



Figure 1 Robert Mugabe addresses a crowd in Harare's Capital of Zimbabwe during in July 1984. /AFP/Getty Images

## WHY MUGABE ATTRACTED AFRICANS AND REPELLED THE WEST

**PETER KAGWANJA**

*As Africa mourns its oldest ruling freedom fighter, Zimbabwe tears for the fall of a liberation hero. 'Uncle Bob', as he was affectionately known, may have lost the economic war, but he won every political battle with the West. His real impact on Africa is ideological. Consequently, the Africa-West standoff emboldened him and turned him into a symbol of African resistance.*

Robert Mugabe passed on. No doubt, he was one of the most influential Africans in the 20th and 21st Century, and controversial too.

Mugabe remains both an enigma and a magnet, attracting Africans and repelling the West. He

was at the center of a game of brinkmanship between Africa and the West, fostered by diametrically opposed responses to Zimbabwe's seizure of land owned by some 4,500 white farmers in 2000. Since then, the two sides looked

each other in the eye to see who would blink first.

Mugabe's fall from grace in the eyes of the West is a relatively recent phenomenon in his 37 years in power. He was portrayed as the archetypal barefisted dictator, and hailed by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as "a man I can do business with." And in 1994, Queen Elizabeth bestowed on him an honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath.

What inflamed relations with Britain was the injudicious denial by Tony Blair's Laborites in 1997 of Britain's colonial responsibility for land reform. Clare Short, Britain's secretary of state for international development, wrote to Zimbabwe's minister of agriculture and land: "We are a new government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and, as you know, we were colonized not colonizers."

After Britain reneged on its pledge to fund land reform, citing cronyism, Mugabe went ahead with his own land redistribution plans, which pushed Zimbabwe's predominantly agrarian economy down the cliff: 80 percent unemployment, nearly empty government coffers, collapsed services, and an annual inflation rate of 18,000 percent.

In less than seven years, Zimbabwe witnessed the fastest peace-time economic dip in history since Weimer Germany – plunging one of Africa's strongest economic and regional breadbaskets into a crisis with 4 million people reportedly starving and in need of food aid.

Mugabe may have lost the economic war, but he won every political battle with the West. As the oldest freedom fighter of our time, he always drew the biggest applause in African meetings, including serving as the chairperson of the African Union Jan 2015 to Jan 2016 between January 2015 and January 2016.

The Africa-West standoff emboldened him and turned him into a symbol of African resistance, a liberation hero.

Even though foreign humanitarian aid flowed steadily to the poor in Zimbabwe, the West's asset freezes and travel bans on Mugabe and a hundred of his associates and spouses were seen in some quarters as "racial" retribution for his seizing of white farms and handing them over to black Zimbabweans. But invoking a moral mission, the West insisted that its "smart" sanctions targeted elements of the ruling elite "engaged in actions or policies to undermine Zimbabwe's democratic processes or institutions."

In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion in 2003, Mugabe upped the ante, whipping nationalism to a fever pitch: "Our cause is Africa's cause," he told the fervently pro-Zimbabwe publication, *New Africa*, in May. This gave wings to intense militarization of polity in the government ahead of the 2008 elections to forestall a Western-sponsored "regime change."

In a move aimed at demobilizing the opposition's urban support and nipping in the bud a Ukrainian-style "orange revolution," the Mugabe government ordered "operation Murambatsvina" (Drive Out the Filth) – a draconian clearance of what it termed "illegal shelters" in Harare and other cities – which a United Nations report estimates has destroyed the homes and livelihoods of 700,000 Zimbabweans and negatively affected 2.4 million more.

Apart from the economic cost of Zimbabwe's meltdown on the region, Mugabe's real impact on Africa is ideological. The West urged South Africa to break rank with states that backed Mugabe and to adopt a forceful stance against Harare. At the same time, South Africa's ruling elite feared that, owing to Mugabe's nationalist credentials and popularity, public condemnation of Harare would exacerbate

South Africa's internal divisions leading to isolation on the continent.

Pretoria's behind-the-curtains quiet diplomacy talks between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the opposition from 2000 to 2004 yielded a new constitutional draft for Zimbabwe. But the initiative was stillborn because Pretoria lacked the muscle to enforce it.

Issues of sovereignty also come into play. Pretoria's effort to use economic leverage by offering Zimbabwe a \$500 million credit line to pay the International Monetary Fund debt in return for governance reforms backfired. Zimbabwe rejected the offer and paid its own debt in February 2006.

Mugabe's status as elder statesman and anticolonialism hero ensured unwavering regional support. An extraordinary SADC summit in March 2007 expressed "solidarity" with Mugabe, but appointed Mbeki as mediator between Zimbabwe's ruling party and the opposition. Zambia's, Levy Mwanawasa, then chair of SADC who had previously described Zimbabwe as a "sinking Titanic," made a U-turn, declaring that the country's problems were "exaggerated."

Despite SADC's relentless resolve to bail Zimbabwe out of its economic woes and South Africa's mediation, the enterprise had no breathing chance unless Africa and the West end the face-off.

Moreover, the trial of Liberia's warlord, Charles Taylor, in 2006 for crimes against humanity as part of the West's war on impunity in Africa has removed guarantees for safe retirement, thus

diminishing the chance of Mugabe's exiting. He is running in the 2008 elections.

The face-off fostered an international climate hostile to Zimbabwe's economic recovery. Although Mugabe; exited Zimbabwe politics in a less heroic nature, he will be him remembered as a powerful voice of liberation in Africa's liberation struggle and comrade in the fight against colonial rule

Affectionately Known as "Uncle Bob" the history of our respective countries fraternal relations would be incomplete without his mention. Mugabe remains one of Africa's most renowned freedom fighters and also one of the founding fathers of what is today known as the intergovernmental Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Mugabe's resignation in 2017 marked a turning point for Zimbabwe's recovery; his successor, Emerson Mnangagwa, presidency reckoned promise for hope. His emphasize to deal challenges related to social economic nature, and the promise to open-up Zimbabwe for business, to deal with corruption, reach out to worrying political and ethnic lines and spear-head democratic governance in the country; is a new beginning for rapprochement, particularly for the west and the end of isolationism.

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