



Robert Mugabe's Liberation War Credentials: ZANU-PF's Winning Card?

Introduction

The ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and its leader President Robert Mugabe have puzzled many political analysts and lay people by successively 'winning' elections in the midst of serious and unprecedented economic and political decline that has left Zimbabwe as a mere shadow of its former stature as the 'bread basket' of Southern Africa.

The popular explanation of why ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe have continued to win elections is that they have long experience in rigging them. This argument is also popular within opposition circles. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has claimed that it won both parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000 and 2002 as well as the subsequent ones of 2005 only to be cheated and denied power by ZANU-PF. They challenged results of many constituencies where they lost to ZANU-PF through the courts. Some analysts have argued that ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe have continued to win elections because of their consistent deployment of their 'degrees in violence' to scare away the people from voting for the opposition. Political violence and intimidation of the electorate is said to be ZANU-PF's winning card.

At another level, the feebleness of the opposition politics, its lack of political maturity, the vacillation of its leaders and worse still its capitulation to the old disease of factionalism is said to have given ZANU-PF a free ticket to win elections. With the two opposition MDC factions failing to unite before the coming elections scheduled for end of March 2008, it is to be expected that ZANU-PF will once more win. The MDC has failed to match ZANU-PF propaganda and mass mobilisation strategies that have included use of food and land re-distribution to buy and win voters. The MDC is banking on popular anger rather than on its mobilisation prowess.

ZANU-PF is blessed with being led by a veteran of the liberation struggle whose 'liberation war credentials' are not questionable. Because of this ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe have been very popular since 1980, and one wonders whether this popularity has continued even in the midst of economic and political crisis in the country. It was only

in February 2000 that ZANU-PF lost elections regarding a constitutional referendum¹. This was the first indication that there was a possibility of ZANU-PF being defeated in an election.

It had been exactly this belief that had galvanised some forces within the civil society and intellectual circles to launch the opposition MDC in September 1999 to wrestle political power from the ruling party. At its formation, the MDC became popular in urban areas where it also won the bulk of its votes in the 2000 parliamentary and 2002 presidential elections. ZANU-PF maintained a stronghold in the rural areas and by 2005 (parliamentary elections) it made some inroads even into the MDC urban strongholds. There are various reasons for this. Throughout the liberation struggle, ZANU – unlike ZAPU² – drew its support base from rural areas. ZAPU emerged as a worker-based party and drew its fighting forces from this class mainly, whereas ZANU imbibed Maoist mobilisation strategies of the ‘fish and water’ type. The rural peasants became the sea within which ZANLA³ forces played their politics. Throughout the liberation struggle ZANLA used night vigils – called *Pugwe* in Shona⁴ – to politicise the peasantry and to win them over to ZANU. Seen in this light, ZANU is a party with a rural base. The liberation war was fought in the rural areas and ZANLA was purely a guerrilla army compared to ZIPRA that modelled itself as a conventional military force that mainly left politics to rural ZAPU nationalists. The legacy of the liberation struggle has left a deeper memory in rural areas than in urban areas. Memory of rural guerrilla is in fact a memory of ZANU as an emancipatory force. This memory will take time to pass from peasant consciousness. ZANU is reaping dividends from this consciousness. The MDC is a product of urban civil society rather than rural mobilisation. This makes it hard for the MDC to break into ZANU's rural base.

But why did ZANU-PF loose the referendum in 2000? ZANU-PF lost partly because of its complacency. It assumed that it was still popular. Having won four successive elections (1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995) overwhelmingly, ZANU-PF had all the reasons to relax. Pressure from civil society had ‘forced’ the ruling party to call for a referendum. However,

¹ On 12/13 February 2000, Zimbabweans rejected a new constitution proposed by President Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF in a result that surprised many commentators. At a very low turnout (about 20%), the vote was some 45.3 % for and 54.7% against the new constitution. It was widely regarded as a blow for the ruling party and for Mugabe himself.

² The Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) was formed in 1961 with Joshua Nkomo as President, and Robert Mugabe as information and publicity secretary. The Rhodesian government banned ZAPU in 1962, which ultimately contributed to a guerilla war against the government. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was founded in 1963 by Ndabaningi Sithole, Herbert Chitepo, Edgar Tekere, Leopold Takawira – and Robert Mugabe (see below).

³ The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was ZANU's military wing. It was supported and trained by the Soviet Union. The armed wing of ZAPU was the Chinese-supported Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), which operated mainly in Matabeleland.

⁴ The overwhelming majority of Zimbabweans define themselves as Shona or Ndebele. More than 3/4 of Zimbabweans speak Shona as their first language (about 12-14% Ndebele). The Ndebele are mainly concentrated in Matabeleland (which is divided in the two provinces Matabeleland-North and Matabeleland-South).

ZANU-PF did not take the referendum as seriously as a national election, and its 'rigging machinery' was not fully prepared for it.

The referendum woke up ZANU-PF from slumber and complacency. By 2000, those Zimbabweans born in Zimbabwe in 1980 (the 'born-free')⁵ had entered the age of maturity and began to exercise their right to vote. ZANU-PF was not their first choice as it was failing to deliver on all fronts. The referendum was mainly an urban political affair and the majority of those who voted were from urban areas. More importantly, ZANU-PF could afford to loose a referendum as this did not remove them from power. Despite the attempt by ZANU-PF to dominate the referendum preparations, for the first time civil society also actively participated and managed to make the electorate aware of good and bad clauses in the constitution.

Very few analysts have ventured into a historically based understanding of the logic why ZANU-PF and Mugabe continue to be 'popular' in the midst of a crushing economic and political crisis that has affected every aspect of people's lives. This essay posits that ZANU-PF and Mugabe have continued to be popular and to win elections ahead of any other party in the country because of their undisputed 'liberation war credentials.' This argument is vindicated by the fact that in Matabeleland areas where the 'liberation war credentials' of ZANU-PF and Mugabe were contested and overshadowed by those of Joshua Nkomo, PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA, their popularity is not all that impressive and the MDC has been able to gain considerable support in both rural and urban constituencies. Unlike ZANLA that left peasants with a very deep memory of the liberation struggle, ZIPRA with their Soviet-orientation won the support of peasants through impressive military victories against the enemy on the front rather than through night vigils and propaganda. Therefore unlike in Mashonaland where ZANLA operated, in Matabeleland the peasants remained relatively 'uncaptured' mentally - hence their flexibility in voting patterns. The peasants of Mashonaland were fully 'captured' by ZANU nationalist liberation imaginations.

The Liberation Struggle as a Myth of Foundation

Without the liberation struggle in which the ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe played a fundamental role there would be no Zimbabwe, so the mainstream and official nationalist inspired narrative of the foundation of the post-colonial liberated and sovereign nation. In this discourse, Mugabe is the icon of guerrilla liberation warfare, a veteran of the bush war that brought Zimbabwe into being in 1980 – just as Nelson Mandela is the icon of the anti-apartheid struggle and living symbol of the triumph of good over evil. It is important

⁵ The Prime Minister of the British Colony Southern Rhodesia, Ian Smith, had declared independence unilaterally in 1965. As Prime Minister of the internationally not recognised Rhodesia, he had maintained a white minority regime until a negotiated settlement ended his reign. A first negotiated settlement in 1978 (see below) failed to put an end to the civil war. The final settlement was signed on 21 December 1979 and became known as the 'Lancaster House Agreement'. In February 1980, ZANU-PF won the first general elections of the new 'Republic of Zimbabwe'.

to highlight here that Mugabe is however different from Mandela in that he is more a 'usurper' of power than the real founding father of the liberation struggle. First, he was part of the 'dissidents' that led the split from ZAPU in 1963 to form ZANU. Second, he was part of a plot to dethrone Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole from the presidency of ZANU.

Like all 'usurpers' across history, Mugabe worked hard to create the image of being *indoda sibili* (a real man - to use his own phrase) within the liberation struggle. He consistently played the role of a radical and a true symbol of the triumph of revolutionary courage over opportunistic cowardice, prevarication, and 'puppetism' of some nationalist leaders like Nkomo, Sithole, and Bishop Abel Muzorewa⁶. He consistently worked to make sure his liberation war credentials were beyond question, lest people were reminded of his usurpation of power and influence from Nkomo and Sithole. This living hero of the liberation war has come to embody the core ideals of a liberated state, a vanguard and revolutionary party that knows what the people want and that has a historic duty to fulfil even the oracular prophecies of Shona spirit mediums to fight for complete liberation including taking back the 'stolen' land.

One feature of Mugabe is his ability to use culture as a political tool of mobilisation. When he joined the nationalist struggle from Ghana, he had seen how Kwame Nkrumah used culture to create his political profile. Nkomo was another great cultural nationalist. But Mugabe overtook him when he appropriated all leading Shona spirit mediums like Mbuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi, and Chaminuka to add the religious sacredness to his leadership and the liberation mission of ZANU. This strategy also endeared ZANU more to the peasant who still strongly believed in the power of traditional African religion with its oracular shrines.

The person of Robert Mugabe has been so 'present' in the Zimbabwean political landscape that it has engendered a strong belief even within ZANU-PF that should Mugabe step down, the party, the state, and the nation will crumble (the 'no Zimbabwe without Mugabe' mentality). Mugabe's portrait is literally visible in every public office to demonstrate his ever presence in the lives of Zimbabweans. The creation of the National Youth Training Centres has inscribed 'Mugabe-ism' on the minds of the youth under the pretence to inculcate them with 'patriotism.'

⁶ In the 1970s the British Government had been working towards a deal with the Ian Smith regime that would end economic sanctions in return for a transition plan towards majority rule. Bishop Muzorewa formed the 'United African National Council' (UANC) to oppose this settlement. Towards the end of the 1970s, the UANC was the only legal 'black' party in Rhodesia, since it had rejected violence. In March 1978, Muzorewa along with Reverend Sithole and others signed an agreement with the Smith regime that led to an interim government. The UANC won the subsequent elections in 1979 and Muzorewa became the first Prime Minister of the new 'Zimbabwe Rhodesia' (both ZANU and ZAPU, however, denounced the process and the civil war continued). Muzorewa officially remained Prime Minister until ZANU-PF won the February 1980 elections after the 'Lancaster House Agreement'.

Since 2000 ZANU has been searching for the reasons why it lost the referendum. Its conclusions were that there were 'uncaptured' youth who are ignorant of the liberation credentials of the ruling party. The late Minister of Youth and Employment, Border Gezi, insisted that the 'born free' youth needed to be 'captured' if ZANU was to survive the challenge from the MDC. This is why National Youth Training Centres are termed Border Gezi Youth Training Centres. Their purpose was to capture the youth on behalf of ZANU and Robert Mugabe. The question explored below is how Mugabe came to where he is and why is he still popular in the midst of a crisis. A venture into his liberation credentials is in order here.

Robert Mugabe's Liberation War Credentials

Mugabe's interest in politics crystallised while he was pursuing his education and profession as a teacher. His political baptism was at Fort Hare University College in South Africa where he came into contact with the ANC's radical youth wing, read Marxist literature, talked with South African communists and came under the strong influence of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of passive resistance. He was also influenced by Harry Nkumbula and Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia and the legendary Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana where he took up a teaching position for some time. Giving a eulogy at Joshua Nkomo's burial at the Heroes Acre in July 1999, Mugabe admitted that Nkomo influenced him to join politics as a young teacher. He was also influenced by a fellow teacher, Leopold Takawira, who had joined the struggle for liberation.

Mugabe joined the National Democratic Party (NDP) in May 1960 and immediately impressed many Africans by his eloquence and spent time sharing his experiences in independent Ghana with his African supporters in Highfield Township in then Salisbury (Harare). By October 1961, Mugabe was elected Information and Publicity Secretary of the NDP. The NDP was a successor to the first mass nationalist party formed in 1957 called the Southern Rhodesia African National Congress (SRANC) that was banned in 1959. When the NDP was banned, Mugabe together with other nationalists formed the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) where he continued as its Information and Publicity Secretary. ZAPU was banned within a year of its existence, and the leading nationalists, including Mugabe, began to organise underground politics with the aim to launch the armed liberation struggle. While this was underway, ZAPU was hit by a major split that led to the formation of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) on the 8th of August 1963 in Enos Nkala's house. Mugabe went with those who formed ZANU which until 1976 was led by Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole.

The causes of the split are still subject to debate among scholars and even participants. It partly had to do with the leadership of Joshua Nkomo and partly to do with tribalism. Nationalists who led the split have popularised issues of differences over ideology and strategy and ignored ethnicity to save their faces. They portrayed themselves as radical and confrontational. But what is beyond doubt is that the split resulted in inter-nationalist violence that rocked the major cities and inaugurated politics of factionalism that rocked nationalist movements until 1980 and beyond. It also divided the liberation struggle into

ZAPU (the Ndebele-Kalanga camp) and ZANU (the Shona camp). Recruitment into the military wings of ZAPU and ZANU took ethnic dimensions. ZANLA became predominantly Shona in outlook whereas ZIPRA became predominantly Ndebele⁷.

As background it is important to note that between 1964 and 1974, Mugabe together with other leading nationalists of both ZAPU and ZANU, save for a few who were in exile already, languished in detention. It was then that some leaders of ZANU, particularly Mugabe, Enos Nkala, Maurice Nyagumbo, and Edgar Tekere, fell out of favour with Ndabaningi Sithole the founder president of ZANU. Mugabe became the favoured alternative. But it was not until the Magagao Declaration that Mugabe was accepted by a wider fraternity of ZANU as their leader. Unlike Sithole, Mugabe worked very hard to consistently demonstrate his unwavering commitment to the armed liberation struggle by embarking on a long, dangerous journey to join the fighting forces and recruits in Mozambique in 1975 together with Tekere. His press statements were in line with ZANU's chosen radical politics. When the external ZANU leadership was detained in Zambia, following the assassination of Herbert Chitepo, the national chairman of ZANU, Mugabe fought for their release and condemned Kenneth Kaunda for bringing the liberation struggle to a standstill. Mugabe articulately espoused ZANU philosophy and argued for a resumption of the armed struggle.

By 1976 Mugabe had ascended to the highest position in ZANU, and he immediately imbibed Marxist and Maoist rhetoric in order to be in synch with the fighting forces and the broader support base of the party. He immediately became the most eloquent champion of liberation of the country from colonial rule and an avowed Marxist guerrilla leader. Under his leadership the armed liberation struggle was embraced as the only route to independence, though he continued to engage in diplomatic initiatives and negotiations in Geneva, Malta, and ultimately Lancaster House where independence was finally successfully negotiated.

Conclusions

Mugabe and the struggle for Zimbabwe are one in popular memory. ZANU-PF and Mugabe are one in the view of the rank and file of party supporters. During the armed struggle ZANLA (the military wing of ZANU) and ZANU were one. Today, Mugabe, ZANU-PF, and the land reform are one. In short, Mugabe has unchallengeable liberation credentials and these are useful for every ZANU-PF election campaign.

⁷ This ethnic bifurcation of the two major liberation movements had the long-term effect of politicising Ndebele and Shona identities with calamitous consequences for the post-colonial state. Its immediate result was the civil war that rocked Matabeleland and the Midlands regions characterised by state-sanctioned and ethnicised violence that reduced the Ndebele-speaking people to dissidents or dissident collaborators. Violence only came to an end with the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987 that was in reality a Ndebele-Shona nationalist elite pact with little to offer in uniting the grassroots. The long-term impact of the ethnicised violence of the 1980s against the Ndebele has polarised the nation beyond repair.

The credentials of Mugabe and his party have enabled them to appropriate liberation history and war veterans as party property and through the National Service Youth Training Programme the youth are also being appropriated to serve the party. Traditional chiefs in rural areas have also been brought to the side of ZANU-PF through pay-offs as well as the top military and police officers. On top of this, popular national heroes like Joshua Nkomo and Simon Muzenda have been appropriated to serve ZANU-PF's hegemonic agenda. Opposition forces have found it very hard to penetrate this hegemony.

The MDC-Mutambara has tried to wrest nationalist and liberation history from ZANU-PF's monopoly. They have supported land reform in an attempt to make inroads into what ZANU-PF has reduced to a party affair. They have tried to imbibe the same nationalist rhetoric that ZANU-PF has used effectively to label the 'other' MDC-Tsvangirai as an imperialist funded political formation. But the problem is that the Mutambara faction is small and it is not clear whether its politics have any national appeal strong enough to make a political difference in Zimbabwe.

Let us wait and see what will come out of the March 2008 elections. ZANU-PF is banking on its unchallengeable liberation credentials, and despite Mugabe's well advanced age, he is still a symbol of the liberation struggle. The post-nationalist dispensation is yet to be born in Zimbabwe. In ideological terms, Mugabe is unique in that he has consistently kept his eyes on the nationalist liberation ideals, instrumentally using them to connect with the electorate during every election for over 28 years.

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