

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Empire's angry offspring

Michael Holman, who first met Robert Mugabe 30 years ago, traces the personal and political history that turned the warrior for Zimbabwean liberation into today's bitter president

Over the next 48 hours Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe will, for better or worse, shape the future of southern Africa. If he loses the weekend presidential poll and goes quietly, the region will heave a sigh of relief. If – as seems more likely – he clings to power, the worsening economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe will infect all its neighbours.

It is a far cry from the landslide victory that Mr Mugabe won in 1980, in the immediate aftermath of Zimbabwe's independence. Today the victor of the liberation struggle is resorting to thuggery and cheating to remain in power.

He claims he is the victim of a concerted campaign by the UK, as the former colonial power, and Zimbabwe's white farmers. What explains the bitterness of this talented man and his retreat into a world of paranoia and fear of conspiracy?

It is too easy to caricature him as a black, racist thug. In part, he is Britain's creation, moulded by Empire and colonialism. He is also white Rhodesia's product, shaped by minority rule and the country's bloody independence war. Yet he is his

own man, too, his character forged by a Roman Catholic mission education, seven university degrees and more than 10 years in detention.

It is nearly 30 years since I first interviewed him. I brought him a gift of a shirt from Sally, his Ghanaian wife in London. I found an austere but articulate politician with a keen, dry sense of humour. He was not yet the leader of his party but there was already a quality of sheer confidence and competence about him that would lead to his emergence as the most powerful figure in the liberation struggle.

The next occasion we met was shortly before he went into exile in neighbouring Mozambique. We shared a meal, sitting on the floor of the flat of a young lecturer at the University of Rhodesia. We were dissident young whites, whom he regarded with a certain disdain.

Mr Mugabe was as uncompromising then as he is today. There was to be no middle way. It was black majority rule or nothing. Quietly and dispassionately, he spelt out why he believed the war was justified.

It was a conflict linked with a past that Mr Mugabe has never forgotten. He has

never entirely forgiven Britain and its western allies for being on the wrong side in southern Africa's battle for liberation, supporting the Portuguese regimes in Angola and Mozambique.

As a schoolboy, I became aware of the rumblings of African nationalism that were sweeping through the continent. Incarcerated in my home town of Gwelo – 8,000 "Europeans" and 43,000 "natives" – was an African icon. Behind the white-washed walls of the jail I cycled past was Hastings Banda, future leader of Malawi. He was the self-proclaimed "destroyer of the Central African Federation" that linked his country (then Nyasaland) to Northern and Southern Rhodesia – today's Zambia and Zimbabwe.

He got his way. But the British-chaired conference in 1963 that broke up that federation helped fuel the war that was to come. The white minority government of Southern Rhodesia was left with most of the federation's army and air force. Two years later they were used by Ian Smith to defend his unilateral declaration of independence.

The death toll in the war reached 30,000 before Mr

Smith capitulated. By 1979 it had brought his rebel regime to the Lancaster House negotiating table.

The decisive issue that held up a settlement was land. Who would fund the buy-out of 5,000 white farmers? Private talks with British and US officials appeared to satisfy Mr Mugabe. Today he insists that Britain broke the spirit, if not the letter, of the Lancaster House deal.

Although the first white settlers were lured by the promise of gold, the real riches of Zimbabwe lie in its land. By the time my family arrived in the early 1950s, half the land was officially white. The rest – mostly poor quality – was left for the blacks, who outnumbered them 25:1.

As late as the 1970s, white Rhodesians were attempting to consolidate these foundations. In one celebrated case they drove Chief Rekayi Tangwenya off land on the eastern border with Mozambique, held by his family for generations.

By then an exodus of black schoolchildren was under way from the mission schools along that same border. Following Mr Mugabe's lead, they became enthusiastic recruits for what was to

become Zanla, the guerrilla army of today's ruling Zanu-PF party. The days of white rule were numbered.

It was already clear to most observers that Mr Mugabe was the man to watch rather than Joshua Nkomo, his better-known British-favoured rival from Matabeleland. In the 1980 elections Zanu-PF won 57 of the 80 seats. Most of the balance went to Mr Nkomo, reflecting a tribal division that many fear has not healed.

The breakdown came swiftly. The leader of Matabeleland's Ndebele tribe refused to accept his defeat, prompting a brutal retaliation in which thousands of peasant farmers and their families in Matabeleland were killed by Mr Mugabe's troops.

In 1980, the new prime minister had preached reconciliation. It did not last. When Mr Smith's former Rhodesian Front won all but a handful of the reserved white seats in 1985, Mr Mugabe's fury was cold and unforgiving.

It marked a sea change. A sense of betrayal gnawed away at Mr Mugabe. His wife Sally died in 1992 and his isolation increased. The



Robert Mugabe in 1978, a year before the Lancaster House deal that left him resentful

Corbis

whites had proved politically treacherous. Some, with South African assistance, had attempted sabotage, as the apartheid regime tried to destabilise its neighbours.

But land was once again the most pressing issue. Black land hunger, a prime factor in the civil war, was unassuaged. White farmers were victims of their own success, thriving under the new regime.

The Zimbabwean leader insists that Britain reneged on promises made at Lancaster House to fund land redistribution generously. The contrast with Kenya is striking. In that former colony, Britain, backed by the World Bank and Germany, provided twice as much money in real terms as it has so far given, or pledged to Zimbabwe.

Mr Mugabe blames

Britain. He claims the former colonial power has been pushing its "pink nose" into the region ever since Cecil John Rhodes dreamed of extending the Empire from the Cape to Cairo.

It may be desperate election tactics. But it is more. It suggests that Britain's last colony in Africa has yet to cut the umbilical cord that tied it to London – and neither side knows how to do it.