

Robert Mugabe

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# Introduction

On November 21, 2017, the Zimbabwean military forced President Robert Gabriel Mugabe to resign from office. At the age of ninety-three, he had been in power for thirty-seven years. He was worn down by the decades in office, falling asleep during official functions, and surrounded by sycophants. By the time he was overthrown, Mugabe appeared to be little more than an African despot, ruling via his security services and dominated by a much younger, rapacious wife who dreamed of succeeding him.

Yet Mugabe was, in reality, more than this caricature. His tragedy was that he stayed in office as leader of the country and head of his party, ZANU-PF,<sup>1</sup> for far too long. His real achievements had long since faded from public consciousness. When he finally resigned, there was a dominant public narrative of Zimbabwe as a tyrannical “basket case.” Responsibility for this tragedy was laid squarely at his door. The truth is more complicated. Certainly, leadership in young African democracies has been a key factor in determining their postindependence trajectories. However, Zimbabwe’s

fortunes since independence cannot be distilled down to the attitude and actions of just one man. Mugabe, both as a dedicated leader within a liberation movement and as a political personality, was intricately linked to the outcome of the original struggle for independence and the end of white domination in 1980. He shaped the course of his country since independence, but Western misunderstanding of the importance of political cultures and structures of power in Zimbabwe has oversimplified the picture.

Robert Mugabe emerged as head of the political wing of one of the two main liberation movements—the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU)—through a combination of luck, guile, ideological focus, and persuasion. As prime minister, and later as president of Zimbabwe, Mugabe proved to be a master of “divide and rule.” He had perfected these political skills while maneuvering between rival factions within his own movement then operating from external bases in neighboring Mozambique in the mid-1970s. Mugabe won the initially reluctant endorsement of the guerrilla fighters as they took on the army of the white regime. In 1979 Britain finally persuaded all the factions involved in the conflict to come to London for talks at Lancaster House. Mugabe still believed he could win the guerrilla war, and was reluctantly persuaded by African heads of state to accept British-supervised multiparty elections. The war-weary population, influenced by the infiltration of ZANU guerrillas, was persuaded of the attractions—as

well as the necessity—of a victory for Mugabe’s party in the 1980 independence elections. From then on, Mugabe worked to ensure the unquestioned dominance of his party and policies. In the mid-1980s he unleashed a violent campaign against the rival liberation movement, Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), and its leader, Joshua Nkomo. Thousands died in southwestern Zimbabwe, and Mugabe progressively arrogated more and more power to himself.

Mugabe’s political and international reputation achieved its high point between 1987 and 1995. At the outset of Zimbabwe’s independence, the country attracted remarkable international goodwill and a substantial injection of foreign funds, including British and Canadian financial support for a land reform program. There were dramatic improvements in education and primary health care. By the early 1990s, Mugabe had established an international political image and reputation as one of the senior successful national liberation leaders turned politicians, a pillar of the modern Commonwealth, and a key regional advocate for transition in neighboring South Africa. Mugabe’s rhetoric of reconciliation and nation building, which was so striking to both the suspicious white population and the international community, faded as the years went on. He renewed calls for a continuation of the liberation struggle’s goals. By the end of the 1990s, his star was in relative eclipse. His thwarted attempts to accelerate land reform and domestic austerity, along with mounting social and

political challenges at home, caused Mugabe's popularity to decline, while his reputation was damaged on the international stage by the flawed decision to intervene in the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As he had done before, and would do time and again in future under pressure from multiple quarters, Mugabe presented himself as the only solution to his movement, ZANU-PF's problems. At the same time, he buckled in the face of war veterans' demands for larger pensions—with disastrous financial results for the Zimbabwean public purse. Then Mugabe decided to answer calls for land redistribution by encouraging the initially haphazard invasion of mainly white-owned farms. From 2000 the country experienced a progressive economic meltdown and the growing militarization of government administration. Long accustomed to using violence as a political language, his party's leadership and security chiefs unleashed a program of abduction, beatings, and intimidation against the opposition and civil society activists.

By this point, the country was effectively being run by the security apparatus's Joint Operations Command. At the apex of these structures of state security sat Robert Mugabe with key elites who had a direct interest in sustaining his rule. These members of the military and security services refused to let Mugabe stand down following the 2008 election. Mugabe proved to be the ultimate political survivor, repeatedly outsmarting political rivals. When participating in a Government of National Unity

from 2009 to 2013, Morgan Tsvangirai, the most serious political opponent to emerge since independence, found himself outmaneuvered by the veteran leader. Mugabe served the interests of the military, political, and business elites who kept him in power for nearly four decades, until they finally turned on him, fearful that he would install his wife, Grace, in the presidency.

As a man and a leader, Mugabe proved a deeply complex and contradictory individual. His character mixed qualities and vices in equal measure. Like Nelson Mandela, he was a “prison graduate,” having spent ten years in a Rhodesian jail. The experience taught him remarkable self-possession. He could contain his anger at personal tragedy, but was deeply embittered by racial and social injustice in Rhodesia and its delayed transition to black majority rule. A highly intelligent and learned man—as Lord Carrington (the key British negotiator at the Lancaster House talks) once observed—he could be magnanimous when things were going his way, but vicious in adversity. His cabinet colleagues realized that resigning from office was not an option, as he could turn on them as potential political rivals. Instead, they should wait to be dismissed.

An intellectual shaped by his Jesuit education and his Marxist beliefs, there was a remarkable consistency to his thinking. Despite the fact that the rest of the world and the international political economy had moved on, he resolutely refused to do so. A bibliophile—even as Zimbabwe’s leader—Mugabe would fly incognito to

London to browse the shelves of Dillon's bookshop. An eloquent and charismatic speaker, he tailored his message according to his audience, and ensured that his words resonated directly with the hopes and aspirations of his listeners. His particular outlook, his political skills, his dominance of his party, and his extraordinary longevity in office meant Robert Mugabe's personal history is woven through that of his country. The two cannot be separated.