

Mugabe Feasts as Nation Goes Hungry

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Extravagant birthday celebrations seen as emblematic of lack of care for the nation.

The greatest irony of President Robert Mugabe's birthday bash last week was that few of the thousands of youths he regaled will reach his ripe old age of 84.

Under Mugabe's rule, life expectancy in Zimbabwe has declined from about 65 years at independence from Britain in 1980 to the current 36 years for men and 34 years for women. The AIDS scourge has only added to the humanitarian crisis in the country, which began eight years ago with Mugabe's decision to expropriate white-owned commercial farms, ostensibly to give to landless veterans of the independence war.

Observers say most of the productive farms went to Mugabe's cronies and members of the military and police who have no idea about farming.

The economic collapse meant that a majority of the youths cheering Mugabe at his birthday extravaganza had no job and would be returning to rural or urban poverty as soon as the festivities were over.

Few of them have any illusions that they might reach half Mugabe's age. "We have heard it said that life begins at 40 but that statement rings empty to me," said a youth from the ruling ZANU-PF party who said he was going to the birthday celebration in Beitbridge, on the South African border, for the food.

"Poverty, AIDS and stress are taking their toll. Most of us have no future to look forward to. We have no jobs, we have no education to talk about and that is very stressful."

Ironically, when Zimbabwe won its independence in 1980, it was regarded as the "jewel of Africa". It was also considered the breadbasket of the region, exporting the staple maize to neighbouring countries in years of deficit.

It has become a net importer since the destruction of agriculture, considered the backbone of the economy. "To me the real irony is that Mugabe wants to teach our children that he is a role model leader, when he has deprived them of a secure future through his criminal policies," said Anna Gonzo, a housewife in Harare.

"He is a very bad example of what a father should be like, let alone a national leader. He doesn't have the authority to stand before our children telling them about principles and morality when he has literally ruined their lives."

She said while Mugabe was happy to boast about the seven degrees he acquired under the repressive colonial regime of Ian Smith, few young people can afford a university education now because of astronomical costs and a lack of facilities.

Zimbabwe has been in the grip of a political and economic crisis for the past eight years, estimated by

economists to have cut gross domestic product to 1953 levels.

The unemployment rate has spiraled to 85 per cent while half the population is estimated to subsist below the poverty line.

“Shameless as he is, Mugabe is happy to tell the youth that all their problems are the result of western sanctions, not his own economic and political failures,” said Gonzo. “Fortunately few people still buy into this propaganda anymore.”

Mugabe is almost the oldest active politician in the country, second only to his vice-president, Joseph Msika, who is older by three months.

The similarities end there, however. Msika has on several occasions opposed Mugabe’s haphazard seizure of white-owned commercial farms and has been critical of Mugabe’s endorsement as the ruling party’s presidential candidate for next month’s election.

The two nationalist leaders have been together since the 1987 Unity Accord between ZANU-PF and the defunct ZAPU-PF, which was led by the late Joshua Nkomo.

Mugabe’s birthday celebrations were characterised by extravagant feasting at a time when nearly four million people are facing starvation or survive on donor assistance.

Analysts say it is emblematic of Mugabe’s lack of care for the nation that he should entertain his cronies and ministers in the midst of grinding poverty. “Can you imagine how many people could have been fed from the [funds] ZANU-PF raised for this personal junket?” said one analyst in the capital Harare.

“But it would be expecting too much to think that ZANU-PF would scrimp on food just because a few people were starving next door.”

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