

Chikerema Ignited Spirit of Zimbabwe Nationalism

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Cancer claims nationalist who was first to articulate the notion of black majority rule in Rhodesia, and the catalyst for independence struggle.

Long before he died in hospital in an Indiana hospital on March 23 after a long fight with cancer, veteran Zimbabwe nationalist Robert James Chikerema told friends that the last place on earth he wanted as a final resting place was the North Korean-built Heroes' Acre in Harare.

"I've told my sons that if they ever try and take my body to that place they are to open fire. I've given them guns," Chikerema told me. "They must open fire and stop me being buried next to those crooks and sycophants who destroyed Zimbabwe."

He didn't need to worry. Chikerema's uncle - Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe, who briefly attended his funeral in Kutama, about 80 kilometres northwest of Harare, at the Catholic Jesuit mission where both men received their early schooling, said for anyone to be considered a "Zimbabwean hero" that person should first have fought in the war for independence and then have remained associated with the ruling ZANU-PF party after independence.

Chikerema gladly failed on the second count. Journalist, author and historian Lawrence Vambe said his old friend was "terribly disappointed that a man we all trusted so much and in whom he had so much belief when he was young, Robert Mugabe, turned into such a corrupt, evil man who has destroyed a country that we all hoped would become one of the great countries of not only Africa, but the world.

"Despite all his failings, and there were many, James Chikerema was one of the greatest Zimbabweans of them all."

Chikerema was born at Kutama Mission on April 2, 1925, the son of Joseph Dzeneza Dambaza and his wife Antonia Sekai Dambaza. In all, there were 12 children but five died. Charles, who became a Marxist journalist, was the family's youngest.

All were brought up as strict Roman Catholics and when he was 13 years old, Chikerema left Chishawasha Mission Station to study at Kutama Mission where the Jesuits were already educating his contemporary and nephew Robert Gabriel Mugabe.

Chikerema said of the Jesuits at Kutama, "They taught me the meaning of the words love and truth. I abandoned Catholicism when I saw how so-called Christians treated blacks when I lived in South Africa, but I still owe them a debt of gratitude. They were disciplinarians but they were really great, great teachers and taught us to have respect for the church, our country and, above all, ourselves as blacks."

In his late teens he left Rhodesia for Mariannhill Mission in Natal and later moved to Cape Town where he studied law at the local university. There he was befriended by a large Jewish family who took him in, helped pay for his education and introduced him to Zionism and Marxism.

In his early twenties, Chikerema read bits of *Das Kapital*, joined the Communist Party and got to know men like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo.

Upon his return to white-ruled Rhodesia, Chikerema teamed up with a man who was to stay loyal to him for the rest of his life, George Nyandoro, great grandson of one of the Shona chiefs who took up arms against Cecil Rhodes' white settlers in the 1890s. The pair then approached Joshua Nkomo to lead the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress, the ANC, the move that injected life into the black fight for parliamentary representation and ignited the spirit of the African nationalist struggle during the days of the British colonial Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

One of the regrets Chikerema took to his deathbed was his failure to "liberate" Nyandoro, his closest friend, from what he always called "that place" – Heroes' Acre.

With great bitterness in his voice, Chikerema told me in the course of interviewing him for a planned biography, "George died in July 1994, unexpectedly. His dying wish was to be buried next to his family in the Marandellas area, about 72 km east of Harare, but no, Mugabe, who so hated George in life, wanted to nationalise and exploit him in death. The day they buried him and sang their songs of praise I got so drunk. 'George,' I said, 'my brother – one day I will take you away from that place. How I will do it, I do not know. But one day...'"

The youthful Chikerema and Nyandoro were the darlings of the black masses in the townships of Rhodesia long before Robert Mugabe came on to the political scene. When the 30-year-old Chikerema addressed onlookers in the rough recreational halls in Salisbury's townships in 1955, he shocked them not only with his incendiary delivery but also with his use of an expression they had never heard before: One man, one vote.

He was the prototype firebrand militant in post-Second World War Rhodesia where black political leaders had never asked for more than better pay, the right to stand in the same queue as whites in the post office and to be able to buy alcohol. Chikerema was the first of a generation of African revolutionaries to articulate the notion of black majority rule in Rhodesia, and was the catalyst that launched nearly two decades of civil unrest and seven years of guerrilla war that ended with the independence of the state of Zimbabwe in 1980. However, he lacked the blinding ambition for absolute leadership that has littered postcolonial Africa with failed states controlled by unbalanced despots – including Robert Mugabe.

In 1959, both Chikerema and Nyandoro were arrested during a state of emergency that paralysed the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland and moved it centre stage internationally for the first time.

Upon their release from prison in 1964, Nkomo sent Chikerema and Nyandoro to Tanzania and then to Zambia to carry on the fight against Ian Smith's Rhodesian white minority government.

When Nkomo was imprisoned, Chikerema became the acting president of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union, ZAPU, the successor movement to the ANC, and in that capacity addressed crowds of hundreds of thousands in Peking and went to Moscow where he agreed to sell his country's post-independence minerals to the Soviets in return for weapons of war to topple the Smith regime in Salisbury.

Weary of watching internal feuds eat up the energies of ZAPU and the subsequent breakaway ZANU, Zimbabwe African National Union, movement, Chikerema, Nyandoro and Nathan Shamuyarira formed the Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe, FROLIZI, in 1971.

In December 1974, Chikerema (FROLIZI), Bishop Abel Muzorewa (ANC), Ndabaningi Sithole (ZANU) and

Joshua Nkomo (ZAPU) signed a Unity Accord organised by President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and his political spin doctor Mark Chona.

But it did not stop the terrible infighting of the Zimbabwe liberation movements.

From his place of exile in Lusaka, the Zambian capital, Chikerema watched the internal strife sap the strength of those supposed to be fighting white oppression in Rhodesia, as the country's major Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru and Ndebele clans shed each other's blood more than that of their white rulers.

Chikerema lashed out at what he called "a Karanga Mafia in ZANU" immediately after the murder on March 18, 1975 in Lusaka of Herbert Chitepo, a Manyika who was leader of ZANU. That morning at State House in Lusaka, Chikerema tried to draw a pistol from his holster to shoot dead the man he always said murdered Chitepo - Josiah Tongogara, a Karanga and head of the Mugabe wing of ZANU in the absence of Mugabe, then in prison in Rhodesia. "You will never get way with this," he yelled at Tongogara as policemen surrounded the out-of-control Chikerema.

Mugabe's ruling party never ever forgave him. The widely discredited official ZANU version of Chitepo's death is that agents of the white government in Rhodesia murdered him.

After the collapse of a détente exercise to achieve southern African peace between Kaunda and John Vorster of South Africa in 1974-1975, Chikerema disappeared from view before returning to Rhodesia in 1978 to participate in a widely condemned "internal settlement".

At first he supported Bishop Muzorewa and became co-minister of transport in the short-lived Rhodesia-Zimbabwe Government (March-November 1979).

But later he broke away from Muzorewa's party and formed the Zimbabwe Democratic Party, ZDP, supported by a small group of MPs who included some of the great names of the liberation struggle - Professor Stanlake Samkange, Dr Enock Dumbutshena and Steven Parenyatwa, who was tragically killed in a car accident shortly before independence.

In 1980, Chikerema contested the country's first one person-one vote elections but got nowhere.

For 13 years he walked the political wilderness, always hoping that one day the call would come and he would, somehow, miraculously take over and shape the new Zimbabwe in his own socialist, traditionalist image. Whenever he faced a serious problem, he organised a traditional bira ceremony and sought advice from the ancestors.

The call never came but debt collectors did. Chikerema went to work for his old financial backer from his years in exile in Zambia, Tiny Rowland of Lonrho, returning only briefly to the political arena in 1995 when he joined the Forum party led by Dumbutshena.

Chikerema often attacked Mugabe in print. But when the septuagenarian Mugabe re-married in 1996, Chikerema sent him a bull as a wedding present and in 1999 surprisingly served on the Constitutional Commission whose recommendations were massively rejected by the people of Zimbabwe in a referendum the following year.

He is survived by his wife Philda and seven children.

Trevor Grundy lived and worked as a journalist in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa from 1966-1996. He met James Chikerema in Lusaka in February 1974 and stayed in contact with him until his death.

Location: Africa

Topic: Comment

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

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