



An update letter from Ben Freeth, our Executive Director in Zimbabwe: The devastating legacy of former President Robert Mugabe



Zimbabweans shun the funeral of former president Robert Mugabe who became a power-hungry, brutal and staggeringly wealthy dictator.
Photo credit Associated Press

IN THE WAKE OF MUGABE

Dear All

I write from a troubled country after the death of our former President of 37 years. I was numb when I heard the news of Mugabe's death early on the morning of 6 September: his death was irrelevant to where we now are as a country. His mantle was already handed on in the jubilant and heady days of the coup in November 2017. We celebrated then. The release was tremendous.

Tragically, in the darkening days of September 2019, nearly 2 years on, there is no such feeling of release. In fact I have yet to meet anyone living here under the dark oppressive atmosphere of his successor, who is either jubilant or in mourning. The electricity cuts that plunge everyone into darkness for the vast majority of each day and night, the straggling fuel queues, the water shortages stretching to months and years for many homes, the collapse of health and education, the hyperinflation, the massive hunger, the injustices, the fear - these are things that dominate the lives of the people of Zimbabwe at this time.

I have been interviewed many times on radio, television and for the print media during the intervening days and have been asked again how I feel about Mugabe's death. The feeling hasn't changed. I am numb. His death is irrelevant to us.



Former President Robert Mugabe's cortège enters the stadium
Photo credit SABC



Former President Mugabe's sparsely attended funeral at the National Sports Stadium in Harare on Saturday 14 September 2019.
Photo credit EPA-EFE/AARON



Zimbabweans came out en-masse on Saturday 18 November 2017 in support of the de facto coup that ousted President Mugabe.
Photo credit Associated Press

"But you suffered so much under him! You were tortured, dispossessed, persecuted! You lost your home and everything you owned! You lost family and friends. He murdered your father-in-law. You must feel something!"

When pressed in that way I have to admit I do feel something. I feel sad. I am sad that a man could choose to do such horrible things for so long to so many. He had the choice to do great good - and the goodwill of the whole world to do it. Instead he chose to do great evil: violence, torture, genocide, dispossession, injustice... this is his record. He destroyed so much and killed so many.

His successor, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, the one who ousted him, wants him to be buried in Heroes' Acre with the whole bevy of lieutenants who aided and abetted both Mugabe's rise to power and his desperate bid to hang on to it to the very end. Mugabe, in his disdain for those he surrounded himself with - some of whom he had murdered - wants to have the last laugh, and so in an awful Shakespearean tragedy twist, he has willed it that he will be buried elsewhere. He, in a macabrely touching way, wants to be buried next to his mother, in the place where he grew up.

I have read some of the long string of obituaries that have accompanied his death. It has annoyed me that there are those who try to paint a picture of his apparently redeeming factors. I find it hard to see any. As for his liberation credentials, I have to be candid. I have never believed that the killing of tens of thousands of innocent civilians - as he did in the name of liberation - can ever lead to liberation. Liberation has yet to come in Zimbabwe. A population strangled by corruption and cowed by fear is a population yet to be liberated.

The empty stands at the National Sports Stadium in Harare for Mugabe's funeral gathering last weekend, contrasted with the hundreds of thousands who thronged the streets in jubilation when he left power 2 years ago, tell the story very starkly. It may make a few of the numerous African heads of state who attended rethink their views on this man who caused so much suffering.

Undoubtedly Mugabe was clever. He was hard working too. He was disciplined. He had a great ability to lead others and get everyone to do his bidding. He was a capable man. He was able to turn on an irresistible charm. Sadly, all those great attributes he used to devastatingly awful effect. From the outset of his rise to power he was a man who manipulated people through, on the one hand, understanding his fellow man's innate propensity to be corrupted by greed; and on the other by his innate fear of losing life and freedom and property.

MUGABE'S LEGACIES

For me, these, with one other, are Mugabe's two legacies. They live on today. He achieved what he wanted by nurturing and feeding the appetite of insatiable greed; and by using cold-blooded and calculating violence. With the first, he created an irredeemably corrupt elite, and with the second he created a population cowed by an all-consuming and terrible fear.

Of course, these legacies of corruption and fear are underpinned by the third and most critical: his overruling legacy of lawlessness and injustice. To achieve what Mugabe achieved, he had to neutralise justice and make the justice system and its judges into an arm of the executive.

For Zimbabweans, his most terrible legacy is the destruction of the justice system in Zimbabwe - and then, even more devastatingly for the 280 million people of southern Africa, being the prime mover in the destruction of the SADC Tribunal that was set up as a court of last resort for the entire southern African region. His intransigence in not respecting the final and binding Judgements of that court - and then shutting down the court that made them - plague us to this day, with up to 7.5 million Zimbabweans needing food aid this year. I am convinced that if those Judgments had been respected and justice had been allowed, we would not be in this dire situation of hunger and economic meltdown that we find ourselves in today.

In the Psalms we read that justice and righteousness are the foundations of God's throne. Through the tumultuous reign of Mugabe - and now of his chief enforcer and successor, President Mnangagwa - injustice and unrighteousness have underpinned their thrones. Such foundations can only ever lead to the destruction of the house on which they are built. This too shall come to pass.

Through the Mike Campbell Foundation, we will continue in our battle for justice and to bring back the SADC Tribunal. We will continue to enable those living in extreme poverty to feed themselves and their families through our practical conservation agriculture training courses. We will continue to help the children of destitute farm workers to go to school. We will continue to grow open-pollinated, non-hybrid seed for giving out to destitute rural people ahead of every planting season.

We will continue to work and live on in hope - even when, for the time being at least, hope in some things can seem in vain.

Thank you so much for your prayers and support without which we can do nothing. We are so very grateful to you for standing with us.

In hope,

Ben Freeth

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"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6 v 8