

Mugabe Warrior Credentials Questioned

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ZANU PF enraged by book that casts president as reluctant leader of independence struggle. Veteran nationalist Edgar Tekere has broken one of the most sacred conventions of African liberation doctrine by publishing a book which openly questions the official story of how Robert Mugabe rose to lead his country's main guerrilla movement before becoming independent Zimbabwe's first black prime minister and then state president.

Tekere's newly published autobiography, *A Life Time of Struggle*, puts Mugabe at the outer periphery, rather than the centre, of the liberation struggle waged by black nationalists in the 1970s to end white minority rule.

Mugabe is cast by Tekere - former secretary-general of Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU PF party - as a reluctant leader of the independence struggle who was thrust into the top position merely by accident of history.

Tekere's revisionism has caused uproar within ZANU PF. There are cries for Tekere's dismissal from the party and a leading Harare bookstore wholly owned by the government has refused to stock his book, which has become an instant bestseller.

At the 1964 launch conference in Gweru - in the central part of the country - of the then Zimbabwe African National Union, ZANU, the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole was elected president. A distinguished Catholic schoolteacher, Leopold Takawira, was elected vice president. The ZANU executive was quickly arrested and imprisoned for the next ten years, but one member, Herbert Chitepo, managed to flee abroad, becoming the leader-in-exile of the movement.

A second-tier leader, Secretary-General Mugabe, and a third-tier leader, Deputy Secretary for Youth Tekere, then aged just 27, were also imprisoned.

Mugabe became leader only by default, argues Tekere, after Takawira died in prison; Chitepo was assassinated in Zambia (after internal struggles within exiled ZANU factions turned bloody); and Sithole was toppled from the leadership while still in prison.

Although official accounts of the nationalist struggle make Mugabe its kingpin, Tekere writes that during the difficult formative years in the late 1950s of the black nationalist resistance, Mugabe was teaching outside the country in Ghana. When the precursor of ZANU, the National Democratic Party, was launched in 1960 Mugabe still had not returned home.

When Mugabe did return, he was told that despite his considerable academic achievements it would be difficult to incorporate him into the top leadership because he was single.

To overcome the problem, the ZANU leadership arranged a marriage for him with a woman named Abigail Kurangwa, who, says Tekere, "agreed to marry Mugabe, and eventually fell in love with him. Mugabe appeared to reciprocate, and his family liked

Abigail".

The fact that Mugabe had agreed to an arranged marriage showed what Tekere argues was a clear trait - deference to his leaders and what the author also argues was a lack of personal vision.

In 1961, when other leaders of the short-lived National Democratic Party rejected Joshua Nkomo as leader, because of his love of luxury living, and tabled a motion to get rid of him, the motion "was countered by none other than Mugabe."

Tekere writes that Mugabe was even reluctant to agree to the sacking of Sithole by ZANU leaders while still imprisoned in Kwekwe Prison. He abstained from the vote.

Tekere says even Mugabe's historic decision to flee across the border with Tekere into Mozambique - after their release from imprisonment in 1975 - was not voluntary one on Mugabe's part. Tekere's flight with Mugabe followed the assassination of Chitepo: ZANU had to move its external bases from President Kenneth Kaunda's Zambia which had arrested the entire external ZANU leadership in the aftermath of the killing.

But who was to take over the leadership in Mozambique?

Tekere writes, "I had always been committed to the armed struggle, and, moreover, as the leader of the youth I was the obvious choice. But I was a junior member in terms of the party structures, so there was need for a very senior Party cadre to accompany me.

"Ndabaningi Sithole had been sacked, Leopold Takawira the vice president had died in detention and the secretary general was Robert Mugabe. Thus it was that Mugabe went with me into exile. It was made clear that he was not going as president of the party, but he had the authority to speak on behalf of ZANU."

But when Mugabe then agreed that ZANU should be absorbed into Bishop Abel Muzorewa's short-lived United African National Council, Tekere writes, "My first disagreement with Mugabe took place then [on their clandestine journey from Rhodesia to Mozambique]. We were discussing what we would do when we met the other [exiled ZANU] recruits, and Mugabe was adamant that we should tell them that we were in the UANC [United African National Council], according to the Lusaka Accords [an agreement designed to unify all the Zimbabwean movements and factions].

"This made me extremely angry, and I said: 'What a treacherous mind you have! We are here by decision of ZANU. I am not part of the UANC. You are a betrayer. I am going to report back to those who sent us here about your betrayal.'

"After that I made sure that he did not meet any recruits when I was not there too, in case he began to talk about the UANC."

The theme of Mugabe as a betrayer of the armed struggle runs throughout the book. After the Chimoio Massacre of November 1977, in which more than one thousand people were killed in a Rhodesian Armed Forces raid on a ZANU camp in Mozambique, Tekere gave a report on the killings to Mugabe, who was in Maputo, Mozambique's capital by the Indian Ocean. Tekere writes, "Two thirds of our dead were women. He [Mugabe] said to me, 'You know what, I'm beginning to wonder whether this is worthwhile, with all

these people dying.' But I replied that we must go on to the end. His remark aroused in me a mixture of anger and disgust."

This was the time when Mozambique President Samora Machel is reported to have said of Mugabe, "I respect Mugabe, but he does not measure up to this scale of military operation and planning. He does not belong as a soldier."

When Tekere later told the ZANU commander Josiah Tongogara - later to die in Mozambique in a car crash and be replaced by Mugabe loyalist Rex Nhongo - about this and not to trust Mugabe with details of their discussions, Tekere says Tongogara told him, "Now you have heard it for yourself! You are the one who brought a sell-out here! Look how many of the people have been killed! I told you not to bring him here, but you only believe what I said now because Machel told you!"

Tekere writes, "Some time later, I brought the subject up again with Tongogara: 'Are you saying I brought a sell-out?' This time the two of us analysed the situation and realised that we were both equally apprehensive that Mugabe might let us down. After this we began to isolate out dependable commanders, and tried to discover how many of us were still committed to the war. But this filled us with sadness."

Machel put Mugabe "virtually under house arrest" in the aftermath of the Chimoio massacre. "Security at the house [where Mugabe was kept] was uncomfortably tight", Tekere writes. The house arrest was ostensibly for Mugabe's safety, but the fact that Machel never discussed it with him personally suggests there was another reason.

Tekere says Mugabe did not share his enthusiasm for committing to war. While Tekere went straight into military training on arrival in Mozambique, Mugabe showed no interest and never became a fighter. Explaining to Mugabe why it was necessary for him to learn how to use a gun, Tekere recounted to Zimbabwe's future head of state how King Hussein of Jordan had had to kill five ambushers after his guard and driver had been killed. "I then taught him to handle weapons and to keep them always within reach," said Tekere. "Yes, up to that time, he had not learnt how to use a weapon."

"There are other examples of his lack of appetite for war. Mugabe was the Commander-in-Chief of the Zanla [the acronym of ZANU's guerrilla army] forces, yet he had no uniform. This became obvious to us when the time came to inspect graves, following the Chimoio attack. Here he was, surrounded by the rest of us dressed in our military attire, wearing a suit. It was most incongruous."

"He was really a civilian bureaucrat. He would sit in his office, waiting to receive military briefings from me, and never took the initiative himself unless pushed. He did not know how to salute. I always remember Ndabaningi Sithole's words during the detention years. He said: 'You want Mugabe to be your leader? Mugabe is a good civil administrator.'"

Tekere writes that Mugabe was eventually chosen as ZANU's leader-in-exile because he was a middleman between competing factions, not because he showed leadership qualities.

At a function in Harare to launch the book, Tekere said Mugabe now regarded himself as a king who had single-handedly delivered the country from white rule - although the truth was that he had had to be persuaded to join the nationalist cause wholeheartedly. "I am more ZANU PF than Mugabe," said Tekere. "I have heardpredictions that 2007 would be a better year for this country. No, it cannot be. It is going to be worse as long as we continue with the slogan 'Pamberi navaMugabe' [Long Live Mugabe]. Mugabe has become a liability to the people of Zimbabwe."

In the book, Tekere concludes, "Robert Mugabe is right at the centre of the nation's problems; in my view 90 % of the blame should go to him, and 10 % to those who have uncritically huddled over him over the years."

ZANU PF has gone into overdrive trying to discredit Tekere's book, which, although highly self-centred, gives new and interesting insights into the personality of Mugabe and the role he played in the armed struggle. Although it fails to provide any new insights into the deaths of Chitepo and Tongogara, the book will inevitably open up a new debate about the man who has been Zimbabwe's only leader since independence from Britain in 1980.

Of the demands being made for his expulsion from ZANU PF, Tekere has replied, "If they do, that will further show that there is no democracy and freedom of speech in ZANU PF. The book contains my personal opinions about the war. So why will I be punished for my opinions?"

"A Lifetime of Struggle" is published by Sapes Books in Harare

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