

## **The Last Dance of Africa's Longest Political Patriarch**

*Stan Chu Ilo*

The political impasse in Zimbabwe has not come as a surprise to many discerning Africans. Mugabe's shenanigans and that of his ZANU-PF party are typical of many African leaders and ruling parties: African leaders do not usually lose elections. Ruling parties also do not lose control of power unless they are removed from power through military coup or by popular revolt, which often ends in ethnic conflicts, violence and in some cases civil wars. African leaders have to be negotiated out of power through all kinds of negotiations and political settlement. Indeed, credit should be given to Mugabe that one month after the elections he has not yet declared himself winner as Kibaki did in Kenya. It is obvious that the opposition in Zimbabwe was strong and alert enough and made it nearly impossible for the ruling party to thwart the will of the people. In addition, there is a clear sign among the ordinary people of Zimbabwe that they are tired of political patronage and divisiveness and want something new. Their will was so strong that even the irrepressible Mugabe has been unable to torpedo these strong counter-currents.

Elections are the commonest causes of war and violence in Africa. The recent and ongoing crisis in Kenya is a clear example. We also have many past and recent examples of political crises and wars caused by election crisis or post-election violence in many countries like, Cote d'Ivoire, Uganda, Nigeria, Congo-Kinshasa, and Chad among other countries. There have been some bright spots in the evolution of constitutional democracies in Africa as found in some African countries like Botswana, Malawi, Ghana, Senegal, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, and Tanzania.

African countries must evolve suitable means of transiting from one government to another through the electoral process. I do believe that the Western model of transiting from one government to another through regular elections cannot be transplanted to African countries without some modifications. In traditional African political set ups there were no ex-kings or chiefs, what roles does African societies envision for leaders who leave office? What could be offered to ex-leaders as some honorary or token gesture to help them quit office, and remain in retirement after quitting without interfering or sabotaging the political process? We Africans must question the cultural realities within

our societies that make leaving office a scary possibility for office holders. We also need to begin conversation on why political offices have become so attractive such that there are many who want to occupy it and remain therein without regard to the common good or the ethical dimension of the steps they take in attaining or keeping a political office. These are some of the questions the present political crisis in Zimbabwe pose.

Mugabe is not the only dictator in Africa who has refused to step down. The list is long and shameful: Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso (21 years), Yoweri Museveni of Uganda (22 years), Paul Biya of Cameroun (25 years), Teodoro Obiang Nguema of Equatorial Guinea (29 years), Sassou Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville (20 years with some interregnum in the mid 90s), and Gaddafi of Libya (39 years), to mention but a few. Most sit-tight dictators in our continent will do anything to remain in power no matter how much pain and agony they cause their people. Is it right for one to stew and swim in the blood of his or her countrymen for the evil passion of attaining and retaining power? How many millions of lives have been wasted in the African continent because of unnecessary wars and conflicts over election and power? Are we Africans ready to practice Western democracy or are we just deceiving ourselves living what we do not understand or condemning what we do not understand?

Nigerians, for instance, are now waking up to the devastating effects of the Obasanjo misrule on the nation's economy, politics and social life. The twin peaks of horror attained and sadly sustained by IBB and Abacha were not ameliorated by Obasanjo, rather he built on what they did: violence, unexplained deaths of many politicians, high incidence of violence and thuggery, state terrorism, corruption, religious grand standing, intimidation of the opposition, political patronage, grinding poverty in the midst of so much wealth, and betrayal of the highest and noble aspirations of ordinary Nigerians for the good life. The only difference was that those two ruled in a military set-up and could get away with their misrule, but Obasanjo governed in a so-called democratic setting and got away with so much harm and unmerited injustice on the land. Nigerians are getting a feel of the true length and breadth of Obasanjo's misrule every new day.

The present crisis in Zimbabwe is a well choreographed strategy by Mugabe to create chaos and anarchy in the country in order to prolong the tragedy of his growing

misrule. The question is: Does the present condition of Zimbabwe represent the dreams and aspirations of many Zimbabweans at independence in 1980? Does Robert Mugabe still incarnate any trace of the national hope of his people as he did 28 years ago? I do not think so.

At the time of her independence, Zimbabwe carried so much hope. The late president of Zambia, Julius Nyerere was quoted to have told President Mugabe on the occasion of Zimbabwe's Independence in 1980: "You have inherited a jewel, keep it that way." Zimbabwe was a land which was to show the rest of Africa how to transit from a colonial state to a prosperous state. It was also at that time, a country with a great racial and ethnic diversity that was seen as a model to the rest of Africa that multiculturalism is a blessing and not a curse. Robert Mugabe inherited a country that was at peace with herself after a long drawn out war for Independence. However, Mugabe upon assuming power made it clear in his actions and words that he wanted a one-party state that will give him absolute power in the country, and that he wanted to rule Zimbabwe in perpetuity. He has within the last ten years displayed a clear distaste for any kind of opposition to his self-styled leadership, cult of personality, abuse of power, and unilateral and divisive policies. It is no surprise that Mugabe's messiah complex has blinded him from reading the hand writing on the wall that Zimbabweans, the African continent and indeed the international community see him as an open sore of the African continent.

The nationalist Mugabe of 1980 gradually became an absolute monarch, whose misrule is seen as worse than that of the racial and colonial lords he helped to unseat. With a country that has the highest inflation in the world (1,700%), and an unemployment rate of over 83%, life in Zimbabwe has become in Hobessian terms 'short, nasty, and brutish'. With a well crafted neo-patrimonial, centralist and clientalist national political network, Zimbabwe has become Mugabe's private property. Those who oppose him swim in the hot waters of state sponsored terror, and are denied any benefits from the state. Those who fawn on him are rewarded with the dwindling largesse from a badly weakened economy. Mugabe has become a blot on Africa's present search for viable and dynamic constitutional democracies where everyone has a right to pursue their desire for happiness and self-fulfillment. Many people are wondering what else Mugabe has to offer his benighted country. Mugabe's problems were not caused by Western governments as

he would like the world and Africans to believe. The suffering and pain he brought upon his people have reached a saturation point. In addition, the sad condition of life of Zimbabweans, his dictatorial tendencies and suppression of the opposition made him unpopular among Zimbabweans whose cry for freedom and unsatisfied hunger for the good life has pierced the hearts of fellow Africans and the international community.

What is evident today is that the people of Zimbabwe have spoken with a clear voice that they wish to pick together the broken fragments of their national polity. They have rejected Robert Mugabe, his ploys, plots and games. A post-Mugabe government is the only real chance of arresting the inevitable descent of Zimbabwe into lawlessness, war, biting poverty, and national suicide. There is no other way forward for this immensely blessed country than the resistance of the attempt by Mugabe to stay in office through illegitimate means. Zimbabwe is at a turning point in her much checkered history. Every attempt should, therefore, be made by African leaders as well as the international community to stand with the freedom-loving and weather-beaten Zimbabweans. Time has now come, to put an end to the insatiable thirst for power, empty promises and rhetoric, and effete paternalism of this old African fighter, who once star-struck the continent but has now cast a thick dark cloud beyond the horizons of Mother Africa.

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