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Remembering Robert Mugabe: Hero or Despot?

By Alan Chong & Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

Anti-colonialism was the backbone of Mugabe's agenda of achieving black majority government in his country. As debate continues over his legacy, are there lessons to be learned from the Mugabe model of leadership?

COMMENTARY

ROBERT MUGABE'S passing in a Singapore hospital on 6 September 2019 has evoked mixed reactions worldwide. A nuanced perspective was reported from a churchgoer in Harare, Zimbabwe: "I think everyone can admit that without the work he did we would not be as [independent](#) as we are," she said. "You know when you fight, in a fight sometimes you lose your teeth, (right)? And we became poorer. But that's a fight and he did it, and [we should give him that](#)."

From Singapore, one followed the many twists and turns in the political fortunes of independent Zimbabwe often through the lenses of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. Often these abstractions were crystallised into issues concerning the fight against the vestiges of colonialism and the quest for a just government that reflected the majority of the indigenous population.

Winding Road to Independence

The birth of modern Zimbabwe followed a tortuous course. Initially part of a constellation of British-ruled African possessions that included Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia – as Zimbabwe was formerly named – comprised a politically-vocal white settler population who refused to accept the changing realities of decolonisation worldwide following the end of the Second World War.

Ian Douglas Smith, a graduate of the then-prestigious Rhodes University in South Africa, an ex-Royal Air Force fighter pilot, and the son of a wealthy farmer, started his career in the nascent politics allowed under colonial Rhodesian conditions.

He rapidly made his way into the leadership of the Rhodesian Front, then made headlines by issuing a unilateral declaration of independence in November 1965 in his capacity as prime minister of the fledgling white African state.

This angered not only neighbouring African majority-ruled postcolonial states, but also embarrassed British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who was painstakingly arranging for constitutional terms to avoid duplicating a South African-type scenario in Southern Rhodesia.

Rise of Mugabe

In contrast, Mugabe was born into a poor family and attended the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, becoming a school teacher. This university was retrospectively revered as it served as the training ground for Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Oliver Tambo and Chris Hani, amongst other leading lights of Africa's struggle for decolonisation.

Indeed, while Rhodes University catered to the white elites of Africa, Fort Hare schooled the future black African leaders. Incensed by Ian Smith gaining power in an independent Southern Rhodesia, Mugabe initially subscribed to Marxism and sought to undermine white minority rule.

Jailed by the white minority government from 1963 till 1974, Mugabe was hardened in his conviction that decolonisation had to roll back white racism. After several defections from fellow black African nationalist movements, he and his comrades forged the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) as a revolutionary movement sheltered in neighbouring Mozambique which was then under Marxist rule.

Following his release from prison, Mugabe waged a full-scale guerrilla war against the Smith regime with tacit support from neighbouring African states and some Commonwealth members. Being an avowed Marxist into the late 1970s did not however endear him to western states.

ZANU and ZAPU

Instead, many parties interested in brokering a peaceful resolution to the armed civil war in Rhodesia preferred to deal with Joshua Nkomo and the Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU), Mugabe's on-off political ally and more moderate-sounding partner.

ZAPU was wholeheartedly committed to the British-brokered Lancaster House Agreement in 1979 that committed the Smith regime to start a supervised transition to black majority rule through democratic elections. Under tremendous pressure, Mugabe and ZANU signed the Lancaster House accords.

In the ensuing democratic elections conducted in February 1980 under the auspices of the Lancaster House Agreement, Mugabe reorganised ZANU into the ZANU-PF (Patriotic Front) to improve his electoral chances while steering clear of his erstwhile allies in ZAPU.

Although the hustings were marred by widespread allegations of voter intimidation practised by all parties, Mugabe's ZANU-PF won by a landslide of 63% of the vote. Mugabe himself survived two assassination attempts during the campaign, nearly prompting British military intervention.

Hero or Despot?

Although Premier Mugabe officially negotiated a 'truce' of sorts with the white minority by pledging to respect their private property in exchange for British and American financial assistance to Zimbabwe, fears lingered that Mugabe would eventually return to his Marxist principles and nationalistic agendas.

Meanwhile, Mugabe's rule between 1980 and 2017 produced one of Africa's highest literacy rates that ranked at 82% in 2002. The number of schools in the country climbed from 177 in 1980 to 1,548 by 2000.

Unfortunately, Mugabe's economic record was mixed, especially in reducing economic inequality. Persons connected to ZANU-PF seemed to have done better than the rest of the black population.

By the early 2000s, facing economic downturn again, Mugabe played his old anti-white economic card by allowing the violent seizure of white-owned farms to appease disgruntled veterans of Mugabe's liberation wars. But this move exacted a huge cost on an economy which careened into hyperinflation. Many white Zimbabweans lost hope and left the country, along with foreign investors.

Mugabe's own black African detractors among the opposition parties did not escape his authoritarian censures. Towards the end of his tenure as the president of Zimbabwe, Mugabe relished his role as the tormentor of white power and of the West in general.

Lessons from Mugabe Model

Whereas the West expected condemnation for what they saw as flagrant violation of property rights, they failed to muster support from Zimbabwe's neighbours. South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), now in power, had long looked up to the ZANU as inspiration in their struggle against Apartheid rule, and these relations would prove durable to the end of Mugabe's rule.

Indeed, his expropriation of white lands proved popular in South Africa and left the ANC with a dilemma of how to temper expectations fuelled by their local political nationalists who promoted similar "solutions" in South Africa.

Such is tragically the role of the liberator of colonial subjugation in Mugabe's remarkable story. Rolling back colonialism was indubitably the steel underpinning

Mugabe's steadfast agenda of achieving black majority government in his country. Pride in reviving the ownership of the land and its economy was understandably the handmaiden to reversing centuries of colonial domination.

But one must also consider the costs of not pragmatically compromising with the realities of a complex interdependent world economy that relies on the psychology of reassuring investors and consumers. This is where today's populist leaders – in Asia and elsewhere – have plenty to learn from Mr Mugabe's passing. Today's operating principles must also include perfecting the art of compromise.

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