

# Twenty years of Zimbabwe: A balance sheet

**T**WENTY years ago, on April 18, 1980, the radical movement in Calabar — with students, academics and workers as main components — organised a rally in the old African Club to celebrate one of the most significant events, at least for our continent, of the second half of 20th century, namely, the independence of former Southern Rhodesia. We sang, marched and danced as Robert Mugabe, flanked by his comrades and compatriots, emerged from the underground to take his oath of office as Prime Minister of the new African nation, Zimbabwe. Our jubilation was duplicated around the continent, the black diaspora and revolutionary communities across the globe. The banner everywhere was: "Power to the people, land to landless!"

That was 20 years ago. Today, Zimbabwe is again in the news. But there is this big contrast: In April 1980, in addition to the understandable jubilation in the revolutionary "camp," all the countries of the world, with South Africa as a possible exception, officially greeted and congratulated Mugabe; political leaders from the world's geopolitical regions and ideological blocs, including the two opposing super powers (America and the Soviet Union), saluted him, with many making offers of economic, social, technical, administrative — and even military — assistance; the world media, both electronic and print, carried screaming headlines and editorial comments announcing the collapse of yet another colonial fortress in Africa. But in February 2000, even the most independent, self-respecting and objective news media and political commen-

tators in Nigeria joined the Western media and the new imperialism in calling Robert Mugabe a "tyrant" and a "dictator".

How do we understand, and then begin to explain this transformation or metamorphosis (of Mugabe or the world?) to the younger generation — especially students — many of whom were unborn, or were infants, in April 1980? Of course, history has produced many popular heroes and heroines who later turned tyrannical and ended tragically. But how far is Mugabe a true example, or instance of this? The historical turn was dramatised in the referendum held in Zimbabwe in the second weekend of February 2000, over a Draft Constitution. The country's Election Directorate announced that 697,754 people voted "no"; while 578,210 voted "yes". Robert Mugabe, who became president in 1987, had campaigned for a "yes" vote. In fact, he said before the vote that a "no" vote would be a "vote for colonialism". He and his ruling party, ZANU-PF, were therefore the losers in the referendum, although officially and technically the contest was not fought along party lines.

Let us look a little more closely at the figures. The country has a population conservatively estimated at 11 million. About 100,000 of these are white and another 100,000 are Asian and mixed. The rest, constituting about 98 per cent of the population, are black. Assuming, again conservatively, that half the population is of voting age, this would give a voting population of 5.5 million. Hence not more than 20 per cent of black voters actually voted. On the contrary, the white

By Edwin Madunagu

population which constitutes a very small fraction of the total population but owns most of the land, mobilised in full and voted in full. Those whites who had fled to South Africa in the wake of Zimbabwe's independence suddenly returned to the country to vote. Here then is the irony: the blacks whose very lives were in question and who had previously been very enthusiastic in electoral politics recorded a very low turn-out while the white who had hitherto boycotted post-colonial elections even crossed the borders to vote "no". The question is why?

My provisional answer here is that the Zimbabwean black population did not think that the question of land re-appropriation and re-distribution should, or could be, decided in a referendum, the type that took place last month where the "international community" was in the vanguard of the campaign not only against Robert Mugabe, but also against land re-distribution to the landless Zimbabweans, including veterans of the war of liberation and independence. Why, an honest, but simple-minded person, may ask, could't dispossessed Africans, who constitute the overwhelming majority of both the population and electorate, come out in force to vote for the constitution and hence for land re-distribution which was its main element? My provisional answer is that it is both insensitive and cynical to ask thieves and their victims to decide whether the stolen property should be returned. Personally I would not take part in such a question-and-answer. But then, this is politics, not moral philosophy. Events since

the referendum, including the upsurge of nationalist anger especially among the liberation war veterans, and forcible, but illegal, land occupation by blacks, appear to bear me out.

One may ask why so many black activists, including "human rights" and "pro-democracy" campaigners, took part, very vigorously in the "no" campaign. Well, there may be several explanations. Some opposition campaigners could have argued somewhat like this: since one could only vote for the Constitution as a whole and not parts of it and since there was no way of separating the land question from the other questions, including the presidency of Mugabe and the governance of ZANU-PF, the safest thing to do was to vote "no". These people, for some reasons, considered getting Robert Mugabe out more important than the planned redistribution of land to their landless countrymen and women. Taking a long view of history I think they are wrong, tragically wrong.

Four other issues featured prominently in the referendum campaign. These were Mugabe's long stay in office and power; the alleged dictatorial character of his regime and his personal rule; his involvement in the civil and interventionist war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); and the alleged corruption of his government. A decade ago, the charges would have included the "destruction of the economy through socialist policies and programmes". History has however, temporarily, but mercifully, relieved the "Marxist" veteran of that charge: the "socialist" experiment in Zimbabwe has since been abandoned.

President Robert Mugabe definitely has a case to answer on the charge of dictatorial acts and tendencies. And it does not matter that most of his accusers are guilty of worse

crimes, including treachery, against the people of Zimbabwe. When someone is accused of being thief, it is illegitimate for him to answer: "What of you, you no be thief?" Political dictatorship, unless sufficiently explained and mitigated by historical circumstances which the people themselves, and not just the leaders, understand and appreciate is sufficient to remove a leader from office and power. Mugabe also has a case to answer on the charge of involvement in the Congo war. But the case is not that of involvement per se, but the deployment of state resources. Unless he can demonstrate that the state and people of Zimbabwe were under threat as a result of the war, then he has a big explanation to make. What he ought to have done as a revolutionary and nationalist was either to mobilise his countrymen and women to move into the DRC, as volunteers, or if the situation was sufficiently serious and considered to be so, to resign as president and go back to the bush as guerilla fighter, but now for a new cause.

On the question of staying too long in office or power, Mugabe has no case to answer. The equation of democracy with governmental or leadership tenure and elections of any type is the most dangerous and cynical ideological and psychological campaign of the new imperialism, the "international community," against the peoples of the Third World. The fact is that given a historical setting, several factors account for the rate of change of leadership, and an honest researcher can uncover them. Finally, on the issue of land redistribution, it is Mugabe's opponents who have a case to answer before the landless, before Africa, before history. And sooner or later, they will answer.