

New Role for Canny Tanzanian Politician

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Can Benjamin Mkapa succeed where so many other African leaders have failed? A friend and colleague of the former Tanzanian president from the days when they were both young journalists assesses his chances.

When South Africa's Thabo Mbeki tried to mediate between President Robert Mugabe and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, he got the slow handclap from Zimbabweans and most of the international community for his ineffectual results.

Mozambique's ex-president Joaquim Chissano, who was Mugabe's best man for his second marriage, also stepped in as a mediator - only to retreat, having achieved nothing.

Nigerian head of state Olesegun Obasanjo, as chairman of the African Union, tried reading Mugabe the riot act - but the Zimbabwean president replied with his own oratorical fire, walked out and ended a long-standing personal friendship.

Finally, when United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan tried this year to mediate, Mugabe rejected him and turned to his close friend Benjamin Mkapa for help.

The former Tanzanian president's mission, which Mugabe interprets as being to heal the rift with former colonial power Britain, has been widely written off in advance as doomed to abject failure.

Almost everyone in the independent African media is predicting terrible humiliation for Mkapa.

"No hope for Mkapa's mediation" screamed a headline in *The Zimbabwean*, a newspaper published in Britain and edited by veteran journalist Wilf Mbanga.

"Mkapa mission doomed" was the headline of a lengthy analysis by commentator Njabulo Ncube in the *Financial Gazette*, one of the few independent papers still functioning in Mugabe's impoverished land of 11.5 million people.

In the Johannesburg daily *Business Day*, the headline "Mkapa needs divine intervention for Zimbabwe" was followed by a report in which Zimbabwe-watcher Dianna Games reported on her latest visit to Mugabe's tottering republic.

But this pessimistic outlook is not shared by many of those who know the 68-year-old Mkapa.

"Ben just might pull this one off," a veteran journalist and Commonwealth-watcher in London told IWPR. "He's a very clever man, and he received his political education sitting at the feet of Dr Julius Nyerere who survived [as Tanzania's president] for 24 years."

“Ben is very pro-British, very committed to the Commonwealth. He has said off the record that there can be no forward movement in Zimbabwe until Mugabe goes, but that he must be honoured and safeguarded during his departure, even if he really deserves an appearance at The Hague,” said the journalist, referring to the International Criminal Court, which has powers to try political leaders for human rights abuses.

“Ben Mkapa is one of the best African leaders to ever come to power,” said Jim Adams of the World Bank. “He was able to safeguard [the socialist] Nyerere’s reputation as ‘father of the nation’, while making Tanzania acceptable in the eyes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.”

Those observers – including Mugabe supporters as well as his critics – who believe Mkapa is going to act as a stooge for the Zimbabwean leader simply do not know the man.

The state-owned press have warmly welcomed the naming of Mkapa as the latest mediator, although his appointment has yet to gain the approval of leaders of the Southern African Development Community, which will meet soon in Lesotho to ask questions about how Mkapa’s mission will be funded and what his precise brief will be.

Yet Zimbabwean’s aging leaders – including the 82-year-old Mugabe – actually know little about the real Mkapa. They have only seen him perform in a role he does well – singing the praises of failed African leaders. He got used to that while working for President Nyerere, first as a newspaper editor and then as one of his ministers.

Mkapa has certainly been critical of western demands for reform in Zimbabwe, saying, “Their pressures have failed and they have run out of options except the stridency of the media. They have burnt the bridges of communication.” And he has also said, “There is no gainsaying Comrade Mugabe’s outstanding record of struggle against colonialism and minority settler rule.”

But if you think that this former senior journalist and foreign minister, who survived being a speechwriter for Oscar Kambona – Nyerere’s deputy who fled into exile after accusing the president of establishing a dictatorship – does not have a good word to say about anyone in the West, think again.

When Nyerere died in 1999, Mkapa paid tribute to Tony Blair and the British government for looking after the man who liked to be addressed as “Mwalimu”, or “teacher”. In 2001, Mkapa, by now president of Tanzania, grew even closer to Blair after buying a British-made air traffic control system for Dar es Salaam airport. Blair and his ministers disputed Oxfam allegations that the money – 28 million pounds – would have been put to better use feeding and educating Tanzanian children.

Mkapa is also aligned with Blair and United States president George Bush in their global hunt for terrorists. The East African coast is a breeding ground for anti-Western Islamic militants.

Nyerere’s 23 years in office were an economic disaster in which “self-reliance” policies left the country bankrupt and the most indebted of African states.

His successors, President Ali Hassan Mwinyi followed by Mkapa, found that their deeply impoverished country had run up debts of up to 35 billion US dollars. They had to pick up the pieces and start all over again, while avoiding de-constructing the myth of Mwalimu. Mkapa did that job brilliantly, while privately acknowledging that Mwalimu had been badly “misled” by a collection of left-wing intellectuals from western universities who played out their political and economic fantasies in an African socialist

Disneyland.

In the 20 years since Nyerere left office, nearly all of his rural reforms have been dismantled. The centrepiece was “ujamaa”, a form of collectivisation which saw 11 million people forcibly transplanted from their villages in just four years. Just like Mugabe's land reforms, “ujamaa” led to catastrophe: food production fell and famine set in, making the Tanzanian government more reliant than ever on foreign food aid.

One weary member of parliament told me on a recent visit to Dar es Salaam that “ujamaa” had been the biggest disaster in East African history – yet the applause for Mwalimu Nyerere still goes on. “We kept clapping right until the end,” he said. “Otherwise, he’d never have gone. We had to throw flowers, although there were some who wanted to throw stones.”

Increasingly uncertain about the wisdom of his policies, Nyerere wrote in 1975, “I frequently meditate upon whether it would not be a service to my country if I stood down from political leadership while still in possession of my senses.” It took him another 10 years and a few more billion dollars of debt to do so.

George Ayittey, a Ghanaian professor of economics at the American University in Washington, said as the new millennium dawns, many Africans fervently hope that the old generation of leaders like Nyerere and Mugabe will quietly fade away into the sunset.

“To be sure, they did endure great personal sacrifice and fought gallantly for freedom from colonial rule for their respective countries. But the legacies they left behind bespeak of shattered economies, rampant corruption, never-ending cycles of political instability, senseless civil wars, wanton destruction, famine and refugees. To deflect attention away from their own domestic failures, they grandstand on the world stage, railing against Western colonialism, imperialism, racism, the IMF and the World Bank. To continuously celebrate them without a hint of the unspeakable misery they bequeathed to their people is criminally irresponsible.”

Although Mkapa served Nyerere loyally and – in public – signed up to his socialist agenda, it was apparent even then he was much more than an unthinking servant of the regime. As a young man in the late Sixties, when he was editor of *The Nationalist* and we used to drink together at the New Africa Hotel, Mkapa showed himself to be clever and not at all doctrinaire.

Journalist Philip Ochieng, in his book on the media in Africa, said Mkapa had a degree of cynicism about socialism and the disastrous collectivisation programme. Mkapa was “a right wing representative but a man capable of playing the Nyerere-ist game with great skill and savoir-faire,” said Ochieng.

Many Tanzanian ultra-leftists accused Mkapa of being purely an opportunistic socialist all along, trimming his sails to the wind.

The Tanzania that Mkapa helped build certainly bears little relationship to the ramshackle, poverty-stricken country it was when Mwalimu was in power. In Dar es Salaam today, the cellphone industry is booming and there are now grand hotels and efficient banking services, although the kind of appalling slums found on the outskirts of all Africa's major cities remain evident.

At the start of his administration in 1995, President Mkapa vigorously pursued economic recovery programmes, robust macroeconomic policies and structural reforms, including the privatisation programme

initiated by his predecessor Mwinyi. Under Mkapa, Tanzania achieved growth of a steady six per cent per annum.

In June this year, Mkapa was appointed co-chairman of the new Investment Climate Facility for Africa, a public-private partnership funded by companies, bilateral and multilateral donors that will work in close partnership with African governments and regional organisations. The institution is being launched just as Mkapa steps into the limelight wearing his Zimbabwe mediator hat.

"This new and exciting facility will act on key obstacles to doing business in Africa," argues Mkapa. "Together we can remove the obstacles that stand in the path to Africa's prosperity."

One of those obstacles is, of course, Robert Mugabe.

Mkapa will, therefore, not be on a mission to keep Mugabe in power, but rather to help him make a dignified exit so that the West, led by Britain and the European Union, can pump into billions of dollars into a recovery programme, much as western states came to Zimbabwe's aid after independence in 1980 through an aid programme called ZIMCORD.

His strategy, according to highly informed sources in Dar es Salaam, is to seek a way of saying goodbye to the Zimbabwean leader without humiliating a clever, proud and once potentially great man. Then the door will be open for massive reconstruction programmes - the same kind of thing that took place in Tanzania after 1985, when Nyerere finally stepped down.

Michel Raimbaud, the French ambassador in Harare, has tentatively encouraged Mugabe to use Mkapa to begin to engage with the West - and with his own opposition, too - in a constructive manner. "Why not re-engage in political dialogue?" asked Raimbaud. "After all, if you accept to discuss with foreigners, why not talk [also] among Zimbabweans?"

While it is not clear how Mkapa will tackle his new task, it is certainly clear what he will not tolerate.

Having navigated stormy waters under Nyerere's leadership, he will not put up with ear-bashing rhetoric from Mugabe on the merits of scientific socialism or the need for some new form of non-alignment to bait the United States, the European Union, the World Bank and the IMF. Mkapa, who played the role of radical socialist to survive under Nyerere's wing, is today at home with European diplomats, millionaire businessmen and well-educated lecturers.

Rather than arriving in Harare to prop up a grumpy octogenarian despot, Ben Mkapa is likely to go there with the mix of pragmatism, charm, cynicism and cunning necessary to persuade Robert Mugabe to make a gracious curtain call and prepare the way for a constellation of investors similar to those who pulled Tanzania out of its swamp.

He may well succeed where more obviously upright and idealistic men have failed.

Trevor Grundy worked on Tanzania's state-owned Standard newspaper for five years at a time when President Nyerere was titular editor-in-chief. He later worked as a journalist for 20 years before returning to Britain to write on religious affairs.

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