

Rebuilding Zimbabwean Pride

Author: [Trevor Ncube](#)

A one-time admirer of Robert Mugabe reflects on the harm the president has inflicted on Zimbabwe – and what can be done to reverse the damage.

Robert Mugabe used to be my hero. At university, where I was a member of the student council, I remember how proud I was when he came to visit us. I lined up to shake his hand, and it was a moment I cherished.

Here was an African leader whom I looked up to. I admired the way he spoke, his manner of thought, his vision. I looked forward to when he addressed the nation, and marvelled at how he fired such strong sentiments of patriotism and nationalism.

As I travelled the world, I was proud to be Zimbabwean, and especially proud that Robert Mugabe was my president.

Zimbabwe was African, independent and free, and Robert Mugabe was my man.

How things have changed.

Zimbabwe, the former breadbasket of the region, is now an economic basket case. Life expectancy is plummeting, and more and more people are abandoning the country.

The constitution, the legislature and all other vital institutions have been distorted solely in the service of one man. He has personalised the police, army and security services and rendered parliament useless.

A man who could have been a Nelson Mandela – a figurehead for Africa – has instead destroyed people's lives and dreams. He has devastated a jewel of a nation.

In pursuit of personal benefit, of his desire to stay in power, he has become a monster who clings on to power only because he can.

The recent beating of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai is thus not only a traumatic event for the opposition leader, but also a symbol of what has happened to the entire country.

When I reflect on recent events, I remind myself that this could have been me.

I have not suffered one per cent of what Tsvangirai has. But I have been thrown into a cell with 15 other people.

A few years ago, when I was visiting Bulawayo for my brother's wedding, my passport was seized. I was essentially a prisoner in my own country, and I had to go to court to get my documents back.

More recently, the government tried to revoke my citizenship, and for three months I was a stateless person.

My mother is Zimbabwean, I was born in Zimbabwe, and I lived there for the first four decades of my life. In 1994, I received an award as Zimbabwean editor of the year.

But the government said that because my father was born in Zambia, I was not Zimbabwean.

The real reason, however, was that Mugabe regarded me as one of his enemies because I run the only two remaining independent newspapers left in the country.

Fortunately, I was able to win the case.

But I ask, why did Zimbabwe lose its respect for humanity?

We have a society in which the government decides who qualifies as patriotic. If you do not agree with us, you are an enemy of the state and have no rights.

This lack of mutual respect is the deepest tragedy, the most fundamental distortion of a long period of misrule.

Robert Mugabe has poisoned our national pride, and it will take us a long time to get back to where we were at independence in 1980.

I am often asked what more the international community could do. Are they, and especially Britain as the former colonial power, to blame?

In all fairness, I believe that the international powers have been outplayed by a very wily fox, and it is very hard to hold them responsible for the situation inside the country. Mugabe has made it impossible for anyone to do anything meaningful, apart from marching on Harare.

However, I personally do judge Thabo Mbeki, the president of South Africa, very harshly.

South Africa is the regional powerhouse, and if Mbeki had condemned the elections that were stolen in 2000, then the rest of the continent, and the international community too, would have been able to take a much stronger position, and much bloodshed might have been spared.

Now, however, South Africa is engaging more constructively in the current crisis. The situation has got worse, and they are serious concerned that their neighbour might collapse completely.

Through various regional structures, several African leaders are playing a more active role, trying diplomatically to open the way for Mugabe's departure and the establishment of a new government in Zimbabwe.

We do not know how all this will play out, and there have been false dawns before.

Yet all these factors make the current crisis a moment of hope as well as fear.

We are exactly 50 years from the beginning of the post-colonial experience in Africa, and it may be that we have now come full circle.

Even at this worrying moment, if African leaders can come together to resolve the crisis, we could be seeing a rebirth not only of Zimbabwe but of the continent as a whole.

Clearly, we have learned some lessons from the last half-century, and one of them is that the days are gone when we can blame everything on colonialism. What Africans, and especially Zimbabweans, have to do now is assume responsibility for the crisis themselves and find their own solutions to it.

The scale of the challenge is enormous, and international support and expertise will be vital in tackling it – re-establishing democratic institutions and rebuilding a devastated economy.

But the biggest and most long-term challenge will be recreating a sense of mutual respect and in fact rebuilding society. We will have to cleanse people's minds, and rebuild their respect for life, dignity, and property, and for each other.

Then it will be up to Africa to ensure that Robert Mugabe is the last strongman of the continent. Never again must one man hold the hopes and dreams of a nation to ransom.

Trevor Ncube, a native Zimbabwean, is chief executive of South Africa's Mail & Guardian, owner of Zimbabwe's Independent and Standard newspapers, and chairman of the Africa division of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting.

Location: [Africa](#)

Topic: [Comment](#)

Focus: [Zimbabwe Crisis Reports](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/rebuilding-zimbabwean-pride>