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– OPINION –

THE WORLD ROBERT MUGABE LEFT BEHIND

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Being in Harare, Zimbabwe, as the news came through that Robert Mugabe had died, was in many ways a welcome and anti-climactic experience. If that was my personal sense – as a Commonwealth official who supervised the observation of the independence elections from January to March 1980 when he came to power, and who has visited Zimbabwe almost 70 times since – it seemed also to be the mood of the city. Harare remained quiet. The news came at night, too late for the newspapers that had already gone to press. Not everyone has wi-fi access, many of those who do face constant electricity cuts and cannot recharge their cell phones or computers, so the news spread to a large extent by word of mouth. If there was one intangible sense that hung in the air, it was a sense that this was about time. Mugabe had hung around too long. And even though he had been ousted from power in 2017, his shadow had clung to Zimbabwe.

Yet the shadow of what had been a liberation leader did not fade away in Zimbabwe but in a hospital bed in Singapore, where he had been receiving treatment for some months. Years of visiting specialist facilities there and receiving, according to unsubstantiated reports, experimental treatments involving total blood transfusions, had probably exhausted his body as much as had age. But it is the securitised and militarised political party he headed that still runs Zimbabwe today; so the death of Mugabe, no matter how anti-climactic, is not a relief for citizens immersed in economic degradation and who are beaten and shot if they protest a little too loudly.

In the end it was his own military who finally turned against him – although Harare, ever a rumour mill, spread the account that it was originally a police coup. Further, that the military intervention was a counter-coup that decided finally to take power for itself with a civilian head in Emerson Mnangagwa, and an enforcer not quite behind the scenes in General Constantino Chiwenga. Chiwenga is in fact very much on the scene as a powerful vice president to Mnangagwa.

The whole 'transformation' of Zimbabwe was meant to be confirmed and validated in the 2018 elections. Observer groups were invited from Europe, the US, and the Commonwealth. Though there had been many irregularities, particularly in the voters' roll, these groups were probably on the verge of accepting the results, grudgingly and conditionally, as at least credible.

But even before the results were fully announced, military forces attacked protesters outside the electoral commission, causing fatalities before the astonished eyes of observers and foreign journalists alike. The next day, riot police with tear gas launchers tried to storm the hotel where many of the same observers and journalists were staying – with the cameras of the journalists broadcasting it all in real time. I myself was in the midst of this. The astonishing ineptitude spoke volumes about an unreformed and brazenly securitised, if divided, government. Even then it was thought that this was the hand of Chiwenga, unable or unwilling to imagine what was required for the new Mnangagwa doctrine of openness. As a result, no observer group validated the elections. President Mnangagwa's plea that a new Zimbabwe was 'open for business' resulted in a tiny trickle, not the hoped-for flood of new investment.

At the time of writing in September 2019 (a little more than a year after those elections) the upshot is an official inflation rate of 176%, second in the world only to Venezuela's; but the real rate is more likely in the region of 800%. A new Zimbabwean dollar, introduced in June 2019, is now at 7.6 to US$1 on the official exchange, but between 10 to 15 to US$1 on the black market. Its value is likely to decline further as Zimbabwe faces an increasingly huge imports bill. This is the result of local productivity having stalled dramatically and being unable to regenerate itself in the face of shortages of materials and electricity outages of up to 18 hours a day. Water is also subject to long cuts each day. The health sector is near collapse with a grave shortage of medicines and strikes by medical personnel, all amidst the spectacle of oligarchs journeying overseas for treatment – Mugabe having been the prime exemplar. Children whose families cannot afford school fees simply do not go to school. Roads are unpaved, and cars wait in long queues for petrol. But the fundamental difficulty for the future of any economic uplift is the country's huge external debt. Since Mugabe's farm invasions from 2000 onwards, and the consequent crushing of an agricultural export sector, Zimbabwe has existed on borrowed monies, and now no one – not even the Chinese – wishes to continue lending.

The Zimbabwean debt is probably about US$30 billion, though even the Zimbabwean government may be unsure about that as borrowing by different agencies and ministries seems to have been uncoordinated. The same applies to the terms and conditions of different elements of that debt. One figure does seem to be certain, that US$9 billion is due for repayment in the very near future.

Repayment appears to be impossible at this moment, and even restructuring or rolling over the debt seems extremely difficult without some form of IMF approval, as the debt is owed to multilateral lending agencies such as the IMF, the African Development Bank, and also to the Paris Club and G7 nations. A preliminary IMF programme, designed to achieve some form of fiscal responsibility, prudence and transparency, may or may not be satisfactorily achieved. Even if it is, a more substantive IMF programme to follow may be even more difficult to achieve, but would be essential for any appreciable liquidity to flow into the country. The outlook of the Minister of Finance, Mthuli Ncube, is to satisfy the IMF so he can borrow more in order to repay what is already owed to those from whom the country had previously borrowed. There is no substantial or substantive discussion on how to make the economy productive and able to earn income in its own right. The opposition seems not to have any substantive economic programme of its own, nor any details as to what any such programme might entail. Both government and opposition talk generalities and forms of ungrounded hopefulness.

The opposition MDC party is itself in a divided and largely parlous condition. Its leader, Nelson Chamisa, a former student firebrand, performed very well in the 2018 presidential elections almost forcing Mnangagwa into a run-off (the victor required 50% plus 1 of the votes cast, so Chamisa almost prevented Mnangagwa from achieving this, but did not necessarily garner enough votes himself to be assured of victory in a run-off). But his party trailed the government by a wide margin in the parliamentary polls. It is clear that the electorate saw Chamisa as a more attractive, and honest, figure than his party – which, when not divided, had quickly learned the methodologies of corruption and self-service. Chamisa has several rivals for his leadership role, many watching in case he stumbles. While suggesting he is open to dialogue, Mnangagwa is assiduously working towards forcing Chamisa to stumble.

However, the governing Zanu-PF also has divisions within. Chief among these seems to be the radical differences between Mnangagwa and the man who instigated the coup to protect him, his own now vice president, General Constantino Chiwenga. The heavy-handed suppression of dissent in the streets is attributed by many in the Harare rumour mill to Chiwenga, a man portrayed as unwilling or unable to countenance change except within the parameters of a fierce discipline which he seeks to enforce. That sense of discipline has the nation falling into line like good soldiers. But Chiwenga is also now unwell. His long periods at overseas medical facilities (India and China) suggest, in Mugabe fashion, a trek for cure or extension that cannot be achieved in the decayed medical structures at home.

Finance Minister Ncube seeks to instill fiscal discipline that might placate if not satisfy the IMF. This, however, has the general population, especially those already poor, bearing the brunt of austerity. Equipped public hospitals are now a rarity. The oligarchs, many enriched by ill-gotten gains, are not being asked to take – in fiscal parlance – a 'haircut', a trimming of their resources for the public good. Those who seized diamond fields when alluvial deposits were found, have conspicuously not paid taxes on their diamond incomes into the national treasury. There is no tax on non-productive second (or third) properties above a designated threshold value, or on exorbitantly purchased first properties, on fourth and fifth cars and the like.

Away from the mansions, everyday life is thinner; this includes even newspapers like the government newspaper, *The Herald*. The commemorative issues rushed into print a day after Mugabe's death were slender. The explosion in electronic media has limited effect because wi-fi and electricity are unreliable.

Those most literate, the graduates of 17 public universities and a growing number of private universities, have little by way of reliable employment and career prospects.

Against all this, the neighbouring SADC countries offer a limited if clear solidarity, basically premised on the notion that the country must be given a chance. This is held up in contradistinction to much Western reluctance to conclude the process of abandoning sanctions, and to encourage re-engagement and, above all, re-investment. A bankrupt Zimbabwe does little to help SADC in what was meant to be a zone of economic and integrated cooperation. The question is whether, if that chance is accorded, there is the operational policy to achieve anything.

The legacy of Mugabe

What then is the legacy of Mugabe? Away from the close-quarter consequences of unplanned policy, described above, the general rubric of nationalism which has at its core ownership of land continues to echo in many parts of Africa, South Africa included. The image of the liberator-hero might have become in some ways a mere trope, but it is a powerful and resonant one. The Mugabe who is dead will carry forward this resonance in many ways more effectively than the sickly Mugabe who was barely alive.

In Zimbabwe itself, the death of Mugabe is like welcome rain to the Zanu-PF of Mnangagwa. After a decent interval of public mourning, his government will have a target of blame in a man who cannot answer back and who cannot reward any allies or defenders. A strange twin-track allocation of blame outwards (the West, its sanctions, its uncooperative refusal to invest vast sums in a decayed economy) and blame inwards (the father who lost touch) will help cloak Finance Minister Ncube's increasing measures of austerity as he labours to convince the IMF – and through the IMF, the West and China – to turn on some financial taps. It will never be enough. The eventual flow of liquidity will not restore an economy that needs restructuring, and the development from scratch of measurable and coordinated national productivity. That a country became so economically ruined is an inescapable and haunting background shadow to all the tropes of heroism. The legacy of Mugabe is not necessarily an indictment of the concepts behind his policies. It is a total indictment that says that if planning, operational capacity, and the marriage of macro and micro economic benefit are missing, any policy of nationalism and heroism becomes dissolute.

The next elections

There will be no national elections until 2023, and neither major party is contemplating them at this moment. Political speculation is built around a 'national dialogue', and both parties are sparring over how to command the terms and conditions of such a dialogue. Civil society and church groups ponder aloud the need to include the army in such a dialogue; but that effectively recognises the need for a constitutional space for the army and formalises the sense of a securocratic state.

But, come 2023, the elections will be fought around whether or not Zanu-PF has been successful in stabilising the economy. In a sense, much hangs on the Minister of Finance and whether he can satisfy the international lending community. No faction in either party has an alternative financial plan or platform. Both parties will probably remain divided, although health and mortality, as with the death of Mugabe himself, could change the complexion of the ruling party. In a very real sense, the 2018 elections may have been the last fought by the 'liberation' generation. Whether Nelson Chamisa can make the attractions of youthful leadership more obvious is different question.

The key feature of the 2018 elections was the presence of several observer groups, even though they were adversely impressed by the rough handling they witnessed and received. The US, European and Commonwealth groups cannot be disinvited in 2023. The state of the economy will be a real issue. The shadow of Mugabe having been lifted may mean a different psychological backdrop. It may simply mean a lack of ruling direction, as Mugabe's residual nationalism fades into a more-or-less naked oligarchic monopoly of assets. Angola becomes the template where rhetoric and the purging of old foes simply means the continuation of sharp cleavages in economic life.

Perhaps the observer groups will bring greater technological capacity – including the capacity to interrogate possible algorithmic variations or fluctuations in the counting process. Or both the elections and the observation may be more of the same. The question is whether Zimbabweans are tired of voting that leads to no change, or whether they are tired of a Zanu-PF government that has, not once, but twice delivered the country into terrible economic straits. However, towards the end of 2019 talk of elections is curiously wearisome and seemingly out of place in Zimbabwean discourse. The sad truth is that there has been no progress, except downwards, since the 2018 elections.