

A Ceremonial Ride into the Sunset for Mugabe?

Written by Stephen Chan

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STEPHEN CHAN, FEB 12 2015

Robert Mugabe, 91 years old in February 2015, assumed the chairmanship of the African Union (AU) in the same month. He was, for the year before, chairman of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc incorporating 15 countries from the Democratic Republic of Congo to South Africa. Including Angola and Botswana, the bloc's mineral resources are unrivalled in Africa. But Mugabe was a mostly inactive chairman of SADC, and it is likely that he will conduct his chairmanship of the AU in a similar fashion. Beset by economic problems at home, pondering a possible backlash from the victims of his recent political pogrom within his own party, and feeling the weight of the years and the limits of Singaporean medical intervention (he had to spend five weeks in Singapore over the new year, on one of his regular visits for unspecified medical treatment), he may be more concerned about stage-managing his legacy than leading the continent.

In some ways he should be revelling in triumph. He won the 2013 elections convincingly and, notwithstanding a clear lack of transparency over voter rolls, the opposing parties fought such a lacklustre and wrongly-planned campaign that it seemed the elections were lost as much as won. The SADC and AU choice of Mugabe to be chairman may have been to cement his triumph, conferring validation upon him – but may also have been signals that it is time for him to go, even if in a blaze of glory.

Mugabe has long enjoyed continental popularity. At the public part of Mandela's funeral, a vast stadium of South Africans booed Jacob Zuma, but gave Robert Mugabe a standing ovation. Particularly in Southern Africa the memory of white supremacist behaviour, of its overbearing and condescending nature is still strong. The boorish nature of this racism has left scars that are still livid. Mugabe may have ruined his country's economy through the nationalisation of farmlands, and much of the lands seized may have wound up in the hands of cronies, but this step was seen by many as a belated and necessary victory over white ownership of what should have long ago become a black patrimony.

However, Mugabe's African popularity may have peaked and begun to decline. His first public duty after his return from Singapore was to fly to neighbouring Zambia in order to attend the inauguration of the newly and genuinely-elected President Edgar Lungu. He and his retinue stayed at the new luxury Radisson Hotel near the national university. But, as word of his presence spread to the adjacent Arcades shopping mall, a crowd of demonstrators spontaneously appeared at the hotel, chanting "Mugabe must go!" It was as if Zambians, proud of their rough and ready but enthusiastically proper democracy, had no time for the grand old man with his record of bullying his way through one election after another.

What does this mean for his chairmanship of the AU? The AU has 54 countries in membership. Only Morocco, currently in dispute with the organisation, sits outside. At the turn of the century, the AU was established as a significantly overhauled version of its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The doctrine of non-interference was replaced by one of non-indifference. One result was the despatch of peacekeeping troops to Darfur. The AU has an extensive, though still largely untested, organisational architecture to do with human rights, peacekeeping and security. It has a huge secretariat in Addis Ababa, where it sits alongside the Economic Commission for Africa. Its Secretary General is the former wife of Jacob Zuma, herself once South African foreign minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. And the entire apparatus sits within a gigantic new complex, complete with a gold statue of Kwame Nkrumah – the pioneering Pan-Africanist – built and donated by the Chinese. In Africa, all roads lead to Addis – and certainly the best planes fly there, it being the hub of Ethiopian Airways, the strongest of all

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African carriers and the only one flying the new Dreamliners.

For Robert Mugabe, the chairmanship will be no dream. Islamic insurgencies have rocked Nigeria – the richest African country – and combat has spilled over to neighbouring Chad, Niger and Cameroon; Somalia, and are spilling over into Kenya; as well as Mali and the Central African Republic. The East of the Democratic Republic of Congo remains a contested region of warlords, ethnic militias, and proxy forces of the surrounding governments. Ebola wracked Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. African piracy continues in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea. The Arab Spring has died away in most of North Africa, and the military strong man turned president has been resurrected in the person of Egypt's President Sisi.

By the same token, and especially in terms of Islamic insurgencies in Iraq and Syria, together with Russian-led war in Ukraine, the image of Robert Mugabe as a demonic and evil leader has faded away like an evaporating dream. The West simply has much bigger things to worry about now. He will encounter little resistance from the West as he executes his duties as AU Chairman. The European Union has already said it will lift its travel ban on him whenever he comes to Europe as AU Chairman. He himself would say (correctly) that he killed very few people compared to Saddam, Gaddafi, the Taleban, and the Islamic State.

But his business as AU Chairman will be ceremonial. He may use it as a platform for rhetoric from time to time; but, unlike Colonel Gaddafi, who was once Chairman of the OAU, he will not attempt to remodel the organisation's shape or mission. It is a one-year appointment and, his health permitting, he will travel much and enjoy guards of honour and peer esteem expressed through the protocols that greet heads of state.

His mind may be more concentrated on events back home. The second half of 2014 saw bitter manoeuvres within his own political party. Mugabe's wife took the leading role in denigrating and humiliating the party and the government's own vice president, Joice Mujuru. The shrillness of the attacks contrasted with the dignity and silence of Mujuru – who had been a genuine heroine of the war of liberation. In her 20s, as a frontline guerrilla, she had shot down a government attack helicopter, led counterattacks against government assaults while 8 months pregnant; and in her middle age undertook the laborious task of overcoming her lack of education, eventually achieving a hard-earned PhD.

Her humiliation and demotion within the party was accompanied by a similar fate for many other senior members, including other war heroes. The party of liberation was now eating its own liberationists. Mugabe could always deride the opposition parties as being led by people who had never taken up arms to fight. But those he politically ruined in 2014 did take up arms to fight. One of their responses, should or when they remobilise, might be to point out that Mugabe himself had taken the role of the struggle's principal commissar. He too had not taken up arms in the bloody field of combat.

So that, as Mugabe wanders Africa and visits Europe, aglow with the sense of validation for what he imagines is his legacy, he will know this legacy may not be safe in his own home. The battle for Zimbabwe is not completely over. His life may be nearly over, or at least entering its final stage. The African Union has given that final stage a continental platform. Mugabe will be remembered for other things compared to those of Nelson Mandela. They went to the same university – Fort Hare in South Africa – and both became different people and different leaders. But, even within the African Union, many will see Mugabe as at least the most enigmatic chairman since Gaddafi. And many will see him with hopes that it may be for the last time.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair

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