

Farewell, Robert Mugabe

By Stephen Chan,
Created 2007-03-20 00:00

Robert Mugabe's retort to western condemnation of his brutal suppression of opposition protesters in mid-March 2007 was typical, defiant, fighting talk. "Go hang", was his message [1] to the west - although it was as much a message to African presidents. The Tanzanian president, Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, had just paid him an unscheduled visit [2] and had (in private) expressed deep concern. Even the normally uncritical South African and Zambian governments voiced worry about concern about events north and south of their border. To Africa, Zimbabwe and Mugabe are a deep embarrassment.

At the same time, the situation [3] represents a mixed picture. The nationalisation of land was a necessary completion of the project of independence. This was supported throughout Africa. Its unplanned and brutal nature, without compensation and without any plans for the sustaining of agricultural production, was the first stage of profound discomfiture. The second stage was how Mugabe was prepared to persecute his political opposition, at a time when Africa generally was edging towards greater democracy and toleration.

For South Africa [4], in particular, the problem of how to deal with Mugabe has three key aspects. The first is how to separate the need for land reform from the mindlessness with which it was carried out. The second is how to ensure a collapsed economy doesn't trigger meltdown in the surrounding countries. South Africa itself has over a million Zimbabwean refugees on its soil; many are women and unaccompanied children [5], while others are blamed for involvement [6] in violent criminal activity. The third is how to respond to Mugabe's fighting talk - because this is the talk of liberation, and many people in Africa would like to taste the fruits of liberation. The end of apartheid in South Africa has not brought an end to inequality.

But with all this said, how does Mugabe survive in a country with 1,700% inflation, predicted to reach 4,000% by the end of 2007? Even his elite supporters are starting to feel the pinch [7]. And that is the point precisely: he has had much support, and this support really believed in the project of nationalism. Seven years after the farm invasions it is clear to everyone that man does not live on bread alone - but bread is rather necessary [8] to keep life going. Year by year, Mugabe's support has eroded [9] and now 2007 is becoming a tipping-point for him.

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Will it be the brave opposition that brings him down? The opposition is in fact divided and had lain dormant for a long time before the March protests. It would always have struggled to form a strong cabinet. It has no plans on how to regenerate momentum [12] for their cause, and Mugabe will simply keep crushing their demonstrations. Will it be a palace coup, led by key

figures in Mugabe's own Zanu-PF party? They might sacrifice the old man to keep in power themselves. But the strongest factions in the party are led by figures closely associated with the security forces. That is precisely why they could be successful if they moved against Mugabe - but it means no end to authoritarian government. The old man's paranoia might be taken out of authoritarianism, but it would still be authoritarianism.

Even so, Mugabe is now a symbol of everything wrong in Africa. As soon as the symbol is removed, no matter how, the world will take a deep breath and begin to help rebuild Zimbabwe (though, as [Michael Holman](#) [12] argues in **openDemocracy**, the details of the recovery plan need to be thought through carefully in advance). But the very readiness to help post-Mugabe Zimbabwe also means the world was prepared to let Zimbabweans suffer, and that they were used as bargaining-chips in the war against Mugabe and what he represents. There is a large question-mark hanging over the entire western mode of behaviour in this case.

In the end, Zimbabwe must play the lead role in rebuilding itself - albeit with help from the west. It is a country in which both government and opposition are full of highly-qualified intellectuals. But an intellectual is not a technocrat. A person of great urban sophistication is not a farmer. And that perhaps is the simple tragedy of Mugabe [13]. He is by far the best educated of all African leaders. He is the Jesuit of the continent, both in his habits and his intellect. But his hands are soft. For all his vigour at 83, it is the vigour of a man who has never made maize grow with his own hands - and would not know how.

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