

The way forward in Zimbabwe after Mugabe

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The resignation of Robert Mugabe as president was celebrated among broad masses, who have seen nothing but hardship due to the catastrophic economic situation facing Zimbabwe and the brutal repression and lack of democratic rights accompanying this social decline.

But those who believe Mugabe's downfall will bring an improvement in their lives will be cruelly disappointed. The military and the faction of the ruling ZANU-PF led by Emmerson Mnangagwa have used Mugabe's 37 years as head of state to channel social discontent against him and his wife Grace and the nouveau riche clique that makes up the Generation 40 faction she heads.

However, the promises made by Mnangagwa, sworn in as president today, of "a new and unfolding democracy" and "jobs, jobs" are worthless. His goal is to impose an adrenalized version of the capitalist policies that have already created so much suffering. What is needed is not merely the removal of Mugabe, but a political reckoning with Zimbabwe's bourgeoisie and its abject failure to end imperialist domination, brutal exploitation and the looting of the country's rich natural resources.

Mugabe came to power after a 15-year armed struggle against the white settler regime of Southern Rhodesia. He headed the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), which drew its support from the majority Shona people, with its main rival, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo, based among the Ndebele people.

The insurgency led to fears of the Soviet Union developing a bridgehead in Southern Africa, prompting US-inspired talks with the British Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. With its close relations to China, ZANU utilised socialist phrases to secure popular support, while exploiting fears of ZAPU's relations with Russia, to secure Britain's backing.

The Lancaster House Agreement paved the way for elections in 1980 won by ZANU. As a precondition for taking power, Mugabe signed up to policies preserving capitalist rule in the newly independent state of Zimbabwe and the domination of the key mining and

agricultural sectors by international corporations. He also agreed not to encroach on the interests of white landowners for 10 years—taking over land only on a "willing seller" basis with full compensation.

In 1982, Mugabe launched "Operation Gukurahundi"—sweep away the chaff—in Ndebele-majority Matabeleland, a genocidal campaign led by Mnangagwa. Mugabe declared an amnesty in 1987, and the two rival parties merged to form ZANU-Popular Front.

The 1980s were a period of apparent success for Zimbabwe, which enjoyed a developed economy with rich resources, and was given favourable treatment by the West as a means of combating Soviet influence. Welfare measures and other progressive health and education reforms were implemented.

The liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought this period to an end. In the post-Cold War era, Washington, London and the European Union were no longer ready to extend the limited room for manoeuvre they once gave Zimbabwe.

Mugabe's regime, reliant on patronage and nepotism, was viewed as an impediment to the interests of international investors. Throughout the 1990s, the International Monetary Fund cut off funding and demanded the opening of Zimbabwe to foreign investment, privatisation and ever-greater levels of exploitation as part of the Structural Adjustment Programmes agreed to by Mugabe.

This led to social unrest, including general strikes between 1997 and 1999. However, the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU) opposed Mugabe from the right—forming an alliance with white business and farming interests in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 2000, which pledged to "privatise and restore business confidence."

Mugabe did nothing to wage a genuine offensive against big-business interests. He responded by combining attacks on the working class in the urban centres with encouraging limited land seizures to cement ZANU-PF's

overwhelmingly rural base—with Mugabe declaring, “Our roots are in the soil and not in the factories.”

His land policy offered no genuine solution to the social and economic problems facing either the rural poor or the workers and unemployed of the cities. The division of large agribusiness estates into small farms tied agrarian layers to ZANU-PF, but condemned previously productive agricultural land to subsistence farming when collective land ownership would have allowed for a highly productive alternative.

The imperialist powers replied to the land seizures and repression of the MDC with brutal sanctions in 2002 and 2008. Mugabe embarked on the “Look East Policy” in 2003 to seek alternative investments and markets, particularly from China and Russia. But Zimbabwe’s subordinate position in relation to the major imperialist powers was only replicated with its new trading partners, who took over vast tracts of industry, mining and the production of consumer goods. Rather than facilitating Mugabe’s declared policy of “indigenisation”, the domestic economy underwent a further collapse leading to a massive trading deficit.

Mugabe’s threat to extend indigenisation to the extraction industries was used by Mnangagwa and Commander of the Armed Forces Constantino Chiwenga to seek Beijing’s backing for their palace coup against Mugabe—with promises of a more liberal trade policy that were also extended to the US, Britain, etc. More importantly, Zimbabwe has placed itself at the centre of a struggle being waged by US imperialism against China and Russia in a contemporary version of the scramble for Africa that threatens the world with war.

The experience of Zimbabwe is that of the workers and agrarian masses in South Africa, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and throughout the continent.

None of the states established following World War II decolonisation have secured genuine independence from imperialism, or developed a viable economy that provides decent jobs, homes, education and health care. Instead, promises of national economic development have given way to the local elites acting as naked political agents of the imperialist governments, transnational corporations and banks.

The working class must adopt a genuinely socialist strategy in opposition to the counterfeit one advanced by ZANU-PF. Trotsky, based on his Theory of Permanent Revolution, opposed the Stalinist “two-stage” perspective that the path to socialism would proceed through a protracted stage of bourgeois democratic development,

which has played such a disastrous role in Africa.

He insisted that in countries with a belated capitalist development, the resolution of the democratic tasks associated in the 19th century with bourgeois revolutions, including national unity and land reform, were now bound up with the taking of power by the working class. He made clear that the global development of capitalism in the imperialist epoch, coupled with fear of an already developed working class that threatened its interests, inevitably drives the national bourgeoisie into the arms of the imperialist powers that have already divided the world between them.

The realisation of socialism must be based on the same objective reality of a global economy and of the international character of the working class. Zimbabwe’s workers must strive to seize power and form their own state, offering leadership to the rural masses. But the success of a socialist revolution, even if begun in a single country, demands that it is spread to neighbouring countries in Africa, and can only be completed on the world arena.

The working class must maintain political independence from all representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the imperialist powers—including both factions of ZANU-PF, the rival MDCs, etc.—and the trade union federations that back them. The advanced workers and youth must begin building a Zimbabwean section of the International Committee of the Fourth International to fight for a socialist Zimbabwe and a United Socialist States of Africa, and to forge a unified movement for socialism with workers in the US, Britain and other imperialist states.



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