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Zimbabwe

Why Do So Many Western Leftists Defend Robert Mugabe?

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Apologetics for a kleptocratic tyrant have nothing to do with anti-imperialism.

Why do so many Western leftists feel the need to defend [a counter-revolutionary](#), kleptocratic despot like [Robert Mugabe](#)? Is it because a country like Zimbabwe and its struggles only matter to them to score points against their interlocutors in the United States or Europe?

Mugabe is almost universally reviled among his own people. His corrupt, [authoritarian regime](#) was about as far from any desirable socialist project as one could possibly imagine and he hijacked a popular movement performing actual land reform in order to save his stumbling autocracy.

He remains a harsh social conservative who [advocates](#) legal action against LGBTIQ persons. Gays are "worse than dogs and pigs," he once [said](#).

Mugabe was a neoliberal stooge up until the 2000s. And far from being a Pan-Africanist hero, he sent his army to intervene in the most rapacious war in Africa's history in the Congo, where it committed major war crimes and seized diamond mines from the DRC in order funnel billions of the illicit proceeds from "blood diamonds" into the coffers of Zimbabwe's ruling elite, [including](#) new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa.

I would love to see some of Mugabe's apologists explain away his son's [comments](#), mad at an exclusive club in Johannesburg a few weeks before the coup: "60k (USD of course) on my wrist, because my daddy runs the country."

The historical record shows that Mugabe [did away](#) with his rivals (through "car accidents" and "suicides"), many of whom played a greater role in the struggle against the Rhodesian apartheid tyranny than he did, and [unleashed](#) a genocidal campaign against his own people shortly after coming to power in order to secure his own power base; at least twenty thousand people were indiscriminately murdered by a special army unit in 1983 and 1984. The Zimbabwean [trade union movement](#) and its socialist left have both been major victims of Zanu-PF's authoritarian rule.

In the end, China replaced the West as the major power with interests in Zimbabwe. Far from the coup being an imperialist project, it is likely that China [put pressure](#) on Zanu-PF to remove the aging and increasingly unreliable despot. As the Financial Times which cautioned against exaggerating the role of China in the coup [concluded](#): "Beijing didn't stand in the way . . . Mugabe clearly lost China's favor." (The FT also suggested there's a lesson in the events for other African autocrats long supported by China: "Might your opponents persuade China to look the other way as you are pushed out the door?")

It should be remembered that it was Mugabe [who championed](#) the IMF's structural-adjustment policies in Zimbabwe and oversaw decades of disastrous economic policies that deindustrialized the country before land reform took off. According to some estimates, Zimbabwe has an unemployment rate of 91 percent. Only 5 percent of Zimbabweans are in formal employment. The country's economy has halved since 2000. Zimbabwe's people suffer while the spoiled failsons of the elite floss on the 'gram.

Zimbabwe is also compared with Venezuela. But while Venezuela suffers from serious economic problems, it reached heights far beyond those in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's was a "socialism" based on an almost entirely informal economy, a kleptocratic state, and the wholesale transfer of raw materials to China at knockoff prices. No

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Zimbabwean is delusional enough to take Zanu-PF's propaganda seriously, but it seems more than a few Westerners are prepared to believe the lazy spin emanating from jaded hacks like the odious former health minister Jonathan Moyo, to depict Mugabe as a socialist revolutionary.

Zimbabwe's tragedy is not one of a socialist dream falling under its own contradictions. It was always a tale of an authoritarian and self-interested elite crushing democracy and impoverishing its people. Mugabe, unlike Gaddafi (who at least built a semi-decent welfare state for Libyans), wasn't removed through Western military intervention; the current political conjuncture in Zimbabwe arises from Zanu's own failings rather than some diabolical Western plot.

One can even defend Zimbabwean land reform without supporting Mugabe, who hijacked the project, ensuring his family and their cronies made off with the prime land. Critiquing an aging despot does not make you an apologist for the despicable Rhodesian regime, which remains a stain on human history. One can even claim that Mugabe and Zanu-PF betrayed the national liberation struggle. You can also rightly criticize British lies and failures when it comes to their promise to fund Zimbabwean land reform. But the people who poured out on the streets of Harare after Mugabe was toppled were not the dupes of Western imperialism; they represented the joyous outpouring of a population that has known untold suffering over the last few decades, a people who had given up hope of any real political change before the old man died.

It is even possible to be skeptical of supporting a coup led by the most repressive and corrupt elements of the Zimbabwean ruling class, while also appreciating the real joy and sense of hope that has returned to the Zimbabwean people after so many years where they were robbed of the ability to dream of a better future, or even a future at all. This remains Mugabe's greatest crime: the terror and powerlessness that comes from decades of personalized rule which inflict psychic damage on a people for generations.

Zimbabwe, despite the immense damage done by Mugabe to its universities and intellectual culture, still has many fine intellectuals (most of whom are in exile). Read their takes, appreciate their work, and follow their lead, not the soundbites and tweets from those simply looking to score points over other Western socialists. For instance, when an [article](#) on Mugabe's legacy by a black Zimbabwean scholar appeared recently in the African online publication Africa is a Country and [was adapted](#) by Jacobin, it was dubbed part of a racist conspiracy against black socialist leaders on Facebook and Twitter. What could be a greater colonial erasure of African intellectual culture?

Those who use Zimbabwe simply as a weapon to batter their rivals on the Left in the United States mirror the despicable conservatives who use Zimbabwe as a rhetorical machine gun to spray against any who dares speak about radical land reform or the heroic legacy of national liberation struggles. As Fanon [wrote](#) so many years ago: "No leader, however valuable he may be, can substitute himself for the popular will; and the national government, before concerning itself about international prestige, ought first to give back their dignity to all citizens, fill their minds and feast their eyes with human things, and create a prospect that is human because conscious and sovereign men dwell therein."

What is so "imperialist" about not celebrating reactionary authoritarian regimes and the geriatric despots that loot impoverished countries to pay for their failsons' Instagram lifestyles?

[Africa is a Country](#)