

Mugabe: African Liberation Hero Turned Despot

Written by Rudi Prinsloo
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Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe, who on Friday saw his stranglehold on power threatened by a long delayed unity government announced next month, has seen his standing plummet from African liberator to despot.

The 84-year-old who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence from Britain in 1980 and previously vowed that the opposition would never rule in his lifetime was once the darling of the West but is now an international pariah.

Born on February 21, 1924, at Kutama Mission northwest of the capital Harare, Mugabe is described as a studious child and a loner and qualified as a teacher at the age of 17.

An intellectual who initially embraced Marxism, he took his first steps in politics when he enrolled at Fort Hare University in South Africa, where he met many of southern Africa's future black nationalist leaders.

He then resumed teaching, moving to Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Ghana -- where he was profoundly influenced by the country's founder president Kwame Nkrumah -- and married a vivacious schoolteacher Sarah Francesca (Sally) Hayfron there.

The couple returned to what was then Southern Rhodesia in 1960.

As a member of various nationalist parties which were banned by the white-minority government, Mugabe was detained with other nationalist leaders in 1964 and spent the next 10 years in prison camps or jail.

But he used his incarceration to gather three degrees, including a law degree from London and a bachelor of administration from the University of South Africa by correspondence courses.

Personal tragedy struck at this time -- Mugabe's four-year-old son died after an illness -- but Rhodesian leader Smith did not allow Mugabe out of prison to attend the funeral.

He used those years to consolidate his position in the Zimbabwe African National Union and emerged from prison in November 1974 as ZANU leader.

He then left for Mozambique, from where his banned party was launching guerrilla attacks on Rhodesia.

Economic sanctions and war forced Rhodesian leader Ian Smith to negotiate, and Mugabe's renamed ZANU-Patriotic Front, which drew most of its support from the Shona majority, swept to power in the 1980 election.

On taking power as a liberation hero, Mugabe announced a policy of reconciliation with the country's white minority.

But he then launched a controversial land-grab policy, seizing white-owned farms. Now only

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some 4,000 white farmers remain in the chaotic land reform programme to resettle landless blacks.

Mugabe also crushed dissent among the minority Ndebele people with his North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade, which massacred an estimated 20,000 suspected "dissidents".

In 1990 he tried to establish a one-party state along Chinese lines but was opposed by a majority of his own party and backed down.

Married to his second wife, Grace who is 40 years his junior and dubbed the "first shopper" for her lavish tastes, Mugabe last month told his party that he "will never, never, never, never surrender".

Displaying familiar fiery defiance, he declared: "Zimbabwe is mine" in trademark rhetoric that has shrugged off any criticism against his 29-year rule.

In his early years Mugabe was widely credited with improving health and education for the black majority.

But under his rule as Africa's oldest leader, the former regional breadbasket has plunged into crisis with ordinary Zimbabweans battling unchecked hunger, cholera and world-record inflation.

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