A New Era for Africa

Anticolonial warriors like Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe transformed the continent. But it's time to move on

ZIMBABWE, THE PHYSICAL HEART OF southern Africa, is once again its political and spiritual battleground. As I write this, President Robert Mugabe is trying to block democratic change that challenges his 28-year rule. But he and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front, do not regard the people's votes as the arbiter of power—or, if they do in theory, they do not accept in practice that they could ever lose an election. In Mugabe's eyes, his right to rule derives from his status as the leader of the liberation movement, the breaker of white power and the creator of Zimbabwe. Whatever happens in the days to come, this is a watershed moment for the nation and for Africa as they struggle to move beyond the burdens of that history.

Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia, has always been crucial to the politics of southern Africa. Ruthlessly grabbed by Cecil Rhodes and a ragtag army of white adventurers in the 19th century, it became virtually a European country, the original inhabitants driven from their land and reduced to workers and servants. Although Rhodesia had one of the continent's best-educated African populations, it denied Africans political power. In 1965, after Britain tried to force change on the white settlers, they declared it an independent, white-ruled republic. Black majority rule? "Not in a thousand years," proclaimed the white leader, Ian Smith. That led to a vicious liberation war that lasted until 1979. A British-brokered deal brought an election in 1980, which

The leaders of South Africa, Angola, Mozambique and Namibia are all heirs to liberation leaders, and have all done their utmost to protect Mugabe

Fighter *Mugabe in his days of opposing white rule in Zimbabwe*

Mugabe won. For many in Africa, including its leaders, winning the war rather than the election entitled him to rule.

To outsiders, the peaceful transitions from white to black rule in Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa were nothing short of miraculous. Many expected that white rule in Southern Africa would end in a bloodbath. But there was a price. While the new rulers accepted the notions of Western-style multiparty democracy, in their hearts the liberation movements did not contemplate that they could lose power at the ballot box.

Zimbabwe is the first country to face this crisis. Mugabe is a bright man with a sense of history. He has long known that he must step down one day—but at a time of his choosing and to a worthy successor, if only he could find one. He is incensed at the thought of being pitched out of office by opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, a man he had dismissed as an ill-educated rabble rouser who played no role in the anticolonial struggle.

Most of Mugabe's peers in the region think the same way. Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, José Eduardo dos Santos of Angola, Armando Guebuza of Mozambique and Hifikepunye Pohamba of Namibia are all heirs to liberation leaders. They have done their utmost to protect—even support—Mugabe in his battle against the West. So has the Malawian President. None of them have good relations with Tsvangirai—a populist outsider whose way of thinking represents a threat to them too.

Yet African governments have taken freedom of speech and fair elections more seriously recently. Most notably, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria was forced out last year when his term was up. At the same time, continent-wide reforms have improved governance. At the end of the last century, African rulers, led by Mbeki and South Africa, began to commit to the rule of law, human rights, and free and fair elections. The Organisation of African Unity, little more than a club for dictators, was reconstituted as the African Union, with aspirations to rule Africa better and a mandate to intervene in countries suffering coups or genocidal civil wars. A Peer Review Mechanism established a committee of the great and good to probe how countries are doing in terms of political and economic management; 26 nations have signed up to be reviewed.

Mbeki was desperate to demonstrate that this was an African initiative. Any hint that he was doing the West's bidding would create an anticolonial backlash. The anticolonial struggle, though won over half a century ago in most of Africa, remains one of the few unifying causes for the continent.

Zimbabwe, of course, did not sign up to be reviewed, and no mechanism exists to hold it to account. The unfolding battle for its political soul, however, is a test for the whole continent. Will its rulers stand by the principles they have signed up to, or will Mugabe's personal stature and his anti-Western rhetoric trump these principles? This is a defining moment not just for Zimbabwe but for Africa. ■

Dowden is director of the Royal African Society

AP