

Mugabeism: Rhesus Factor in African Politics

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Abstract

Zimbabwe is one of the hottest spots in the world today, not because of war or terrorism or geological disturbance, but because of the political turmoil which has atrophied in the being of that country all the major forces of national existence. Zimbabwe now boasts the highest inflation rate in the world; millions of Zimbabweans have fled their country as the Zimbabwean dollar, which was stronger than the US dollar a few years ago, has become so worthless that today it takes millions of Z\$ notes to purchase a loaf of bread. The major actor in this crisis is President Robert Gabriel Mugabe. His involvement in the crisis has divided the opinions of African leaders: some such as Thabo Mbeki of South Africa think Mugabe deserves some understanding; in contrast, others such as Levi Mwanawasa of Zambia think Africa (and, indeed the world community) should not hesitate to use all means, legitimate and illegitimate to remove him (Mugabe) from power. This paper is neither for Judas nor Barnabas. Its position is that Mugabe is a rhesus factor, a necessary and unnecessary variable in the Zimbabwean crisis as it reflects Africa's relationship with the rest of the world.

Introduction

It is lamentable that Africa holds the short end of the stick in all her relationship with the rest of the world. Africa's relationship with the rest of the world is complex, however, for the sake of temporal simplicity, historians have classically decomposed it into three main epochs: the era of the

slave trade (first across the desert and then across the Atlantic Ocean), the era of the colonization of Africa, and thirdly, the present era of neo-colonialism. None of the three eras of contact between Africa and the rest of the world has left pleasant memories with Africans. For the trade in Africans drained the continent of the pick of her human resources, while colonialism destroyed the glories of her past, and at present, neo-colonialism is sabotaging efforts being made by Africans to achieve true, sovereignty and nation-hood.

The interest of this paper is neo-colonialism within which context the phenomenon of Robert Mugabe will be made analogous to Rhesus factor, in Africa's external relationship. This interest in the present epoch of Africa's relationship with the rest of the world was instigated by the fact that the dimensions and chapters of the crisis going on in Zimbabwe clearly appear to have been taken out of sequence and perspective by both the sympathetic and hostile opinions about Mugabe.

Positions have been assumed on the crisis in Zimbabwe, and all are heavily colored by sentiments. But this paper's suggestion is that the basic approach to the crisis is to consider that Mugabe is doing two irreconcilably opposite things at the same time. He is democratizing land ownership in Zimbabwe at the price of a heavy hemorrhage of his distinction and dignity as an ex-freedom fighter. Mugabe, before he began the process (and politics) of redistributing lands numbered among Africa's great ones. However, he has, since the reform and its politics, gone many miles down the lane of honour and glory in the eyes of many. And because he is involved, the question, "Is Mugabe a necessary or an unnecessary example in the regulation of Africa's relations with neo-colonialist powers?" must be asked. Whatever are the responses to this question, it should be noted that the similitude which this paper seeks to establish between Mugabe and Rhesus factor is a hard-headed contemplation of both the virtuous and vicious implications of his being the most active agent in the chemistry of the crisis going on in Zimbabwe.

Justification of analogy

Before plunging into the vortex of a justification of the similitude between Robert Mugabe and Rhesus factor, let us attempt a semantic

contemplation of the words "Rhesus factor and "Mugabeism". Rhesus factor is "a substance present in the red blood cells of around 85% of humans. Its presence (rhesus positive) or absence (rhesus negative) can be dangerous for babies when they are born and for people having BLOOD TRANSFUSIONS" (Wehmeier, 2000). In non-technical language, Rhesus factor will be defined as a being both the presence and absence of which will upset a system. The other word," Mugabeism is a philosophical consideration of the involvement and propensities of African leaders such as Robert Mugabe in Africa's relationship with the rest of the world, especially with the West.

Robert Gabriel Mugabe is the most divisive talking-point in African politics today; and different positions have been assumed on the crisis which his land ownership reform and politics triggered off in Zimbabwe. On the one hand, there is a cross-section of opinion that canvasses understanding and sympathy for Mugabe and the inevitable complications one sees in his agrarian reform and politics. Those who seek this accommodation for Mugabe think he incarnates a resurgent spirit of African irredentism, that he personifies a desirable African effort to roll back the frontiers of neo-colonialism, that his land reform cannot be dismissed as one unfortunate abstract that can be disengaged from the polemics over Africa's relationship with neo-colonialist sovereigns and forces. On the other hand, there are those who are implacably opposed to Mugabe. They believe the whole episode of instability in Zimbabwe has been plausibly caused by a concatenation of disastrous steps and actions Mugabe has been taking with his advantage of power. This research will ally with neither of these extreme portraits of the situation in Zimbabwe. Rather, it will look at both the beautiful and ugly impressions of Mugabe's involvement in the crises.

Mugabe, who is being demonized in some quarters with a passion, was once (not a long time ago) a blue-eyed boy with the West. His relationship with the West remained so chummy until he began introducing some somber, distasteful elements into it in the late 1990s. Then he had (after some repugnant efforts to manipulate the constitution) started to rake up the contentious issue of land ownership which the whites had

suppressed at the Lancaster House Talks on Zimbabwe's independence. That this issue was suppressed and condemned to abeyance meant that in Zimbabwe (until Mugabe's land reforms). The whites who constituted only one per cent of the population owned seventy per cent of arable land. Many people have, despite all the damaging publicity against him, not ceased seeing him as an intrepid African nationalist imbued with a resolve to dismantle neo-colonialist architecture in Africa. Mugabe's fans, i.e those who believe in the righteousness of his economic democracy of land ownership, buck any efforts to slide his land reforms into his misadventure in Zimbabwean politics. One of them, Antonio de Figuerido, a white Portuguese, in these words, tried to put the crisis in Zimbabwe in perspective:

The root cause of animosity towards Mugabe's government is centered on the issue of the redistribution of rich and disproportionately ill decided agricultural lands inherited from, or brought by, white settlers during the decades of white settler rule. This issue was left unresolved, since the independence agreements in London over 23 years ago, (De Figuerido, (2003).

Because of this courage to return land to its rightful owners, Mugabe has become a necessary example in Africa's politics as far as her relationship with the rest of the world is concerned. There is little doubt that one of the things which have condemned Africa and detained her in the margins of development is the reprobate willingness of her leaders to collude with the rest of the world to retain and even upgrade the restrictions that colonialism and neo-colonialism have imposed upon Africa. The denunciation of Mugabe will certainly cut little ice with those who have not lost track of the history of land ownership in Zimbabwe (and in other countries in Southern Africa). Anderson (2008) will want it not to be forgotten that:

Whites in colonial Rhodesia simply took the land they wanted by conquest. They paid no compensation to the Africans they dispossessed. European farms, big and small,

dominated productive Highveld 1900 and still today. Land was free. Labour was cheap. And throughout the colonial period, the state provided enormous financial subsidies to Rhodesia's white farmers. By contrast, African agriculture was sorely neglected under British colonial rule.

On the flip side, Mugabe should be considered a reproach to African politics. He is a tyrant who has become imprisoned by illusions of grandeur and indispensability. His reform of land ownership in Zimbabwe has become insipid with a heavy tincture of dictatorial pettiness. The current crisis in Zimbabwe cast its shadow when, after his party's victory in general elections in 1990 he "called on ZANU-PF Central committee to support the creation of a de jure one-party state in September 1990 and lost" (Wikipedia, online encyclopedia). He courted and won further slump in public image in 2000 when his scheming to steamroller a referendum on a draft constitution that would have allowed [him] to seek two additional terms in office, immune government officials from prosecution, and allowed government to seize white-owned land was easily defeated. Since the botched attempts to corrupt the constitution of his country, Mugabe has lurched from one controversy to another. His main problem is the technical deficiencies in the timing and procedure of his land redistribution to lie in abeyance for about two decades?

Why did he forget for a long time that "land was a central plank of the nationalist political platform"? and that when the guerrilla war started in the seventies, both his own ZANU and Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU pledged to bring about radical land reform on gaining power? Yesterday, he was a liberation hero, but today he drips with tyrannical propensities. His statement that "it was mainly the land issue that actually needed to be addressed before getting to a stage where we say fine, we have settled this matter and people can retire" (The Economist, May 3, 2003:40) is a lunatic balderdash. His politics of land reform involves a tyrannical misuse of power and resources in his country. Mugabe clearly missed the finest opportunity to redress colonial injustice of land ownership, and now is being told that then was a time to redistribute lands and now is a time to be withdrawn from power.

Colonization and nationalism

Zimbabwe, a former British colony, was formerly called Southern Rhodesia. Its colonization by Britain started in the late 1880s. According to Weinrich (1975:17),

In 1889, the British South Africa Company was granted a Royal Charter to settle in, and administer, the land north of the Limpopo River. In 1890 Cecil Rhodes sent a pioneer column from South Africa, which crossed the Limpopo and established the town of Salisbury, the future capital of the new country. Immediately, after occupation, the company granted large tracts of land to the pioneers and to syndicates without taking into account the distribution of the African population.

This forcible seizure of land from Africans by Cecil Rhodes inaugurated the first episode of hostilities between Africans and the whites. As noted by Weinrich:

Within a short time some 15 million acres out of 96 million were given to Europeans. This land alienation, accompanied by harsh administrative practices by company agents, caused bitter frustration among the African people and when in 1893 the pioneers invaded the country of Ndabele, a tribe living to the West of the newly occupied territory, war broke out. This war was won by the superior weapons of the European settlers and Ndebeleland came under the control of the British South Africa Company.

The interest to colonize this part of Africa began after King Lobengula unwillingly surrendered his sovereignty to Rhodes. Rhodes, after stumbling upon fabulous gold deposits, wasted no time to secure and exploit them. And to gratify the greedy desire of his heart, he persistently played off the ethnic groups, one against the other.

Throughout the period of Zimbabwe's history under colonization by

Britons, inter-racial contacts between Africans and whites were as violent as they are being now. During the struggle for independence, the whites always easily overwhelmed Africans' resistance to injurious colonial practices. And disgruntled at the poor dividends of armed resistance to colonial inequities, some Africans took their case to the Lord's tabernacle. However, because of their deep suspicion of the Church which they suspected of sympathies to their oppressors, these Africans hived off to found a species of Christianity that they hoped would foster their just demand for equity in land ownership and freedom from the imperial tyranny of Britain. One of these irredentists called Romo Nyirenda even set himself up as the true son of God and consequently suffered martyrdom with his execution in 1926.

African resistance to colonialism in Zimbabwe became more sophisticated after Africans such as Joshua Nkomo, Abel Muzorewa, Ndabaningi Sithole, Robert Mugabe joined the nationalist struggle. In 1930, African National Congress (ANC) of Southern Rhodesia was formed. This party was too elitist for effective mass membership, and so it did not take long before it lost steam and died out. In 1961, National Democratic Party (NDP), formed a year before, was proscribed, having been accused of violent activities against official authorities. NDP membership morphed into Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) which in 1962 was banned too. ZAPU partisans differed deeply over how best to fight colonialism in Zimbabwe. In 1963, those who favoured greater militancy splintered off to form Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). ZANU, at first led by Ndabaningi Sithole, because of its militancy, was favoured by the African Liberation Committee (ALC). Nkomo and his ZAPU were seen by many Africans as peripatetic sympathy-seekers, because they, unlike Mugabe and his ZANU liberation fighters, were operating from exile.

Things came to a head in 1965 when Ian Smith, who was heading an ultra-racist government, unilaterally declared independence of Southern Rhodesia from Britain. His Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) attracted a loud condemnation in Africa and in some sympathetic quarters outside. Indeed, it had very serious impacts upon international politics. For example, the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) asked her

members to freeze diplomatic contacts with Britain which took a very duplicitous stand on the declaration and the crisis it generated. Also, the UDI nearly tore the Commonwealth of Nations apart.

African nationalism in Southern Rhodesia continued until 1979 when negotiations for the independence of the colony achieved a cease fire by Africans and whites. Independence was ultimately achieved with the signing of the Lancaster House Compromise in 1980 by both Africans and whites.

The Lancaster House compromise and independence

The Lancaster House compromise is important in the appreciation and historical reconstruction of the crisis in Zimbabwe. This document ended Africans' armed struggle and transferred political power to Africans. It settled major issues excepting land ownership to which the white delegates took a great exception. The white delegates schemed to moderate or even suppress the profile of land ownership, and to cadge guarantee of whatever commitments that they might be able to rail through. White land owners were certainly not prepared to make liberal concessions on land because such concessions were, as they rationally feared, certain to rock the base of their economic structure. Anderson lays out in the following lines why it must have been difficult for white farmers to make liberal concessions on land.

By the end of the seventies, more than 40 percent of the country was still in the hands of white farmers. Their community had been the backbone of Ian Smith's support since UDI, fighting against the rise of African nationalism and bitterly opposing any suggestions of African political advancement. Even in defeat, few of Rhodesia's white farmers were ready to give up their land. As the negotiations to bring majority rule to Rhodesia came to a head, the question of land redistribution still appeared to be the greatest stumbling block to a peaceful settlement, (Caledonian.org).

When they were invited to independence talks in London, Zimbabwean nationalist leaders such as Robert Mugabe, Abel Muzorewa, Joshua Nkomo, had a lot of reservations about the intentions of both the white land owners and Britain. Britain had played hide-and-seek over Smith's UDI and assumed a very ambiguous position on the land question. Nonetheless, the nationalist leaders accepted the invitations after a commitment by Britain to giving #75 million to offset the cost of buying out European farmers after independence. They were, however, disappointed when Britain modified this commitment, promising to provide N20 million instead, and putting the nationalist leaders into a very disadvantageous position of committing to respecting European property rights and [refraining] from any expropriation of land during the first 10 years of independence while the constitution negotiated at Lancaster House remained in force. Though African participants accepted this proposal, it seemed a poor deal and has rankled ever since.

There is no doubt that the Lancaster House Compromise was conceived with the most despicable intention to guarantee colonial perversities which kept 70 per cent of arable land in the caroused hands of less than one percent of the Zimbabwean population. This compromise was the Pandora's box which Mugabe, after being in power for two decades, decided to open. Also, it is the cause of 231 million per cent inflation rate, of cholera epidemic, of run away cost of living, and of other piteous spectacles that are the lot of Zimbabwe today. Africans reluctantly accepted the conditions laid out at the Lancaster House and Zimbabwe 'became' politically independent.

The ambivalence of African response to the crisis

No one will begrudge Zimbabwe her touching images of famine, unaffordable livelihood, social/political dislocation and her association with the highest inflation figure in the world, and no one will disagree that her crisis merits unrestrained concern either. There is, however, a clear disagreement among African leaders over who to blame for the crisis.

Some African leaders think that Mugabe is a devil who is not as black as a jaundiced artist painted him. This group argues that he at least

deserves the opportunity to be understood. In this group are Thabo Mbeki, Bakili Muluzi of Malawi, Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Muammar Ghaddafi of Libya, Namibia. South Africa, Namibia and Malawi lobby for a moderation of passion for Mugabe because, they like Zimbabwe, are grappling with how to balance land ownership. DRC does the same thing as a gesture of repayment for the support Mugabe gave the senior Kabila. Ghaddafi does the same thing possibly because he sees Mugabe as a soul-mate in his entrenched paranoia about the West. Mbeki's sympathy for Mugabe couched in these words: "with everything having failed to restore the land to its original owners in a peaceful manner, a forcible process of land redistribution becomes inevitable" (Africa Today, February 2004:22) was strongly influenced by his frustrations with the slow pace of land redistribution at home [South Africa]. Muluzi who also sues for sympathy for Mugabe thinks that all the disparate elements in the crisis in Zimbabwe have been badly mixed up. He believes that Mugabe's land reform is being mistaken for misgovernance as the cause of the crisis in that country.

[The crisis in Zimbabwe] isn't a question of leadership. The Zimbabwe problem has been there because of land problem, and it affects whites. In fact, all of us in the region supported the land programme because there is no freedom without land. And democracy is about the equitable distribution of wealth. And in Zimbabwe, there is no equitable distribution of wealth, (New African, July 2003:21).

On the other hand are some African leaders such as John Kuffour, Festus Mogae, Raila Odinga, Desmond Tutu and Levi Mwanawasa who think Mugabe is maniacally destroying Zimbabwe. These eminent personalities are orchestrating the African angle of the demonization of Mugabe. One of them, Tutu, whose voice carries a lot of weight in African and world affairs, once expressed his discomfiture at an attempt by some African leaders to get some reprieve for Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth of Nations' sanctions against her. Tutu said that:

I respect the African leaders who participated in [the 2003 CHOGM held in Abuja, Nigeria], some more than others. But I have to confess that I have been baffled with what appears to have happened there, and the reactions of some of the participants. What has been reported as happening in Zimbabwe is totally unacceptable and reprehensive and we ought to say so, regretting that it should have been necessary to condemn erstwhile comrades, Africa Today, February 2004:22).

Tutu has also called for military intervention in Zimbabwe.

Another harsh critic of Mugabe was Levi Mwanawasa who made his denunciation of the former an article of faith. Throughout his time as chairman of Southern African Development Community, SADC, Mwanawasa, literally and figuratively speaking, made the denunciation an informal principle of the organization. This author is inclined to believe that Mwanawasa died of complications caused by his hysteria over Mugabe. Mwanawasa, while attending an Africa Union meeting in Egypt in 2008 suffered a stroke from which he never fought back to full health. The least undiplomatic of these critics is Raila Odinga, Prime Minister of Kenya, who also has called for military intervention in Zimbabwe. Still smarting from his experience in 2007 general election in which many believed he unfairly lost to President Mwai Kiwaki, Odinga will be only too eager to compare Mugabe to Kibaki and himself to Morgan Tsvangirai. These two are the pronounced positions African leaders have assumed on the crisis in Zimbabwe. Any other ones will certainly be seeking a permutation of the mechanics these two propose.

Conclusion

We have seen the two main positions African leaders have assumed on the crisis in Zimbabwe. Both of them are extreme and Mugabe is in neither of them. He is in a third one which should be a synthesization of these two. Mugabe was a liberation hero who has become over featured by ambition in the game of Zimbabwean and African politics. He bungled and politicized his effort to restore an African patrimony. The overwhelming

crisis in his country shows that he and his men did not work out a viable blueprint before the first step at land reform was taken. If they had planned well, the Chinese who have replaced westerners as their best friends could have helped Zimbabwe maintain the food security level existing before the exodus of the white farmers. Again, Mugabe waited for too long to begin his reform of land ownership, and his failure to take advantage of time is what has become one of the major challenges he is facing today. His barefaced statement that "it was mainly the land issue that actually needed to be addressed before getting to a stage where we can say fine, we have settled this matter and people can retire" is a lunatic, flatulent balderdash. He should not fail to note that the crisis has become so complicated that it has outgrown the issue of land redistribution that instigated it in the first place. The crisis now involves a tyrannical misuse of power and resources in Zimbabwe, obliging that he voluntarily retires or be forcibly withdrawn from power.

Yet, observers should not fail to understand that the crisis in Zimbabwe is a microcosmic representation of West's stranglehold on Africa. This crisis is larger than Mugabe, so Africans should look at the composite picture and try to connect the dots. Mugabe is one of the dots, his overstay in power is another; his effort to redistribute land is another; the effort by the West to disable this effort is yet another dot. All these dots should be woven into a cobweb.

Recommendations

Because Mugabe has become a bull in a China shop, great care must be exercised in dealing with him. There is no doubt that the crisis he has been accused of causing will survive his time in power. Because the crisis is larger than Mugabe, peace efforts should countenance the following points.

Emotions should not be allowed to run away with all those who are directly or indirectly involved in negotiations on the crisis. So, stakeholders like Tsvangirai Mugabe should be persuaded to moderate positions.

No mistake should be made to disregard the 47 percent of Zimbabwean voters who voted for ZANU-PF in the first round of presidential election in 2007; and neither should the serological preference that sat ninety-nine members of this party in Zimbabwe's national legislature be disregarded. The percentages of votes ZANU-PF won in 2007 show that nearly half the voting-age population in Zimbabwe still loved Mugabe.

Africans should not surrender control of mediation efforts to Westerners. Also, Africans should not allow the west to determine the momentum of their reaction to, and involvement in, the crisis. It will be unconscionable if Africans should not support Mugabe's uncanny boldness to remedy colonial injustices.

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