

Archbishop Ncube Urges Mugabe Overthrow

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Fearless Bulawayo church leader calls for "Orange Revolution" to topple president.

On the wall of the modest study of Pius Ncube, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, hang photographs of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

As Zimbabwe's political, economic and social crisis deepens, 58-year-old Ncube has taken on the mantle of all three of the men he admires and become the person of whom Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe is most afraid.

Ncube is so fearless that many of his followers are concerned for his safety, as he speaks out and acts in total defiance of Mugabe's oppressive laws which suppress a wide range of fundamental human rights. His closest advisers have warned the Archbishop that Mugabe has had many of his enemies imprisoned or killed.

On Good Friday, Ncube lifted above his head a wooden cross crudely made from building planks and led a procession through the streets of Bulawayo from his cathedral to the city's Presbyterian church for an inter-denominational Easter service.

The procession, commemorating Jesus Christ's last walk to his own death, was illegal under Zimbabwean law, which forbids public gatherings of more than five people without police permission. But Ncube had only just begun. He gave interviews to a number of foreign correspondents who had entered the country illegally - risking prison sentences themselves of up to two years - and issued a call for Zimbabweans to organise a Ukrainian-style "Orange Revolution" to overthrow Mugabe.

Before Easter Sunday mass, he said, "I hope that people get so disillusioned that they really organise and kick him out by a non-violent, popular mass uprising ... People have been too soft with this government. So people should pluck up just a bit of courage and stand up against him and chase him away."

Men have been tried for treason for less in Zimbabwe, where it is a crime to insult President Mugabe. But Ncube simply ignores what he regards as unjust laws. Just a few days earlier he said of Mugabe, "He is a very, very evil man. The sooner he dies the better."

Ncube said there is no way this week's parliamentary election will topple Mugabe. It had already been too comprehensively rigged, like two previous polls. "They [Mugabe's ruling ZANU PF party] will cheat," said the Archbishop. "They are very well schooled."

"I am not advocating violence. I am not talking about a freedom struggle - I hate them since they are violent. Mugabe came in by violence, and now when he is threatened he turns again to violence to keep people subjugated."

Citing Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent resistance to British rule in India, the Archbishop said, "I am simply backing a non-violent popular uprising, like that in the Philippines in 1986 and such as Ukraine recently."

The Archbishop's cathedral was packed for Easter Sunday mass. He urged the congregation to persevere

and be hopeful. "Somewhere there shall come a resurrection for Zimbabwe," he said.

A senior journalist in Harare told IWPR, "If Morgan Tsvangirai [leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change] had said what Pius Ncube said about the need for a peaceful uprising he'd have been in the slammer that night. But Mugabe knows he'd be taking on something else if he takes on the Roman Catholic Church."

The irony is that Mugabe's mother, Bona Mugabe, a peasant woman, lived at Kutama Roman Catholic mission station, to the west of Harare, after her husband deserted her. A devout woman, Bona prayed regularly that her son would one day be a priest. Mugabe came heavily under the sway of Kutama's Irish Jesuit director, Father Jerome O'Hea, who paid out of his own pocket for Mugabe to train as a teacher.

Many years later another Catholic priest, Father Emmanuel Ribeiro, and a Catholic nun and university sociologist, Sister Mary Aquina, saved Mugabe's life in 1975 and helped him flee across the border into Mozambique, from where he led a five-year liberation war.

Leaders of Zimbabwe's main religions rejoiced when, at independence in 1980, Mugabe appealed not for revenge after victory but rather for racial, political and religious reconciliation.

"We all thought that under the moral, Christian leadership of Robert Mugabe Zimbabwe would become a paradise on earth," said fellow Catholic and Kutama Mission Old Boy Lawrence Vambe, an acclaimed Zimbabwe historian and journalist now living in exile in England. "One of his best friends was the [Catholic] Archbishop of Harare, Patrick Chakaipa, and perhaps they were too close. But at the beginning we all almost worshipped the man. I certainly did. But no longer.

"He has become intolerable. He has turned all the tenets of the Christian faith upside down and trampled on them."

A few years after independence, it was the same Catholic organisation that had first saved Mugabe from the wrath of the white government, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, which led the criticism against the horrendous acts of Mugabe's North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland between 1983 and 1985.

Mugabe was furious when the commission prepared a devastating report which revealed rape, torture and the killing of more than 20,000 civilians by the Fifth Brigade.

Mugabe begged his friend, Chakaipa, to suppress the report which the Archbishop did - to the church's lasting shame. When the report was released only two years ago, after Chakaipa's death from cancer, Mugabe lashed out at what he called "men in religious garb who have become the stooges of imperialism".

Mike Auret, head of the commission, said, "I am amazed how close Mugabe and [former Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian] Smith are in terms of what they've done. He's become the new Ian Smith. He attacks the church, just as Smith attacked the church. He uses Smith's legislation to imprison his opponents. He has become the man he once hated the most - Smith of Rhodesia."

Auret, a long term human rights activist, had to flee Rhodesia to escape imprisonment by Smith. Mugabe has since labelled him an "insidious saboteur".

Mugabe was further enraged when Robert Ndlovu was appointed by the Pope to succeed Chakaipa as the new Archbishop of Harare. Like Ncube, he comes from Matabeleland, an historic centre of opposition to Mugabe's ZANU PF, and is a severe critic of the Fifth Brigade's rampage through his home province.

Ndlovu publicly criticised the Zimbabwe government's poor human rights record when he was inaugurated in front of 6,000 people, including Mugabe. In an address targeted at the ruling party, he said he and the church supported the fundamental rights of free expression, association and assembly.

"The role of a bishop and of the church in general is to stand up for human dignity, and from human dignity flow human rights," said Ndlovu, who was formerly the Bishop of Hwange, in the heart of the region where the Fifth Brigade operated.

After Ndlovu finished speaking, Mugabe made an impromptu speech, attacking unnamed religious leaders who "joined hands with erstwhile colonial masters to peddle lies about the state of affairs and demonise Zimbabwe".

Although Mugabe is regarded as evil incarnate by Zimbabwe's Roman Catholic hierarchy, he does have friends elsewhere in the Christian Community. Zimbabwe's Anglican primate, Bishop Nolbert Kunonga, has used his pulpit at St Mary's Cathedral in Harare to support Mugabe and his land reform programme.

He was rewarded by Mugabe with one of the farms, St Marnock's, outside Harare, confiscated from its previous white owner, 25-year-old Marcus Hale. The bishop installed his son in the 2000 acre farmhouse, which overlooks a lake and sweeping fields of wheat and soya. The bishop also evicted 50 black workers and their families to make way for his own staff.

From his pulpit, Kunonga has compared opponents of Mugabe as "dogs against an elephant" and described them as "puppets of the West". During one of his pro-Mugabe sermons, the choir began singing hymns to drown out his words. The choir was subsequently sacked by the bishop along with the cathedral wardens and cathedral council.

Anglican priests critical of Mugabe have been transferred to tough rural parishes and many have resigned. A plethora of legal cases between Kunonga and his disillusioned flock are stuck in Zimbabwe's chaotic court system. In place of priests who have resigned, he has appointed men who have pledged not to criticise the head of state.

Ncube, who has condemned Kunonga for aligning the Anglican church with "forces of evil", has himself been vilified by Mugabe supporters as a gay rapist who is HIV-positive. Mugabe has called him "an unholy man, a satanic betrayer of Zimbabwe who has invited Britain, the nation's arch-enemy, to invade".

Ncube says he will never give in to Mugabe. "They [Mugabe's followers] burn homes," he said. "They kill people. They torture people with electricity. They intimidate people. We cannot change this man [Mugabe]. People are dying and yet the government continues lying, saying there is enough food in the country. Millions of people have been forced to flee the country due to violence and poor governance.

"I will not be quiet as long as human rights abuses continue. I am not afraid of anyone, but God only."

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