

Independence Day Gloom

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Conditions for Zimbabweans resemble those under Smith regime.

As Zimbabwe celebrates its 27th birthday on April 18, Zimbabweans can reflect on the fact that the country has come full circle. The one-time liberator has become the oppressor.

President Robert Mugabe, once hailed for bringing democracy to Zimbabwe, has furthered his rule in the same fashion and using the same strategies as the former colonisers he scorns.

Like his predecessor, Ian Smith, Mugabe has seen his legitimacy called into question after his disputed 2002 re-election. He is accused of stealing that election through vote-rigging, violence and intimidation.

Direct and indirect sanctions have been leveled against Mugabe and his government by the European Union, the United States, Australia and Canada. Smith was also hit with sanctions for unilaterally declaring independence from Britain in 1965.

The late Joshua Nkomo, a former vice president fondly remembered as “Father Zimbabwe”, once said that a country could be liberated without its people gaining freedom.

In his book *The Story of My Life*, Nkomo, the leader of Zapu – one of the country’s two main liberation movements – said, “I have told of the triumph of that struggle, and then of how the new African government now under President Robert Mugabe adopted the repressive techniques of its illegitimate predecessor. Zimbabwe is liberated but freedom for the people still lies ahead.”

During the colonial era, from the time of Cecil Rhodes in 1890 until the 1970s during Smith’s rule, the country was governed in an autocratic fashion, with the majority blacks marginalised from the mainstream economy. This tradition of autocratic rule allowed leaders to pursue their own interests, rather than those of the nation, leading to endemic instability.

Although the political context and circumstances are different now, Mugabe and his Zanu-PF elite seem to be emulating their predecessors and following in their footsteps.

From the beginning of the colonial era, human dignity was diminished and property rights ignored, at least for those not in the ruling elite. The rule of law was not equitably applied to all citizens; the elite – in those days, the white settlers – was favoured.

Doesn’t this sound familiar in post-independence Zimbabwe? On first reading, it might be difficult for the born-frees (children born after independence) to distinguish between the two eras.

Some 27 years after independence, Zimbabweans are still not guaranteed the basic freedoms which they fought for and are still being subjected to the same aggression from the state and oppressive laws which they fought against. Opposition political leaders are still treated with the same brutality, violence and intolerance that Mugabe, Nkomo and their fellow nationalists endured and fought against during the

colonial era.

Torture, which Smith perpetrated on nationalists in an attempt to destroy liberation movements, has now become commonly used on journalists, political activists or anyone critical of government, and particularly of Mugabe. The government has even resorted to the abduction of opposition supporters, a tactic used by the Smith regime.

During the Smith era, Africans did not have political rights and in the post-independence era, Mugabe seems to believe that opposition parties do not have political rights either. When Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, booked the Bulawayo City Hall in February to announce his candidacy for president in next year's elections, police sealed off both city hall and MDC headquarters.

A three-month ban had been imposed on political rallies in the capital, Harare, and police, with no warning, extended it to the southern city as well.

Mugabe, like Smith, has banned or, as he puts it, closed down independent newspapers. His government, through its draconian Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, has stifled media development and freedom of expression in Zimbabwe by harassing and sometimes arresting journalists and making it difficult to register new players in the media industry.

In further stifling general freedom of expression, Mugabe has put in place laws that prohibit people from freely criticising him. Countless people have now been hauled before the courts to answer charges of insulting Mugabe when they have only been commenting on the president's flaws and failures while they were commuting to work or relaxing in pubs. Even pointing at Mugabe's motorcade is now an offence which could lead to imprisonment.

Under the Public Order and Security Act, POSA, more repressive than the Smith-era Law and Order (Maintenance) Act, public gatherings, demonstrations and opposition rallies can be banned. The government has also banned some prayer meetings.

People still remember well the running battles between police and African nationalists in the working class townships around major towns. They also remember the curfews Smith imposed in the cities and on peasants in the war zones at the height of the liberation war. In a replication of the Smith regime, there is an informal curfew in force in Harare, where people out after 10 pm risk being beaten by police.

Harare resident John Kudenga said this week there was nothing to celebrate at this year's independence day because standards of living have gone down since independence. People can no longer afford to send their children to school and healthcare was now unaffordable.

"Why should I celebrate? What's there to celebrate? In terms of real income, I believe we are worse off now. Our standards of living have gone down tremendously. We now have both political and economic refugees. Whatever we fought for, we are now fighting all over again for the same freedoms and improvement of our living conditions," he said.

"Unemployment is even higher now and when we talk about land, it is the ruling elite that owns most of the fertile land now. There are serious shortages of basics and we cannot afford a lot of stuff. Imagine, 27 years after independence, things like milk, beef, chicken and generally all types of meats, rice, bread and

margarine are now luxuries. So you tell me, what is there to celebrate?”

Indeed, statisticians have said the standard of living in Zimbabwe has fallen to pre-1957 levels. The Central Intelligence Organisation – inherited from the Smith regime – has remained much as it was during the Smith era, brutal in structure and purpose.

In Rhodesia, the CIO was not accountable to parliament, the courts or even cabinet. It was accountable only to the prime minister, Smith himself.

At independence, the organisation was neither restructured nor reformed to meet the constitutional demands of an independent Zimbabwe. And today, it directly and exclusively reports to Mugabe. Over the years since 1980, the CIO has done its work in the service of Mugabe’s personal political interests.

Former information and publicity minister Jonathan Moyo, the only independent legislator in Zimbabwe’s parliament, said the CIO was using the same “dirty tactics” as those employed in Rhodesia on what is now dubbed “domestic terrorism”.

“A convenient fiction of foreign-sponsored ‘domestic terrorism’ came in handy because it is the sort of stuff lifted from the arcane methods of organisations like the CIO, steeped in dirty and brutal Rhodesian roots without any public accountability whatsoever,” he said.

“Many Zimbabweans still remember only too well how the same CIO in Rhodesia used to infiltrate the liberation movement and how it impersonated freedom fighters ... That Rhodesian book of dirty tricks is still there.”

Nine petrol bombings have been recorded, and four police stations, a passenger train, two petrol tankers, a Zanu-PF sub-office, a supermarket and a house have been torched. Up to 35 opposition activists have been arrested for allegedly perpetrating the spate of bombings and are currently in detention in Harare. But this is reminiscent of a Rhodesian tactic, where the state would perform outrages and blame the liberation movements for them.

In Zimbabwe, 27 years after independence, principles such as the rule of law based on the preservation of human dignity, property rights, individual liberty, free-market initiatives, entrepreneurship, improved education and quality healthcare, still do not exist.

The country has definitely come full circle.

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