

No Cause for Celebration on Mugabe's Birthday

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As Mugabe turns 83, Zimbabweans hope he won't stay in power much longer. As Robert Mugabe turned 83 this week, millions of exiles in the Zimbabwean diaspora raised their glasses high and drank to the end of his regime

They joined the 11.5 million people remaining in Zimbabwe - but emigrating daily in their thousands - in a toast to President Mugabe's demise after 27 years of power in Zimbabwe, whether it comes by his overthrow in a cabinet or military coup, or by dying peacefully in his sleep or in some other less tranquil way.

"He has disgraced Africa," said Lawrence Vambe, Zimbabwe's most distinguished historian and formerly one of Zimbabwe's best-respected journalists before he left the country three years ago to live in the English Midlands with his English wife Mary.

"In 1980 there was such hope for Zimbabwe," said Vambe, who has known Mugabe since the 1930s when they were educated together at Kutama Roman Catholic mission, where Zimbabwe's head of state was born on February 21, 1924. "We all looked to Mugabe for leadership, for truth and justice. How wrong we were to do so. Our hopes are dashed."

Vambe is one of more than 400,000 Zimbabweans living in Britain, having chosen exile rather than remain in their own country, which has the fastest declining economy in the world; an unemployment rate of more than eighty per cent; and the lowest life expectancy in the world, with women living on average for only 34 years, according to the World Health Organisation. Most Zimbabwean exiles live in South Africa: they number more than two million, and hundreds more each day go into exile by crossing the Limpopo River, marking the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa.

"At school Robert was considered a genius by his teachers and the foreign Roman Catholic priests who were with us those days," Vambe told IWPR. "I have seen Robert at very close quarters. He was always aloof when he was a small boy but brilliant, totally brilliant. What happened to him along the way to turn him into such a monster? I'm not sure I know the answer to that question, even as I approach my 90th birthday here in England, so far away from home."

Over lunch at London's Royal Navy Club, Vambe spoke to IWPR of the terrible things that have happened to his beloved landlocked country over the last few years. Like hundreds of thousands of economic and political refugees from Africa and the Middle East, he said he now feels safe in the country that once ran the biggest empire the world has seen since the decline and fall of Rome in the fifth century AD. The irony of being forced to seek refuge at the heart of the erstwhile imperial enemy of colonial Rhodesia/Zimbabwe is not lost on a man of his intelligence and experience of life.

In Britain, there are currently 60,000 Zimbabwean asylum seekers on the Home Office's books. If refused asylum, they will be put on planes back to Zimbabwe where intelligence officials at Harare Airport detain those who dare to have sought asylum outside Zimbabwe.

Zimbabweans are adamant that Mugabe's much-feared Central Intelligence Organisation, CIO, operates with impunity in Britain, threatening those in exile with action against their relatives at home if they say anything negative about Mugabe and his ZANU PF party government in public.

"We get telephone calls late at night and a voice at the other end warns us, 'We know where your parents are in Zimbabwe...we know your sister,' and terrible things like that," said a young Zimbabwean studying art in Bristol, in the west of England. "I have been praying that Mugabe will drop dead on his 83rd. We all do."

Speaking from his home in Oxford, Terence Ranger, a pre-eminent social historian of Africa formerly resident in pre-Zimbabwe Rhodesia, told IWPR that he thought the British government had been inept in its handling of the deepening Zimbabwe crisis.

Ranger, a fellow of St Anthony's College, Oxford University, and before that the university's Rhodes Professor of Race relations, said, "After 2000 it was announced by Peter Hain (then a junior foreign minister) that Britain would give sanctuary to any white Zimbabwean who wished to be in Britain. That played directly into Mugabe's hands, enabling him to say that Britain only cared about whites, not about wider human rights."

In 2000, Mugabe began violently confiscating white-owned farms in Zimbabwe, frightening many white Zimbabweans into exile.

In his youth, Professor Ranger, a liberal advocate of full rights for everyone, regardless of race, religion or class, was manhandled and tossed into a swimming pool in the then Salisbury - now Harare, Zimbabwe's capital - by intoxicated whites who called him "a kaffir lover".

Expelled from Rhodesia, Ranger went on to write some of the finest books about Africa's, and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe's, turbulent past.

Ranger said he today shakes his head in disbelief that the remote and arrogant 83-year-old Mugabe is today the same person who waved an olive branch at Zimbabweans of European origin when he came to power in April 1980 and who led a government that in the 1980s promoted good health, education and one of Africa's most effective adult literacy drives.

But Ranger said that while millions of Zimbabweans in exile and at home detest him, Mugabe remains popular in most parts of Africa beyond Zimbabwe, "One of the reasons he is admired is that he seems to have shown a readiness to say 'to hell with everybody'.

"He says it all the time - 'to hell with the Commonwealth' and 'to hell with Britain' and 'to hell with the Queen', although he keeps on saying that he personally respects her. 'To hell with Desmond Tutu, to hell with Nelson Mandela, to hell with Pius Ncube '(the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Mugabe's most outspoken domestic critic). People say 'Mugabe doesn't watch his tongue', and there are many in Africa who really like that."

Although Ranger criticises Britain's handling of the Mugabe problem, Vambe reserved his most stinging criticism for Thabo Mbeki, President of Zimbabwe's powerful neighbour, South Africa, for helping ensure that Mugabe remains in power.

"Mbeki has let us all down, "said Vambe. "He has betrayed Africa." Vambe said Mbeki had been

inexplicably silent about the catastrophe in the country on South Africa's immediate northern border. He has been entirely silent about Mugabe's 1982-1987 ethnic cleansing operation in western Zimbabwe, when the North Korean-trained 5th Brigade stormed the region and killed some 20,000 minority Ndebele people.

Derek Ingram, an ex features editor at the London Daily Mail and a strong advocate of the ideals of the former British Commonwealth, held out huge hope for Zimbabwe at independence in 1980. In his London home, Ingrams shook his head sadly and told IWPR, "I cannot believe Mugabe has turned out the way he has. We were wrong, weren't we? We were wrong."

Ingram mentioned a catalogue of Zimbabwean men who were seen by western liberals as shining beacons of hope, during the long struggle against white rule when Rhodesia was a self-ruled British colony from 1896 to 1980, who had turned into hard-hearted black racists. Among those he singled out were Didymus Mutasa, who half a century ago was a deeply committed Christian working on Rhodesia's pioneer multi-racial Cold Comfort Farm, and Nathan Shamuyarira. The latter wrote a book "Crisis in Rhodesia" promising that when blacks came to power in Zimbabwe they would abandon all the draconian laws put into place by Rhodesia's last white prime minister, Ian Smith.

Mutasa is today Mugabe's Minister of Security and spy chief, who describes Zimbabwe's handful of remaining white farmers as "filth" and who recently vowed, "I will rid the country of remaining whites." Mutasa also infamously said Zimbabwe would be better off if half the population died of AIDS.

Shamuyarira is currently the chief spin doctor of Mugabe's government, which has not only retained all the draconian laws of the Smith administration but added to them substantially

In Zimbabwe itself, as inflation galloped beyond a record 1,600 per cent, Mugabe's birthday celebrations were held in the central town of Gweru after ZANU PF militants unsuccessfully tried to raise 300 million Zimbabwe dollars (about 1.2 million US dollars) from the general public towards the celebrations.

The weekly independent Standard newspaper said in an editorial that it was ironic that Mugabe saw "absolutely nothing amiss in hosting an ostentatious birthday bash when doctors and nurses were on strike and thousands of students could no longer afford university fees".

Trevor Grundy is an author, broadcaster and journalist specialising in religious affairs and Zimbabwean issues, who lived and worked in Zimbabwe and other central African countries from 1966 to 1996. He is currently collaborating with Susan Woodhouse in writing the official biography of Sir Garfield Todd, the liberal prime minister of Rhodesia between 1953 and 1958 before he was ousted by white hardliners.

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