

Robert Mugabe's Legacy: Revolution, Amity and Decline

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Robert Mugabe is the sort of figure that always caused discomfort. He was a permanent revolutionary, becoming, in time, the despotic ruler who frittered away revolutionary gain. He played multiple roles in international political consciousness. As Zimbabwe's strongman, he was demonised and lionised in equal measure for a good deal of his time in power. His role from the 1990s – Mugabe, the West's all-too-convenient bogeyman and hobgoblin – tended to outweigh other considerations. In the end, even his supporters had to concede that he had overstayed his welcome, another African leader gone to seed.

In 2008, Mahmood Mamdani [noted](#) the generally held view in publications ranging from *The Economist* to *The Guardian* that Mugabe the Thug reigned. Yes, he had helped in laying waste to the economy, refusing to share power with a more vocal and present opposition, and created an internal crisis with his land distribution policy. But this did little to explain his longevity, his recipe of partial coercion and consent, the teacher-visionary and the bribing mob leader. "In any case, the preoccupation with his character does little to illuminate the socio-historical issues involved."

The obsession with character – one of Mephistophelian bargain and decay – is found in both the literature and the popular culture depicting Mugabe. The stock story is this: he taught in Ghana in 1963, a key figure in the nationalist movement split in what was then Rhodesia, becoming secretary general of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The Shona dominated ZANU was formed from the original Ndebele ethnic minority dominated Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU).

Prison followed in 1964; Mugabe fled to Mozambique in 1974 though not before a [spell of imprisonment](#) at the hands of Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda (his escape was probably engineered by Zambians); by 1977, he had assumed control of the organisation, though Mozambique's President Samora Machel never quite trusted him, taking a leaf out of Kaunda's book in detailing the mischief maker, albeit briefly. Military victory was sought against the Smith regime in what was then white-controlled Rhodesia, and it was with some reluctance that Mugabe found himself a signatory to the British-sponsored settlement in 1979, one assisted by Lord Carrington, Kaunda, the Commonwealth Secretary General, Shridath Ramphal, and, ironically enough, white apartheid South Africa.

On becoming leader, he was deliciously accommodating in his rhetoric, despite having entertained the prospect of confiscating land owned by whites a la Marx-Lenin and wishing to hold white leaders to account in war crimes trials. In his national address in 1980, he spoke of the bonds of amity; he wished for bygones to be bygones. "If you were my enemy, you are now my friend. If you hated me, you cannot avoid the love that binds me to you and you to me."

Initially, Mugabe the progressive shone through: healthcare and education programs were expanded; literacy rates and living standards rose; white farmers were reassured that mobs would not be knocking on their doors. Whites were included in a mixed cabinet; heads reappointed in the army, the police and the Central Intelligence Organisation. But he had his eye on dealing with rivals.

In 1983, former members of ZAPU's military outfit attacked targets in Matabeleland. The result was uncompromisingly bloody: anywhere upwards of 20,000 civilians killed; many more tortured, maimed, tormented. In four years, ZAPU had been defeated, absorbed into the ZANU-PF structure. The extinguishment of such rivalry paved the way for a Mugabe presidency and near-absolute rule.

By the 1990s, economic conditions were biting. Real wages fell; the International Monetary Fund demanded domestic readjustments to the economy. Economic stagnation kept company with increasingly repressive policies against journalists, students and opponents. Calculatingly, Mugabe propitiated war veterans by awarding them generous pensions in 1997. Then came the next threat: the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai.

In February 2000, a national vote on a redesigned draft constitution, the progeny of ZANU-PF, proposed British compensation for land; absent that, white farms would be seized without due compensation. Its defeat by a narrow margin saw Mugabe step up his campaign, featuring farm occupations and the sponsorship of veterans to assist in invasions of farms owned by white farmers. Mugabe was returning to an old platform.

The prevailing psycho-portraiture for such behaviour is never consistent. One variant finds its culprit in a decision Mugabe made in 1996. Secretary Grace Marufu, 41 years Mugabe's junior, became his wife, considered within certain circles a less than worthy replacement for Sally, who died in 1992. Wilf Mbanga, editor of *The Zimbabwean* newspaper spared no punches, [seeing](#) in Marufu a lever pulling, power hungry creature akin to Lady Macbeth. "He changed the moment Sally died, when he married a young gold-digger."

His former home affairs minister, Dumiso Dabengwa, [pinpointed](#) a different year when the great compromiser and negotiator changed: 2000. There are no gold-digging suggestions, merely political manipulations filtered with a bit of paranoia. "He held compromising material over several of his colleagues and they knew they would face criminal charges if they opposed him."

Overwhelmingly, the narrative is of the great hope that failed, the rebel who trips. This echo of the good man gone bad is detectable in celluloid, with the fictional state of Matobo in *The Interpreter*, featuring as its political backdrop a bookish schoolteacher who defeated a white-minority regime but fouled up matters by turning into a tyrant. "The CIA-backed film," [suggested](#) the then acting Minister for Information and Publicity, Chen Chimutengwende, "showed that Zimbabwe's enemies did not rest."

Mugabe was every bit the contradiction of the colonial-postcolonial figure, supported one day as the romantic revolutionary to be praised, reviled as the authoritarian figure to condemn, the next. The revolutionary to be feted was a motif that continued through the 1980s, despite signs that the hero was getting particularly bloodthirsty. A string of honours were bestowed like floral tributes to a conquering warrior: an honorary doctorate of laws from the University of Massachusetts in 1984, despite the butchering of the Ndebele; an

honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh (subsequently revoked in July 2007); a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 1994.

Accounts such as Martin Meredith's *Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe*, point to the aphrodisiac of power, violence as currency, the cultivated links with the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Laurent Kabila, and the creation of a crony state. The DRC connection softened the blows of international sanctions, at least to some extent, keeping rural voters in clover and the security forces content. Such arrangements, involving a juggling of loot and measuring out the spoils, is rarely indefinite.

The narrative of the power mad creature runs through as a counter to the liberal thesis that Mugabe started with promise, and went sour. This would have been tantamount to suggesting that Lenin insisted on changing the world through even-tempered tea ceremonies and soft voiced mediation, only to endorse revolutionary violence at a later date. James Kirchick, oft fascinated by the wiles of demagoguery, saw the strains of brutality early: Mugabe's time in prison, as with other revolutionaries, led to a certain pupillage with power, a sense of its necessity. Degrees in law and economics were earned via correspondence from the University of London, a way to pass carceral time for subversive actions against the white Smith regime in 1964. All that time, he nursed Marxist-Leninist dreams.

As leader of the movement to oust the white regime, Mugabe was not sparing with his use of violence. In this, [he differed](#) from the founder of the ZANU founder Ndabaningi Sithole, who renounced terrorism and subversion after his 1969 sentence for incitement. Nor was he averse to internal suppression: his cadres had to be trustworthy in the cause.

Over time, the distance between Mugabe the ruler, and the Zimbabwean citizenry, grew. International sanctions, applied with much callousness, bit. Hyperinflation set in. The state was left bankrupt. Food shortages in 2004 did not sway him. "We are not hungry," Mugabe told Sky News. "Why foist this food upon us? We don't want to be choked. We have enough."

In November 2017, a coup by senior military personnel was launched in terms that seemed almost polite, a sort of dinner party seizure. Mugabe was placed under house arrest; his ZANU-PF party had decided that the time had come. The risk of Marufu coming to power was becoming all too real, though this femme fatale rationale can only be pushed so far. There were celebrations in the streets. Thirty-seven years prior, there were similar calls of jubilation for the new leader. Left with his medical ailments, [Mugabe died at](#) Gleneagles Hospital, Singapore on Friday, [farewelled](#) by his successor President Emmerson Mnangagwa as "an icon of liberation, a pan Africanist who dedicated his life to the emancipation of his people." The muse of history can be atrociously fickle.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research

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