

# Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's longtime president, dies at 95

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Robert Mugabe, the first elected leader of Zimbabwe who ruled the country for nearly four decades, died Friday at the age of 95. His death was reported from Singapore, where he had gone for medical treatment.

Mugabe was one of the last surviving leaders of Africa's anticolonial struggles who subsequently came to power in a newly independent nation. As with those who preceded him in death—Ghana's Nkrumah, Guinea's Sékou Touré, Kenya's Kenyatta, Tanzania's Nyerere, Mozambique's Machel and South Africa's Mandela among them—Mugabe's rule exposed the organic incapacity of Africa's bourgeois nationalists to realize the aspirations of the African masses for freedom from foreign domination, democracy and social justice.

There were mixed responses to the death of Mugabe, who was ousted from power in a November 2017 palace coup led by his longtime ally Emmerson Mnangagwa and the military. Washington and London both issued statements offering personal condolences to those mourning the former president, while the State Department charged that "his human rights abuses and gross economic mismanagement impoverished millions and betrayed his people's hopes for their nation", and the Foreign Office stated that "Zimbabweans suffered for too long as a result of Mugabe's autocratic rule."

One would never guess that Henry Kissinger was among those promoting Mugabe's rise to power, which was hailed by Washington, or that the UK played a similar role going so far as bestowing upon him an honorary knighthood in 1994. Nor would one suspect that the brutal sanctions regime imposed by both imperialist powers exacerbated the conditions of the "impoverished millions."

Various African heads of state paid fulsome tribute to Mugabe's memory. President Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Kenya's liberation leader and first president, whose estimated worth is \$500 million, ordered flags to be flown at half-mast for three days and hailed the former Zimbabwean president as "an embodiment of the Pan African spirit" who insisted that "African problems required African solutions."

Similarly, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, the former trade union leader turned corporate executive whose personal wealth is estimated at \$550 million, mourned "the passing of a liberation fighter and champion of Africa's cause against colonialism."

They recognize Mugabe as one of their own, a collection of corrupt heads of state who have enriched themselves at the expense of masses of African workers and oppressed subjected to extreme oppression and grinding poverty.

When Mugabe was overthrown, he was allowed to keep all of his business interests and was awarded a payment of \$10 million. A 2001 US diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks put Mugabe's total assets at \$1.75 billion, most of it invested outside Zimbabwe.

Mugabe ended his life far from where it began, as a young teacher from an impoverished family. In the late 1940s, after winning a scholarship to the University of Fort Hare in South Africa's Eastern Cape, he came into contact with the African National Congress, which he joined, and

members of the South African Communist Party, who introduced him to Marxism. He would later say that his biggest influence was not Marx, but Gandhi.

In the late 1950s, he moved to Ghana, one of Africa's first independent states, where he attended the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute in Winneba. Returning to what was then the British colony of Rhodesia, he joined the anticolonialist African nationalist movement that was just being formed there. The growth of nationalist sentiments and demands for equality among the black majority population was accompanied by increasing opposition among the white ruling elite to Britain's decolonization process. By 1965, Rhodesia would issue its Unilateral Declaration of Independence from the UK in an attempt to forestall black majority rule.

In 1963, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was founded, with Mugabe as its general secretary. Against the more conservative nationalist leaders who advocated the creation of a government in exile, Mugabe called for armed resistance to British colonialism and white minority rule. ZANU would be banned soon after and Mugabe was arrested the same year. He remained imprisoned until 1974.

By the time Mugabe emerged from prison, a guerrilla war was already being waged from camps located first in Tanzania and Zambia, and subsequently, following the collapse of Portuguese colonialism, in Mozambique.

The armed operations were being directed by a group of young commanders known as the *vashindi* or workers' movement, which sought to unite the military forces of ZANU, which had its base among the majority Shona people, and those of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo, based among the minority Ndebele people. The *vashindi* faction had also organized schools teaching fighters rudimentary Marxism.

By early 1977, Mugabe was able to convince Samora Machel, Mozambique's president, to round up and imprison the *vashindi* leaders, who were only released after Mugabe's election as prime minister of Zimbabwe in 1980. He saw this tendency as an intolerable obstacle to his own leadership, both because of its attempts to unite across ethnic lines and, just as importantly, its opposition to Mugabe's participation in a 1976 conference organized by the British Foreign Office in Geneva with the decisive support of Kissinger, then the US secretary of state.

Mugabe's contacts with the major imperialist powers found their culmination in the Lancaster House talks convened under the auspices of the British government. Held under the direction of Lord Carrington, these talks were convened in September 1979 after he and Nkomo, who had then joined ZANU and ZAPU into the Patriotic Front, had called a halt to the armed struggle.

In the end, they accepted a settlement dictated by the right-wing British government of Margaret Thatcher. This reactionary deal reserved a bloc of parliamentary seats for the white minority, guaranteed the continued capitalist basis of Rhodesia's economy, postponed any significant land

reform for a decade and assured Zimbabwe's nonaligned status as well as its peaceful coexistence with apartheid South Africa.

Lord Carrington would later remark that, while Mugabe used Marxist rhetoric during the Lancaster House negotiations, "of course he didn't actually practice what he preached, did he? Once in office he became a capitalist."

Thus, Mugabe and his party, renamed the ZANU-PF, came to power through a 1980 election after guaranteeing the interests of the international corporations that dominated the key mining and agricultural sectors, as well as those of the white landowners.

While he initially brought Nkomo and other ZAPU leaders into his cabinet, they were subsequently removed from the government amid rising tensions between ZANU-PF and ZAPU. By early 1983, this culminated in the invasion of Matabeleland, the base of ZAPU, where a brigade answerable only to Mugabe carried out mass executions, torture and the blocking of food supplies that led to mass starvation. Estimates of the death toll ranged as high as 20,000, considerably exceeding the number killed during the entire war against the white minority government.

Neither the US nor the British government—which would later vilify Mugabe—raised any protest over the slaughter in Matabeleland. They viewed ZANU-PF, which had established close relations with China, as the lesser evil compared to ZAPU, which had relations with the Soviet Union.

The Mugabe government, while consolidating a repressive regime, was able to introduce welfare measures together with health and education reforms in the 1980s under conditions in which the economy was growing and the new government was able to secure favorable treatment from the Western powers, which were determined to keep the newly independent country from aligning itself with Moscow.

After the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, Washington, London and the European Union saw no need to extend further concessions to Zimbabwe.

The Mugabe regime's social reforms as well as its networks of patronage and nepotism were viewed increasingly as intolerable brakes on the profit interests of international capital. Throughout the 1990s, the International Monetary Fund cut off funding and demanded the opening of Zimbabwe to foreign investment, privatization and ever-greater levels of exploitation as part of Structural Adjustment Programs 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 "privatize and restore business confidence."

Rather than confronting the assault being waged by both foreign and domestic capitalist interests, Mugabe sought to place the burden of the growing economic crisis on the backs of the working class in the urban centers, while demagogically encouraging limited seizures of white-owned farms to curry favor with disgruntled former soldiers of the liberation struggle as well as ZANU-PF's overwhelmingly rural base. He would declare, "Our roots are in the soil and not in the factories."

The land seizures, however, served only to deepen the poverty of both the working class and the rural poor. Carried out with no centralized plan for developing agriculture along collective lines, it broke up large and productive agribusiness estates into small subsistence farms incapable of supplying the domestic markets, much less producing export earnings.

The land seizures, Mugabe's failure to meet the demands of the IMF and the government's repression against the pro-imperialist MDC opposition led to a sharp turn by the major imperialist powers against Zimbabwe and the imposition of punishing sanctions in 2002 and 2008. In the latter year, the British government stripped Mugabe of his knighthood.

During this period, the Western powers suddenly discovered that Mugabe was an autocrat, denouncing him for his dictatorial rule. As is always the case, this only becomes a problem with governments that fail to follow the West's diktats, while other regimes, from Saudi Arabia to Uganda, are given a pass for equal or greater crimes.

The reality is that these methods of rule are the product not of "evil" individuals, but rather of the objective position of bourgeois nationalist regimes in the former colonial countries, caught between the pressures of world imperialism, on the one hand, and the revolutionary strivings of the working class and oppressed masses, on the other, and incapable of any genuinely independent action.

In the face of sanctions, Mugabe announced a "Look East Policy", which sought to replace Western investments with those from Russia and particularly China. This maneuver, however, in no way transformed Zimbabwe's subordinate position in relation to the world capitalist market, with the economy continuing to collapse and the country's trade deficit continuing to soar.

At the same time, in an attempt to solidify his support in ZANU-PF, Mugabe introduced a policy of "indigenization," which was supposed to compel all enterprises valued at over \$500,000 to have 51 percent Zimbabwean ownership. This policy, which could have only benefited Mugabe and his wealthy cronies, created friction with the country's foreign investors, including Beijing.

Mnangagwa, one of Mugabe's closest political associates going back to the 1950s and the man entrusted with executing the massacres in Matabeleland, joined with the military in seeking Beijing's blessings for a coup against Mugabe, making promises of more liberal investment and trade policies that were also extended to Western capitalists. As Mnangagwa would say after the coup, "Zimbabwe is open for business."

Mnangagwa, hailed a reformer after toppling Mugabe, within a short period after taking power had dispatched troops to massacre demonstrators, while arresting thousands, as the working class and poor continued to protest conditions of 200 percent inflation and mass unemployment.

Mugabe's fate—in one form or another—was shared by all of the bourgeois nationalist leaders and states that arose in the period of decolonization that followed the Second World War. While many, like him, displayed considerable courage while undergoing imprisonment, torture and repression, they proved incapable of establishing genuine independence from imperialism, creating genuinely democratic forms of rule or achieving the social aspirations of the masses of the oppressed. Instead, they appropriated for themselves and a new rising bourgeois layer the state structures left behind by colonialism, using them to suppress revolutionary challenges from below.

These bitter experiences provided confirmation in the negative of the Theory of Permanent Revolution upheld by the great Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, and the Fourth International that he founded in 1938. It explained that in colonial and oppressed countries only a fight for power by the working class could advance the struggle against imperialism and ensure genuine national liberation and democratic and social rights for workers and the oppressed masses. This revolution was permanent in that the working class, having seized power, could not restrict itself to democratic tasks and would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character. At the same time, the revolution was permanent in a second sense in that it could achieve victory only to the extent that it was extended in a unified fight of the international working class for world socialist revolution.

In Zimbabwe and every other country in Africa, this means that the working class must maintain political independence from all representatives of the national bourgeoisie and the imperialist powers, as well as the trade union federations that back them. The advanced workers and youth must begin building sections 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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