

Rewriting History in Zimbabwe

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Josiah Tongogara was a major figure in the Zimbabwean independence movement, but the country's present leaders are carefully erasing his place in history.

Twenty-six years after Zimbabwe became independent, one of the most illustrious figures of the war of liberation is being systematically written out of history.

Josiah Magama Tongogara was the current president Robert Mugabe's main rival for power in the exiled liberation movement of the Seventies.

Now political analysts say the president is intent on ensuring that Tongogara's contribution to the creation of modern Zimbabwe as commander of the guerrilla wing of ZANU, the Zimbabwe African National Union, fades away.

Tongogara died on Christmas Day 1979, four days after the Lancaster House Agreement was signed in London, securing Zimbabwean independence. He had played an important conciliatory role in the talks leading up to the agreement.

His death was announced by Mugabe on the liberation movement's radio station two days later. Mugabe said that 41-year-old Tongogara had been killed in a car accident. No autopsy results or photos of the body were ever released.

Mugabe's apparent decision to sideline Tongogara and his achievements from the country's official memory emerged in April last year, when the late guerrilla commander was not one of the "eminent heroes" honoured in Zimbabwe's Silver Jubilee Awards.

Another major figure in the liberation struggle, former ZANU leader Herbert Chitepo, who was assassinated by a car bomb in Zambia in 1975, was also excluded from the pantheon of heroes.

That such important leaders can simply be eradicated from Zimbabwe's official history reflects Mugabe's aversion to other leaders - dead as well as living - whom he perceives as threats to his ascendancy.

Patrick Kombayi, a veteran former ZANU activist who was Zimbabwe's first black mayor, said Mugabe sees all potential leaders merely as obstacles on his own path to power.

During the Lancaster House negotiations, Tongogara is believed to have held secret meetings about post-independence power-sharing with leaders of the rival ZAPU, Zimbabwe African Peoples Union. A senior ZAPU source confirmed that Tongogara did hold talks with ZAPU, including its leader, the late Joshua Nkomo.

According to this source, Tongogara "did not really like Mugabe's policies, and he claimed that he could draw away support from both ZANU and ZANLA", the latter being the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, ZANU's military wing which Tongogara headed.

A ZANU war veteran recalled to IWPR how he saw Tongogara on his return from Lancaster House to ZANLA's guerrilla bases in Mozambique.

"Tongogara slung his AK rifle on his back and announced to us that he was going to be the first black prime minister of independent Zimbabwe," he said. "We all supported him. He was our leader and we hardly knew Robert Mugabe. To our shock, he was killed a few days later."

It was instead Mugabe who became Zimbabwe's first prime minister and later president.

Mugabe's attitude to the liberation guerrilla commander is further evident in his failure to look after his family. In a recent interview, Tongogara's widow Angeline said she was living "an ordinary widow's life". She said she struggled to raise her children, with no support from the ZANU hierarchy, and depended instead on the Catholic Church. While many ZANU stalwarts were awarded landholdings in the land-grab from white farmers, Angeline Tongogara said she had not benefited.

When Tongogara's family held a memorial service for him in December at their home in Harare, no senior ZANU figures were invited. Angeline noted that the state had failed to hold a memorial service for the guerrilla chief. Asked why she had not asked ZANU officials to come, she said she had decided to make it "purely a family affair".

State-owned media have been extremely careful about what they say concerning Tongogara. A source at the state-controlled Herald, Zimbabwe's only daily newspaper, said there was controversy over whether to publish a report on the family memorial service. It was published in the end, but was safely tucked away in an unobtrusive place in the paper after the editor received instructions from top government officials that it must not be "prominent".

Tongogara's brother Joshua became so disillusioned with what he described as Mugabe's double standards that in 2002 he planned to stand for parliament as an independent candidate in his home constituency. But he was harassed and was forced to shift back to ZANU, and he has since retreated into silence and avoided active involvement in politics.

Apart from the formative political role that Tongogara played, there may be a second reason why Mugabe has sought to efface his memory: tribalism. The president has consistently promoted close associates and relatives from his Zezuru clan, part of the wider Shona nation, to positions of power in modern Zimbabwe.

Tongogara was a Karanga - a different Shona clan that historically inhabited lands to the south and east of the Zezuru. During the war of independence, it was the Karangas - led by Tongogara supported by other prominent fighters such as Josiah Tungamirai, Vitalis Zvinavashe and Emerson Munangagwa - who formed the backbone of the ZANLA force.

Since independence, Mugabe has systematically marginalised Karangas in favour of the Zezuru. He has militarised Zimbabwe's key institutions and appointed members of his own clan to head them. The army, police, judiciary and all top government departments are now headed by Zezurus.

Acknowledging Tongogara as a central figure in the struggle for independence would, for Mugabe, be

tantamount to recognising the immense role played by the Karanga group as a whole.

The timing of Tongogara's elimination from the political scene, coupled with President Mugabe's subsequent ruthless rise to power, has led many to speculate that the present regime had something to gain from his death.

"Remember, there is a clique in ZANU that is very aware that the people who should be leading this country - had they not been assassinated - are Tongogara and Chitepo," said Kombayi. "Some of the top ZANU leaders regarded Tongo[gara] and Chitepo as stumbling blocks in their way to higher positions during the liberation struggle."

However, Kombayi believes people would not be fooled by the arbitrary rewriting of history.

"ZANU leaders hate the true heroes even in death," he said. "But the good thing is that the people of Zimbabwe know who their true heroes are."

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