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Zimbabwe

Goodbye and Good Riddance, Robert Mugabe

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Robert Mugabe was no socialist. He was a man obsessed with his own power and control.

When the history of Robert Mugabe is written, it will not be about a black man raised by a single mother, who defied all odds in racially segregated Southern Rhodesia to pursue an education at the highest levels. Neither will it be about an articulate black African teacher-turned-politician, who spent around a decade in prison for challenging white colonial racism and working for the betterment of black Zimbabweans. It will be about the four decades Mugabe was at the helm in post-colonial Zimbabwe, in which his rule was anything but admirable.

As a young politician in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Mugabe was by no means the most prominent of the black nationalists fighting white colonial rule. Neither was he the most motivated. He was, however, the most eloquent. For a clique of educated black elites, whose political and societal outlook was fashioned in mission schools, Mugabe was the man of choice to convey the message to white rulers “in voice and comportment” that blacks were no longer “uncivilized tribesmen.” They were sophisticated enough to deserve the franchise.

In everyday manners and air, Mugabe was an “English man” who spoke their language in the shapely tone of an eloquent and “cultured” gentleman. It is no wonder that when he arrived on the nascent nationalist scene, fellow nationalists noticed his gift of gab and appointed him publicity secretary in their organization, the National Democratic Party.

At the time, Mugabe had come back home, presumably for the holidays, from Ghana, where he worked as a teacher, with the intention to go back to West Africa. He may never have wanted to stay in Rhodesia for long. He became the reluctant latecomer who would go on to dominate Zimbabwean politics for almost half a century.

Much of what people outside Zimbabwe know about Mugabe starts on April 18, 1980, when the colonial tether on Zimbabwe [snapped](#) and the country gained independence from Britain. The popular story is that Mugabe, as a Marxist revolutionary, ushered in a new era of liberation and social progress, exemplified by the early expansion of the education and health delivery system for black people. Yet Mugabe was neither a socialist nor a revolutionary.

He was a rebel, but one who wanted to replace white rulers with a self-interested political project. When he “talked revolution,” it was out of expediency, to further his goal of securing the presidency for life. When he donned revolutionary garb, it was always fleetingly (in the early 1980s, for picture poses), and with an unseemly addition: a tie that clashed with his safari suit.

Mugabe never hid his [disdain](#) for pot-smoking and dreadlocked black men, instead marveling at European classical musicians, especially Beethoven. In an oft-recounted story, Mugabe was quick to express his displeasure about Bob Marley’s invitation to perform at the 1980 independence celebrations. It’s said that he wanted a pianist, preferably British, possibly Cliff Richard.

As an intellectual, Mugabe was never a serious one. His idea of intellectualism was confined to the accumulation of certificates, academic or otherwise. His much-vaunted “seven university degrees,” many achieved through correspondence, were a testimony to this shallowness. A cursory Google search of his works pulls up [one collection](#) of his speeches titled *Our War of Liberation: Speeches, Articles, Interviews, 1976-1979*, but nothing intellectually intriguing. His politics correspondingly lacked ideological robustness, and many of his party and national programs were not designed to outlive him. For that reason, he loathed any discussion about succession, and was violent to

anyone posing any kind of threat to him.

It is easy to point to the social programs during the independence euphoria of the 1980s as an example of Mugabe's commitment to black people and socialism. But throughout the 1980s, and with "[Britain's willful blindness](#)," Mugabe sought to build a one-party dictatorship in the mold of the Kims' North Korea. In fact, he invited North Korean military supervisors to help him create a private army brigade that hounded the opposition and committed [one of the worst atrocities](#) against African people in independent Africa. In the end, the Gukurahundi massacres left an estimated twenty thousand civilians, most of them isiNdebele-speaking black men, women, and children, dead in unmarked mass graves.

Mugabe's politics were a bizarre [populism](#) that relied on force rather than the support of the masses. While this aided his self-interested political ambitions, it was simply unsustainable; his hold began faltering as early as the 1990s. Faced with a fast-changing global political economy and louder demands for change at home, Mugabe's ostensible socialism was exposed as the clumsy fraud that it was.

Western donors who had footed part of his bills started isolating him, and corruption in his government sprouted. The perceived glories of the 1980s went down the drain and, with them, the social programs. Epidemic after epidemic exposed the weak foundations of the health care delivery system, from HIV and AIDS in the late 1990s to cholera and typhoid in the 2000s. Educated Zimbabweans hopped in desperation from one country to another, carrying wads of certificates that often yielded little more than menial jobs.

The Mugabe-era education system, specifically, was bad for the country. With it, he stifled critical minds and killed innovation. Schools taught people to cram for exams and follow instructions to a tee. The most famous teacher in the village or township was the one who whacked the hell out of children for failing a test. Most schools were a mirror image of Mugabe's political [modus operandi](#); slapping down dissenters and ruling the country with a huge stick in hand. Pupils passed with high grades, but out of fear: fear of the teachers' reprisals or, in the case of college students, fear of being left behind when others' ostensible qualifications allowed them to leave the country after graduation.

Mugabe, a teacher trained in the 1940s and 1950s, when blacks weren't expected or allowed to think critically, managed to oil and expand what his [Rhodesian predecessors](#) had left behind. He flaunted the education system whenever he got the chance. It churned out a politically compliant population that loved instruction manuals and textbooks. Individuals who recited what they memorized under the watch of an angry teacher "and ended up doing it with glee. That was sometimes seen as a sign of intelligence amongst Zimbabweans.

Those who managed to skip the border to escape the hellhole that our country had become made for lovely, smiling, articulate butlers and waiters that attended to tourists in places like Dubai and Cape Town. Zimbabweans could, of course, read and cram the menu, enough to explain food recipes to visitors in impeccable English.

They also made for the best implementers of NGO projects "whether or not they believed in their employers' philosophies (most of the times they didn't). They became the best foremen and machine operators on farms in South Africa's Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces "because they could read and follow instructions on seed and pesticide packages. Most never uttered any criticism, come rain come sunshine.

Sadly, that extended to the politics of our nation. And Robert Mugabe knew it.

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] This article was adapted by Jacobin from [Africa is a Country](#) .