant des élections totalement injustes, et pendant lesquelles la violence, l'intimidation et la propagande qu'il a utilisées auraient fait rougir les patrons du Tammany Hall. » Après la chute du régime raciste en Rhodésie, le Zimbabwe constituait pour plusieurs, en Occident, l'espoir que l'Afrique connaisse enfin la démocratie et la bonne entente entre Blancs et Noirs. Dans ce sens, écrit Jeremy Kinsman, Mugabe n'a pas seulement changé de camp, « mais il se moque de nous comme on l'a rarement fait ». Que peut-on faire face à ce dictateur qui ridiculise ainsi la démocratie ? Notre collaborateur offre des pistes de réflexions.

Zimbabwe resonates in Western consciousness like few places on earth. North Americans and Europeans of a certain age rooted for Zimbabweans trying to come out from under the burdens imposed by a Rhodesian regime that represented the worst of institutionalized white colonial racism. Inside white hopes for independent Zimbabwe, there may be hope also for some atonement.

Is this why the prolonged and tragic crisis of governance in Zimbabwe brought a raw emotional reaction to the surface in the West? The violence against political opponents and ordinary civilians has been vicious. But even so, the reaction to Robert Mugabe's behaviour is exceptional.

For comparison, contrast the antagonistic rhetoric reserved for what British Prime Minister Gordon Brown recently termed "the criminal cabal that now make up the Mugabe regime" to the relative civility with which Western leaders defer to Kim Jong-il, the Stalinist dictator of North Korea. Is it only because of North Korea's nuclear weapons that this totalitarian and zanily belligerent state gets the much easier ride? Negotiators fall over each other in efforts to persuade North Korea to accept carrots extended for improved behaviour. But where are the carrots for Mugabe?

In a sense, he had them. His anti-democratic behaviour has turned the carrots into sanctions.

Corrupted governance is not rare in Africa, but the special history of Zimbabwe is such that Mugabe almost uniquely stirs emotions because we feel he has let down our best hopes. He spoiled what we had consoled ourselves was a good-news story of postcolonial redemption, and turned it against us in a vindictive and retro spirit of revived post-colonial bitterness and racial antagonism.

Mugabe clearly believes he is the one who has been deceived. In his partly real, partly simulated outrage over having been double-crossed on the essential issue, compensation for the redistribution of land, he has taunted us in unique ways.

Mugabe has made a mockery of the democratic governance at the heart of our value system. His isn't the naked power grab common to autocrats. He instead stage-manages a perverse parody of democratic choice, by organizing utterly unfair elections whose excesses in violence, intimidation and propaganda would make Tammany Hall ward bosses blush. Normally, rigged one-party-state elections of dictators à la

Saddam Hussein are laughably cartoon-like in their one-sidedness; Mugabe's anti-democratic action has been more brazen, more in our faces, because he pretends his grotesque manipulations are part of "our" democratic process, which indeed carried him first to power.

Of course, the Zimbabwe mess is not about us. Its victims are terrorized and debased Zimbabweans whose currency is worthless, who have no food,

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and who live where violence and intimidation stalk the night. It is their hopes that have taken the hardest fall of all.

What is to be done to address them? Recent G8 calls to pile on what is already a devastated economic landscape more targeted economic sanctions until the "monster" Mugabe gives up power, were partly helpless plays to political audiences at home, born out of frustration with a leader who simply no longer gives a damn about "world opinion," or the quality of Zimbabwe's diplomatic relations. Detached from, and indifferent to, the disastrous condition of the people, rather as in Myanmar, a strongman regime has isolated itself from reality, and therefore normal leverage ceases to work.

And yet something is getting through. Regional efforts to mediate the crisis are beginning to show results and may enable power in Zimbabwe to be shared until new and fairer elections are held.

If Mugabe is being eased out, it is not thanks to Western diplomacy. But hopefully we have learned some things. The damage done initially to Zimbabweans by a grotesque racist society and then the damage done by a deluded leader and his corrupt cohorts in retribution have exacted huge costs that can be drawn down only over time and with the help of many.

The role of Zimbabwe's African neighbours is already crucial. They too pay a price for Robert Mugabe. I once asked Samuel Huntington after one of his talks on "the clash of civilizations" why he never mentioned Africa in his global *tours d'horizon*. "Africa's just out of it," pronounced the Harvard prophet, a dismissal I resented. But it is one made more easily because of African tolerance of Mugabe's misdeeds.

However, let's stop and think about it. While a good number of African leaders, such as Gabon's Omar Bongo, are corrupt tyrants, many other countries — Ghana, Lesotho, Botswana, Mozambique, Liberia, Tanzania, Mali, Benin, Malawi, Zambia and now again Kenya — are in democratic hands. Some have spoken out against the shame Mugabe casts on African efforts at democratic governance. But at the same time, do we really expect elder-respectful Africans to rally that easily behind the rhetoric of a British prime minister against one of the most senior leaders in Africa, one who is a hero of anti-colonialist and anti-racist armed struggle? Do we think there wasn't a clash of civilizations in Africa?

On the one hand, there should reasonably be an expiry date for excoriating former colonial powers. On the other, if ever there were to be a clinical case of collective continental post-traumatic stress disorder, it would be in sub-Saharan Africa. To an African, it is not as if slavery, exploitation and institutionalized racism were just-ended "history." They do form part of contemporary psychology. Mugabe's manipulation of these chords of inherited memory succeeds because the themes still have resonance in a world where anti-immigrant and racist attitudes make news across

Europe. It will take us more time to exorcise our own demons, though the nomination of an African-American for president is potentially an enormous leap to greater health on this complex and tormenting issue.

What is the Zimbabwe crisis really all about? If it is just about Robert Mugabe gone bad, how did it happen?

In the 1960s there was pretty much global unanimity that the unilateral declaration of independence of the racist state of Rhodesia in 1965 would not be allowed to succeed. The guerrilla-freedom fighters under Marxist Robert Mugabe and rival Joshua Nkomo undeniably had one of mankind's most just causes behind them, as well as China and the Soviet Union. But even East-West Cold War rivalry would not slacken the resolve in Western democracies to defeat Ian Smith's racist regime, particularly that of successive UK governments, reinforced by the moral conviction of US President Jimmy Carter, who was less persuaded than Ronald Reagan would be later that Mugabe's Marxism was a central issue in the need to correct institutionalized racist outrage.

The guerrilla war, reinforced by international sanctions on Rhodesia and the isolation of its white community, forced the minority outlaws into a sham power-sharing regime in 1979.

A Commonwealth summit in Lusaka led later that year to UK-brokered negotiations under Lord Carrington at Lancaster House. The outcome after four months of talks was an independent and democratic Zimbabwe, which would soon elect Robert Mugabe as the nation's first leader. The Prince of Wales came to the joyous independence celebrations, which encouraged our better angels to soar in hope.

Rhodesia has always been about the rich land. After all, as author Heidi Holland points out, land was the point of colonialism. In Rhodesia this excluded Africans, who revere the land where they and their ancestors have lived, to even a spiritual degree.

In 1930, the British colony's openly racist *Land Appropriation Act* had restricted blacks' access to land. By independence, whites, who were only 5 percent of the population, owned almost everything of material value and virtually all of the productive land in the country.

While the Lancaster House agreement was a complex set of interdependent mutual guarantees for what was envisaged as a multiracial society, the basic deal can be boiled down to the exchange of majority rule for guaranteed property rights, supported by financed redistribution of white-owned land to black farmers.

How did Zimbabwe pass from being a breadbasket in 1979 to scorched earth today?

It seemed at independence to have the brightest prospects of any African country: abundant natural resources, a modern grid of roads and infrastructure, a competent civil service, human capital and generous worldwide support.

These were the resources a wealthy white-dominated society had built for itself. Robert Mugabe communicated the hope that he could mobilize all the new country's assets in a cooperative spirit of reconciliation. He urged the 200,000 white residents to stay. Ian Smith wasn't prosecuted: he ran for the new parliament, where he would sit for decades as an opposition MP, unrepentant and hostile.

Mugabe's first governments included white farmer Denis Norman as minister of agriculture, David Smith in Industry and returnees from political exile such as Bernard Chidzero, the deputy secretary-general of the UN Conference on Trade and Development, with degrees from Ottawa, McGill and Cambridge (and a wife from Quebec), who rose to become minister of finance (and a candidate for UN secretary-general in 1991).

Mugabe himself was celebrated on the world stage, where he was some-

thing of a role model, not least because in his first decade in power, his governments demonstrably wrenched Africans up in schooling, literacy and health.

In 1991, the Commonwealth held its biennial Heads of Government Summit in Harare. The Queen, as head of the Commonwealth, welcomed delegates at a garden party alongside Mugabe as summit chairman and host.

It was arguably the most eventful positive Commonwealth summit ever, because its Harare Declaration made Commonwealth membership contingent on democratic values, a commitment subsequently given teeth by provisions for suspension or expulsion, which a decade later would tragi-

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cally and inevitably lead to Zimbabwe's leaving the Commonwealth.

The discussions at the Harare summit were not easy. In restricted sessions, Brian Mulroney led in making the case for committing to democracy, against the sarcastic skepticism of Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the haughty condescension of traditionalist autocrat Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, and the diverting ironies of Uganda's leader Museveni, who had just seized power in a coup (but who finally got himself more or less properly elected a few years ago). Mulroney, Britain's John Major, Bob Hawke of Australia, and allies from India and the Caribbean rallied a conference consensus behind the text, due in some

measure to the mediating influence — especially with the Africans — of Mugabe as chairman.

In a side event, Prime Minister Mulroney helped dedicate a clinic built with Canadian assistance and named for Robert Mugabe's impressively straightforward spouse, Sally Mugabe. Ghanaian-born Sally Mugabe had won her own pro-freedom credentials both in Rhodesia and in exile in London, where British security officials tried for years to deport her. It was her husband, jailed for a decade in Rhodesia for "subversive speech," who pleaded by mail with successive prime ministers. In the end he prevailed, but his estimate of the British official capacity for fairness suffered in the struggle.

Those at the ceremony did not know that Sally Mugabe would herself be dead in only several months. With her would go the grounding of her husband in the paths of conciliation, as well as his only close and humanizing relationship. Mugabe has always been a solitary figure. Their only child died as an infant in Ghana when Mugabe was in jail.

Personal dark signs had been apparent for some time to those able to face up to them.

But that it was Ian Smith who always said that Mugabe would show a true totalitarian side sooner or later was taken as a reason to believe the contrary.

Practical day-to-day issues of government and building a socially just infrastructure began to seem less vital to Mugabe, who was increasingly consumed by a resurrected self-image as a defiant and triumphant freedom fighter in the colonial struggles.

Other clouds were gathering. The black-run civil service Mugabe installed had been ill prepared by a white-run society in which only 2 percent of Africans finished high school. Whites who had been guaranteed 20 parliamentary seats for 10 years embittered Mugabe by regularly voting for throw-back racists from Ian Smith's stable.



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ESTIMATED TO REPRESENT MORE THAN
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Starr Review: The Economics of Climate Change, October 2006

With virtually zero deforestation, and the most original, certified, and protected forest, Canada has been a global leader in its commitment to sustainable forest management for some time. The Canadian forest products industry is committed to continual improvement because we agree with this statement by the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change: *“In the long-term, a sustainable forest management strategy aimed at maintaining or increasing forest carbon stocks, while producing an annual sustained yield of timber, will generate the largest sustained mitigation benefit.”*

It's time for the rest of the world to follow
Canada's lead in sustainably managing
forests — the world's climate depends on it.



Meanwhile, Mugabe continued Ian Smith's state of emergency for a full decade after independence. Was it to give himself the weapons to crack down on his own competitors for power? The independence movement had a harshly violent legacy.

In 1982, Mugabe had shown a ruthlessness largely overlooked in the West. The armed struggle against white Rhodesia had always been the work of two leaders, Mugabe and Joshua

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Nkomo, who led their respective armed factions, ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) and ZAPU (Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union). The Lancaster House negotiations intended a power-sharing solution, and Nkomo indeed assumed the number two role in the new government.

However, in 1982 Mugabe turfed Nkomo from cabinet. He then deployed the army's 5th Brigade (originally a ZANU force trained by North Korea and answering personally to Mugabe) against Nkomo's home base in Matabeleland in a campaign of retribution for protest against Mugabe that killed 10,000 to 20,000 people. Though the massacre was far from Harare, word got out about it. Robert MacLaren, who was Canada's first high commissioner to Zimbabwe, warned Ottawa, but "no one wanted to know."

This reluctance to rain on the parade went on for years. Charles Bassett, who won many Zimbabwean friends later when he was Canadian high commissioner, felt obliged to complain in the early 1990s that Mugabe had made a huge mistake in seizing four large white-owned farms and then denying any right of appeal or redress to their owners. Bassett urged that a Zimbabwe minister's trip to Canada to attract investment be held back as lever-

age. He was dressed down by the government in Harare and his effectiveness curtailed by a sullen and hostile coterie around Mugabe, who by this time had been named president.

Mugabe's rhetoric that he was embattled by foreign opponents trying to control Zimbabwe's resources can be dated to about this period, which is when the economy started to go to pieces, accelerated by disastrous advice given Zimbabwe by the IMF and the World

Bank, mostly through the Economic Structural Adjustment Program, which comprehensively failed through a fatuous and destabilizing indifference to local and political realities.

Whatever the contributing factors, the dark signs were evident to those who cared to look. By 1995, US Ambassador Edward Lanpher reported in his parting cable to the State Department, Zimbabwe was "increasingly corrupt" and had "the appearance of democracy, but was basically under a one-party, one-man control." But distractions abounded and attention was elsewhere.

It was the land issues that brought focus back to the problem.

After being re-elected in 1996, Mugabe hardened his line on land, saying that farms would henceforth be expropriated, with compensation to be offered only at a later date, insinuating that the cash would have to come from Britain, where John Major struggled to find an adequate solution.

Meanwhile, Mugabe consolidated power in his hands through selective repression and rewards. Having failed in 1990 to push through a constitutional amendment to make Zimbabwe a one-party state, he still amended the Constitution 15 times to increase exec-

utive power. His Central Intelligence Organization functioned as an arm of his political party. The beneficiaries of the seizures of the best farms were Mugabe's cronies.

Mistrust of Mugabe in the West led to a shrinking of outside financial resources. The shortfalls were covered partly by Libya, and partly by military intervention in the Congo's civil war, which brought cash rewards from Congolese mining and timber trophies seized by his soldiers.

But the economy was collapsing. Mugabe needed scapegoats, and found them in Britain. British disenchantment and Mugabe's resentful hostility were feeding on each other.

Shortly after the 1997 election, when New Labour turned John Major's Conservatives out of office, Tony Blair hosted another Commonwealth summit in Edinburgh. He received Mugabe, but cut short his long monologue on the land compensation issue because of the pressure of other appointments.

Was this a lost opportunity? My first-hand impression of Blair was that he tended toward ageism and impatience with older leaders and old issues, at least in his hubris-driven earlier years in office. His line that as long as the rewards of land expropriation in Zimbabwe went to regime cronies, Britain wanted no part of the deal, was publicly defensible, but by all private accounts Mugabe felt "dissed."

His alienation was deepened by a thoughtless letter from the abrasive international development minister, Clare Short, to the effect that the New Labour government felt no special responsibility to finance the undertakings of its Conservative predecessors.

Exact truth is hard to come by. Some British leaders, such as former prime minister John Major and then Blair's foreign secretaries Robin Cook and Jack Straw, did try to resolve the issue sympathetically. Their efforts failed because of lack of political will at home, but also because of Mugabe.



AP Photo

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe returns to Harare from the African Union Summit in July, where other African nations considered what to do about his dictatorship.

Sir Brian Donnelly, who became Britain's head of mission in Harare, later tried to cut to the truth: "The great Mugabe myth is that it has been lack of money that has precluded land reform. There would always have been money if he had been prepared to accept a transparent and equitable process." Efforts to settle, particularly by Straw, were on the public condition that occupations of white farms cease, but the underlying key would be an undertaking to hold fair elections, and return to rule of law. Mugabe, cornered by his obsessive self-esteem, would not agree, possibly because he knew that fair elections would be the end of him.

At least at the start, the occupations were probably out of his control. By 2000, a "war veterans" movement had sprung up, vigilante militias who seized land from white farmers violently. At first it was spontaneous, but then Mugabe deepened the crisis — includ-

ing with Britain — by encouraging the seizures, which to him proved his bona fides on the issue of popular redistribution. He provoked Britain with the self-righteous and inflammatory line "You keep your money, we'll keep our land." Vengeful and violent occupations inflamed the British press with accounts of the murder of several white farmers and the torching of their homes. Mugabe became in British eyes a pariah, beyond the reach of conciliation from any British politician with an eye to the polls.

Ambassador Lanpher may have been premature about prediction of a one-party situation, but he was right in spirit. In 2000, Mugabe's party, the ZANU-PF, almost lost its parliamentary majority to a new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which upped the ante for the 2002 elections for the executive presidency. The MDC contested the elections under leader Morgan Tsvangirai,

whom Mugabe painted as a British stooge, colours given some local credence by Blair's declaration to the House of Commons that the UK got its information on what was going on in Zimbabwe from the MDC.

Mugabe won, but only after a violent electoral process that prevented the results from being sanctioned internationally. The Commonwealth suspended Zimbabwe's membership. Zimbabwe's African neighbours, however, endorsed the legitimacy of the outcome even as Western countries began to ramp up economic sanctions in a prelude to divergent approaches, which have hindered international consensus to this day.

Increasingly embattled, Mugabe remained stubbornly inaccessible. Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon was sent to mediate, but cooled his heels in his hotel. Subsequent emissaries presidents Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Thabo Mbeki of South Africa were given short shrift

by the president, locked inside his mental labyrinth.

Mugabe, approaching his 80s, had become an isolated tyrant atop a security structure whose only purpose was to assuage its own appetite for the spoils of power, indifferent to the crises of drought and HIV/AIDS ravaging the country and the millions of refugees.

Outrages against governance became more bizarrely blatant, especially after independently inclined judges were forced from the bench for ruling that the nonconsensual land acquisition was illegal. Opposition leader Tsvangirai was beaten up, and then tried for treason on absurdly fabricated testimony by a newly Canadian fraudster. Human rights defenders were abused, arrested and assaulted. Freedom of speech was smothered and foreign reporters expelled, in a spirit of impunity best summed up by junta propagandist George Chirumba, who promised the government “would flush out agitators embedded in journalism.”

Meanwhile, Western countries upped the rhetoric. The US declared Zimbabwe one of the world’s “six outposts of tyranny.” Mugabe’s counterwrath was directed most toward Britain, whose ambassador Donnelly was vilified daily despite massive amounts of humanitarian food aid his embassy administered in support of Zimbabweans, probably to separate the sympathetic Donnelly from an intimidated Zimbabwean civil society. Its plight was described by *New York Times* correspondent Barry Bearak, imprisoned by Mugabe’s police for reporting from Zimbabwe: “There’s an active civil society in Zimbabwe which has been fighting courageously against the regime of Robert Mugabe for a very long time and I got to live through some of what they live through when they’re plucked off the streets and thrown into jail.”

The MDC won the March 2008 legislative elections outright, and Morgan Tsvangirai won the presidential race’s first round. In the runoff, which Tsvangirai would normally have won, Mugabe pulled out all the stops in violent intimidation. More than 100 died,

causing Tsvangirai to pull himself and his party out of the murderous race. The wife of the MDC mayor-elect of Harare is only one who was grabbed at home and just killed, brutally. The horror of the mayhem is that it was organized from the top. It had become part and parcel of the governance of Zimbabwe.

Does it matter what grievances drive Mugabe? Heidi Holland is a South African journalist who has known him for 30 years. In her recent book, *Dinner with Mugabe*, she draws a complex portrait from accounts of others who have known him as well as any could have known a loner without close friends except for his first wife.

She presents a self-contradicting composite of discipline, dignity and coolness clashing with narcissism, and grandiose delusions fuelled by insecurity, distrust and anger. Such a dysfunctional mix might also describe more than a few politicians from the democratic West. The differences are that (1) Mugabe had real grievances against hands of violence, which put him in jail for 11 years; (2) he had presided over a very violent insurrection; and (3) he grew up without an innate sense of limits and then had the power to operate that way.

Authority-rooted African governance has had a problem with the notion of a “loyal opposition,” or even with alternating in power. The fawning security elite that proliferated around Mugabe and that would suffer an end to its privileges were he to be replaced reinforced him in his assault on adversaries in every possible way.

Cut off from reality in a shrinking world of delusion, Mugabe’s demons took over.

They ultimately drove him too far for almost everybody: South Africa’s formerly accommodating President Mbeki, other Africans and even China and Russia. The first steps of a mediated power sharing agreement with the Movement for Democratic Change now being negotiated may not succeed right away. The memorandum of understanding between Mugabe and the MDC is

vague on the important issues of power-sharing. Meanwhile, at a critical time, Zimbabwe has no government. But the Mugabe era is coming to an end.

Zimbabwe needs a renewal of generosity and tolerance from all to help Zimbabweans put their country together again. It won’t be easy and it probably won’t be fair, since those who share Mugabe’s almost absolute power will insist on immunity for their crimes. The MDC itself has split into two wary factions. Tribal rivalries are as present and corrosive as elsewhere in Africa.

If we in the West placed the hopes of our better angels in Zimbabwe, we need now to recognize that colonialist repression and condescension toward generations of black Africans have had a maiming psychological effect which, in an extreme form, Robert Mugabe may typify.

From the outset, Westerners and Africans diverged on what to do, with the former favouring isolation and most of the latter being more accommodating to Mugabe, to his anticolonial imagery — more protective of one of their own. Each side has now to bend toward the necessity of working together.

Healing will take years. Words of comfort or advice won’t be nearly enough: resources are necessary for a country where female life expectancy has declined from 61 in 1991 to 34 in 2006 (the world’s lowest) because of HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, runaway inflation and the poverty of an economy with 80 percent unemployed.

And we should know by now that there is nothing inevitable about democratic progress. It is a long, hard slog, done everywhere in a local way, via local civil society.

We owe it to our respective and shared pasts to help Zimbabwe make it right at last.

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