



COLLABORATIONS

December 2018

Originally published in the Revue des transitions



South Africa and Zimbabwe, is catharsis at last in sight?

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Southern Africa has two particularities: it has been relatively spared by coups d'état (Chuter & Gaub, 2016; McGowan, 2003), and it has been home to settler colonialism and powers based on racial segregation (Les Presses de l'Unesco, 1975).

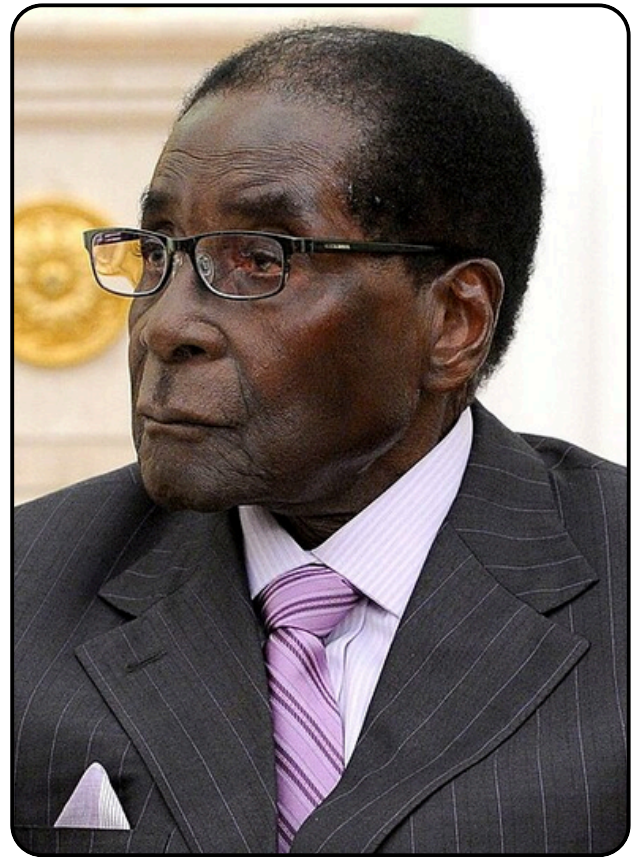
The resulting trauma is particularly pronounced in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and from a comparative policy perspective it is appropriate to distinguish these two countries from the rest of the continent, precisely because of the traces left in people's minds by the prolonged experience of apartheid, an exacerbated colonialism.

A lack of real reconciliation in these two countries, as well as organised pressure from civil societies traumatised by years of brutal repression, have frozen situations in which political and economic elites have governed without regard for the public interest; it is only circumstantial (albeit predictable) events, independent of popular will (Robert Mugabe's physical decline, Jacob Zuma's corruption trial) that have precipitated change.

At first glance cosmetic and superficial because it essentially allows the same politico-economic class to survive, the change at the head of the State could ultimately prove to be a harbinger of structural changes: without prejudging their ethics, in both cases the new leaders (Emmerson Mnangagwa and Cyril Ramaphosa) are aware that their society is on the verge of breaking up (there is no shortage of evidence: the student movement in South Africa, deadly strikes culminating in Marikana, xenophobic riots so unlike the '*rainbow nation*', deadly electoral riots in Zimbabwe): they know that the old

recipes for governance cannot be sustainable without taking into account recent and ongoing sociological changes.

Robert Mugabe had already sunk for several decades into the grotesque of the African Ubu and Zuma was a caricature of himself; his excesses made very few Zulus proud of their representative (sexual and financial scandals).



Robert Mugabe, former president of Zimbabwe and president of the African Union, 2015

In Zimbabwe, the confiscation of white-owned land without genuine redistribution or even collectivisation was as ineffective from the point of view of justice as it was from that of national agricultural production: this land was effectively bequeathed to Mugabe's loyalists, who had neither the skills nor the appetite for the labour-intensive

and somewhat inglorious profession of farming (Gumede, 2018). The direct consequences of this are the transition from an exporting country to an importing country of cereals, the use of printing money to compensate for the lack of currency inflow, Venezuelan-style inflation, and the beginning of a vicious circle with international sanctions, the distancing of investors, etc.

Until at least 2004, the blindness of the people of neighbouring countries forgave everything for Mugabe, who was still seen as a liberation hero, and whom the author of this note saw acclaimed in the Blantyre stadium during the inauguration ceremony of the new Malawian President, Bingu Wa Mutharika, who stole the show from him. Blindness too - or more likely hypocrisy - of his fellow SADC heads of state (with the notable exception of Botswana), who had to take account of his regional popularity by standing beside him, while secretly handing out land leases to white farmers expelled from Zimbabwe.

Apparently Mugabe thought he was popular enough and therefore believed he had enough control of the country to hand over power to his wife; in fact the power structure had been eaten away invisibly, like by termites, it just needed a small shock to shake it definitively, and it was Mugabe's physical fragility that opened a window of opportunity (as indeed with the Angolan neighbour, see below) : all the second-raters who had waited very patiently for his death could not bear to be beaten to the post by a woman, who was, moreover, 20 years younger than them.

They decided to sweep away a cumbersome national hero who would

not die and who wanted to play a final trick on them after making the life annuity last.

Observers have pretended to see a change of regime in what appears to be in fact only a palace revolution: a chief responsible for the massacres in Matabeleland between 1983 and 1987 got the change endorsed, being knighted during a presidential election followed by deadly riots. This whole process took place over the heads of the people, as well as the (very poorly) organised opposition.

That being said, it is too early to judge the direction the regime will take. Economic development in particular is still the most important thing for the people, who would be content with an enlightened monarch if it would allow them to escape the uncertainty caused by precariousness. It should be noted, however, that Mugabe is shamefully well fed and (well) housed, and that he continues to take the grotesque to its limits.

The consequences of the Zimbabwean failure have been felt as far away as South Africa, as it has discredited land redistribution, even though in absolute terms it could have been managed intelligently, progressively, with support and compensation. Ultimately, the problem is that the failure of redistribution in Zimbabwe disqualified it in neighbouring South Africa, thus confirming Mandela's line and his decision to make only very few changes to the economic (im)balances from 1995 onwards, after the transfer of political power.

Except that the under-25s, not having experienced apartheid, are less inclined

to glorify Madiba's legacy and to be content with freedom and theoretical equality. Yet they represent almost half of the population, the most dynamic, the most impatient, and they have objective reasons to be so: the inequalities in the country are glaring, ghettos dorés (gated communities) versus townships, as in Brazil or the United States, with the corollary of structural violence that makes it a state in virtual civil war.

Their pressing demands coupled with Zuma's negligence have weakened the ANC, opening the way for Julius Malema's red berets; yet the potential accession to power of the latter is a source of concern both for part of South African civil society (risk of violence) and for international investors, which the country needs if it is to break the poverty/frustration/violence cycle.

This is why once again (following the example of Emmerson Mnangagwa in Harare) a regime boss (Cyril Ramaphosa) hijacked the system from within, partly to ensure its survival against the Zumaesque excesses that were dragging it down, and partly for his personal gain.

In South Africa, as in Zimbabwe, the state's abandonment of its responsibilities (health, security, education) and the increase in situations of extreme poverty on the one hand and inequality on the other have made the risk of social explosion a real possibility in the medium term, at least in urban areas.

The recent changes are the result of a survival reflex of a ruling class under pressure, coupled with palace intrigues for the succession of the head of state.



Jacob Zuma, President of South Africa, during the opening plenary session on Africa and the new global economy at the 2009 World Economic Forum on Africa in Cape Town, South Africa, 10 June 2009.

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