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AFRICA

Robert Mugabe, Former Zimbabwean Strongman, Dies at 95

During 37-year reign, ex-guerrilla fighter toppled colonial rule but led country into steep economic decline

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe watched a video presentation during a Southern African Development Community summit in Johannesburg in August 2008. MIKE HUTCHINGS/REUTERS

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By Peter Wonacott and Gabriele Steinhauser

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Robert Mugabe, a schoolteacher-turned-guerrilla fighter who helped topple white colonial rule in Zimbabwe only to lead the country to the brink of economic ruin, is dead.

Mr. Mugabe died in a Singapore hospital, where he had traveled frequently for medical treatment, and less than two years after a bloodless coup ended his 37-year rule over the southern African country. He was 95 years old.

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa, the former deputy who toppled him, confirmed Mr. Mugabe's death in a message from his official Twitter account Friday. "Cde Mugabe was an icon of liberation, a pan-Africanist who dedicated his life to the emancipation and empowerment of his people," Mr. Mnangagwa said. "His contribution to the history of our nation will never be forgotten."

On the streets of Zimbabwe's capital Harare, the former strongman's death was received in quiet, with small groups of people gathering to discuss the news on their way to a monthly, government-mandated cleaning campaign. Their silence stood in contrast with the jubilation that greeted Mr. Mugabe's ouster in November 2017.

For most Zimbabweans, the end of the Mugabe era hasn't brought the change they once expected. The country's official annual inflation rate spiked once again in June, to 176%, with many economists estimating that real price increases for consumers are closer to 600%. In recent weeks, there have been brutal crackdowns on protesters, opposition activists and other government critics.

"The author of our problems is dead," said Tinotenda, a 22-year-old student who declined to give his last name. "I am in college now, but I don't know whether or not I will get a job. Mugabe got us where we are now."

Mr. Mugabe's topsy-turvy rule became the narrative of Zimbabwe's independence story. In 1980, he was elected prime minister of the newly independent nation and initially went to great lengths to cultivate goodwill among white people. He would frequently invite Ian Smith, the erstwhile leader of the white-minority government that ran the country then known as Rhodesia, to tea. The former colony had detached itself from the British Empire 15 years earlier, but many white settlers retained deep ties to Britain.

When his Zanu-PF party lost control of Parliament in 2000, in part because white farmers had swung their support behind a rival, Mr. Mugabe felt betrayed. In keeping with a pattern that would define his long political career, he moved to neutralize his opponents, giving the green light for veterans of Zimbabwe's liberation war to invade white-owned farms.

Robert Mugabe in Libya in 2010. PHOTO: GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Over the next several years, white farmers and business owners left the country, sending the economy into a tailspin. Thousands of Zimbabwe's black professionals followed, many crossing the border to South Africa in search of work. Elections in 2002 and 2008 turned violent. Inflation spun out of control and the country began to import a main food staple—maize—to stave off hunger. As hunger and poverty spread, the man who came to power as a new African democrat ended up as another African despot.

It was an ailing Mr. Mugabe's failure to control an intensifying succession battle that ended his reign. On the evening of Nov. 14, 2017, tanks and soldiers directed by Mr. Mnangagwa, whom Mr. Mugabe had purged as vice president days earlier, moved into the capital, Harare. Locked in his opulent "Blue Roof" mansion on the outskirts of the city, Mr. Mugabe watched his hold over the country and party evaporate within days.

Hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans took to the streets to celebrate his impending departure. He resigned from the presidency on Nov. 21, 2017, as his Zanu-PF colleagues were preparing to impeach him.

Mr. Mugabe didn't cease to chide his opponents, even in retirement. In one of his final public appearances, on the eve of 2018 elections that were eventually won by Mr. Mnangagwa, a frail and at times disoriented Mr. Mugabe endorsed the opposition over the party he had led for much of his life.

"I cannot vote for those who have tormented me," he said, slouched behind a pile of microphones at his Harare mansion. "Pray that tomorrow brings us good news."

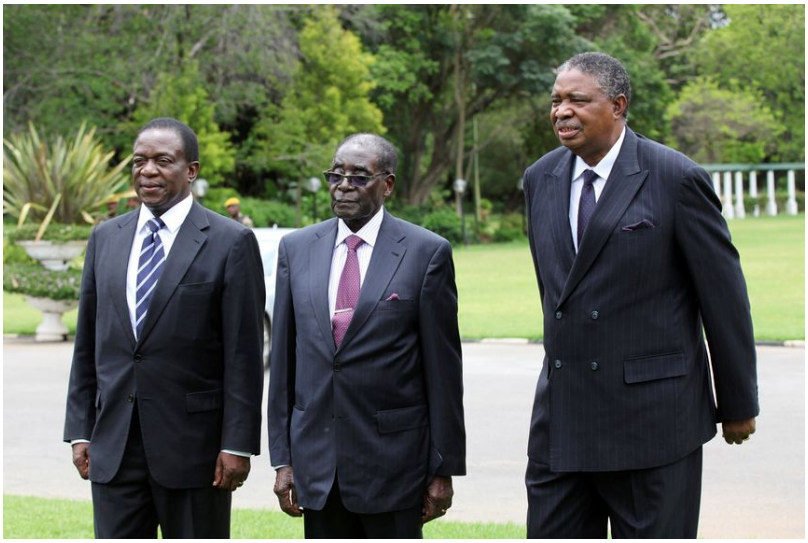
Robert Gabriel Mugabe was born in Matibiri village on Feb. 21, 1924, the son of a carpenter father who later abandoned his young family, in a country that was then a British colony known as Southern Rhodesia. He was educated at Jesuit schools and studied at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, where he was introduced to Marx and Gandhi—egalitarian thinkers who inspired his opposition to white minority rule.

The bookish Mr. Mugabe went on to become a schoolteacher in Ghana, where he met his first wife, Sally, also a teacher, who would turn—like her husband—to political activism. She died in 1992.

In 1960, Mr. Mugabe returned home to join a liberation movement that evolved in 1972 into a guerrilla war against white leadership. Rhodesian authorities arrested him in 1963, after linking his party, Zimbabwe African National Union, or ZANU, to the murder of a farmhand. Colonial authorities banned ZANU and locked up its leader.

Mr. Mugabe used the jail time to devour books on law and economics. In 1966, when his young son died, his jailers denied him permission to attend the funeral. Friends say Mr. Mugabe never forgave the Rhodesian government.

He emerged from 11 years of prison, writes Martin Meredith, author of "Mugabe: Power, Plunder and the Struggle for Zimbabwe's Future," even more committed to overturning white domination, his genteel manner disguising "a hardened and single-minded ambition."



Robert Mugabe, center, is flanked by vice presidents Phelekezela Mphoko, right, and Emmerson Mnangagwa at State House in Harare in late 2014. PHOTO: PHILIMON BULAWAYO/REUTERS

From his base in Mozambique, Mr. Mugabe commanded guerrilla fighters attacking white homesteads and planting land mines in Zimbabwe's east. Rhodesian government troops lashed back, and as many as 30,000 people died before independence in 1980. Elections then propelled Mr. Mugabe to power.

At first, he won over many of his critics—including Mr. Smith—with pledges of racial reconciliation. The British knighted Mr. Mugabe in 1994. He persuaded many white settlers to stay in a country where they remained a tiny minority—22 blacks to every white—but no longer exercised the levers of political power.

Yet in other ways, Mr. Mugabe remained a guerrilla fighter. In the 1980s, at a time when the world hailed him as a peacemaker, he allowed a North Korean-trained military brigade to kill thousands of people in the Western Matabeleland region, a stronghold of his old political partner and sometime-foe Joshua Nkomo.

Mr. Mugabe later expressed regret for the slaughter, describing it as a dark period, but he continued to cow opponents with a mix of violence and politics that doomed Zimbabwe's economy, prompting a flight of skilled workers and private capital.

He supported forcible seizures of farmland belonging to whites, a violent and chaotic process that triggered Western sanctions and started Zimbabwe's steep economic descent. The land often ended up in the hands of Mr. Mugabe's political allies, rather than those of poor black farmers.

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Long lines formed outside stores and shelves emptied. Between 2000 and 2008, Zimbabwe's economy contracted by nearly half; by the end of 2008, inflation had peaked at 500 billion percent, according to the International Monetary Fund. Toward the end of what became known as the "Lost Decade," the price of a loaf of bread soared to 80 trillion Zimbabwean dollars.

Western humanitarian aid and the adoption of the U.S. dollar helped avert a total collapse of the economy, but Mr. Mugabe became bitterly anti-West after the U.S. and the European Union imposed sanctions on him and his loyalists for human-rights abuses and undermining his country's democracy.

Mr. Mugabe could be urbane and witty, but also calculating and coldblooded. Longtime opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai once described a dinner meeting that captured those paradoxical personal qualities.

"Can we eat?" Mr. Mugabe asked.

"No," Mr. Tsvangirai replied. "I've already had something."

"Come on," Zimbabwe's president implored, Mr. Tsvangirai recalled. "If you don't eat with me, they will say it's because Robert Mugabe kills people."

Mr. Tsvangirai laughed, and sat down.

Throughout his presidency, Mr. Mugabe refused to groom a successor, frequently dismissing allies he feared were becoming too powerful. Yet his final spin on the carousel proved one too many.

In November 2017, Mr. Mugabe installed his second wife, Grace, a former typist nearly four decades his junior, as his vice president, ousting Mr. Mnangagwa, a longtime ally who had been nicknamed "The Crocodile" for his political ruthlessness. Dubbed "the First Shopper of Zimbabwe" and "dis-Grace" for embarking on extravagant retail expeditions to Asia, Mrs. Mugabe had a long list of enemies in the Zanu-PF party, who soon plotted to remove her from the line of succession.

From temporary exile in South Africa, Mr. Mnangagwa worked with the head of Zimbabwe's armed forces, Constantino Chiwenga, to direct soldiers to take over Harare. Mr. Mugabe woke up in his "Blue Roof" mansion to find himself under house arrest, shut in by the security forces that had so long propped up his rule.

But the "Old Man," as he had come to be known, clung on to power for nearly a week. In a televised address at which he was widely expected to formalize his exit, Mr. Mugabe, flanked by the generals who turned against him, insisted he was still commander in chief.

"You and I have work to do," Mr. Mugabe said in a rambling speech two days before stepping down from the presidency. "Goodnight."

He is survived by his second wife, Grace, and their three children, Bona, Robert Jr. and Chatunga.

—Bernard Mpofu contributed to this article.

In one of his final public appearances, a frail and at times disoriented Mr. Mugabe endorsed the opposition over the party he had led for much of his life. **PHOTO:** TSVANGIRAYI MUKWAZHI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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