

## **Onetime Friendship Turns Nasty**

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Close allies for years, the presidents of Nigerian and Zimbabwe now clash furiously whenever they meet.

The relationship between Olusegun Obasanjo and Robert Mugabe remains awash in bad blood following the Zimbabwean president's resounding rejection of a proposal from his Nigerian counterpart to help solve the country's political crisis.

Obasanjo, chairman of the Africa Union, recently appointed former Mozambican president Joachim Chissano to mediate between Mugabe and the Movement for Democratic Change leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

But Mugabe refused to talk, angrily denouncing Obasanjo, and late last month Chissano gave up, perhaps reluctant to get between the onetime allies who now clash furiously whenever they meet. Observers say Mugabe now considers Obasanjo a deadlier enemy than British prime minister Tony Blair.

It wasn't always so.

The two were once linked closely at both political and personal levels and Obasanjo owes his life to Mugabe and President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda whose intervention after the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa summit of 1994 saved him from the hangman's noose during the murderous military dictatorship of the late Sani Abacha. Others like Nigerian author Ken Saro Wiwa were less fortunate, and Abacha sent them to the gallows.

When the international community accused Mugabe of rigging the 2000 and 2002 parliamentary and presidential elections, Obasanjo returned the favour, defending Mugabe against scathing criticism from the West. He was among the first leaders to endorse the authenticity of the controversial election victories.

Mugabe responded by openly supporting Obasanjo's own dubious win in 2003, which was also mired in controversy amid accusations of vote rigging, political violence and intimidation.

The two leaders teamed up to condemn the West and their election observers, particularly those from the European Union. Both played the Pan Africanist card and accused the EU and its allies of racism steeped in eurocentrism in their outlook towards Africa.

Mugabe attended Obasanjo's inauguration in May 2003, playing to the international media gallery in an apparent show of solidarity and brotherhood.

But then came the falling out, when Obasanjo committed what Mugabe perceived as the greatest possible sin - calling for his resignation. Worse still, the comments were made in a powerful international newspaper, London's Sunday Times.

"If I say I am thinking about my succession, that's an indication that I think he [Mugabe] should think of his. In my part of the world there are many ways you can tell a man to go to hell," he is reported to have said.

To Mugabe, who is well known for viewing anyone who suggests he step down as an eternal enemy, this was unforgivable. Tried and tested lieutenants, including the late Eddison Zvobgo, Edgar Tekere and Margaret Dongo, who've made similar demands have all sunk into political oblivion.

Also unforgiveable was Obasanjo's support for the white farmers of Zimbabwe, who he described as true Africans and invited to begin commercial farming in Nigeria along the banks of the Niger River.

He widely praised the governor of Kwara State, Bukola Saraki, for inviting them into the country, saying they have specialist farming skills and should not be allowed to go to places like Australia.

Then in late August, Obasanjo said he wanted every Nigerian state to give new homes and land to farmers expelled from their properties by Mugabe.

Some fifteen Zimbabwean farmers eventually took Obasanjo up on his offer.

Following his controversial land grab, Mugabe has become incandescent with rage at anyone who expresses sympathy with the displaced farmers who he views as white imperialists and accused his onetime friend of selling out.

Then came the Commonwealth saga.

Following Mugabe's controversial election victory in 2002, a troika of Commonwealth heads of state - Obasanjo, Australia's John Howard and South Africa's Thabo Mbeki - was set up to recommend whether Zimbabwe should be suspended.

Mugabe was confident that with the help of African solidarity and by playing the race card he would convince Mbeki and Obasanjo to overrule Howard. When the trio recommended Zimbabwe's suspension, the rift between Mugabe and Obasanjo opened even wider.

In 2003, Obasanjo faced a tricky dilemma when he had to decide whether or not to invite Mugabe to the Commonwealth Summit in Abuja, the Nigerian capital. Mugabe's destructive and racist policies threatened to plunge Commonwealth nations into a quasi-racial divide, with African countries on one side and the white community (Britain, Australia and New Zealand) on the other.

Obasanjo was faced with a dilemma because Britain's Tony Blair, Mugabe's sworn enemy, threatened not to attend if Mugabe was invited. Obasanjo had earlier on baffled Mugabe by trashing an attempt by African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to lift the Commonwealth suspension against Zimbabwe.

In the end, Obasanjo did not invite Mugabe to attend, prompting a furious Mugabe to withdraw Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth. Mugabe felt deeply betrayed because he had assumed that Obasanjo was on his side.

Almost two years later, Mugabe's government accused Obasanjo's government of teaming up with Blair to fund the opposition MDC's 2005 election campaign. Mugabe argued that the MDC was offered 200 million US dollars through Nigeria for its campaign activities. Mugabe has always alleged that the MDC is a front for Britain's desire for regime change and Obasanjo therefore, in Mugabe's view, was committing yet another unforgivable sin.

Kamu Yananai is the pseudonym of a Zimbabwean journalist.

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