



Robert Mugabe: Zimbabwe's war hero turned brutal autocrat

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(CNN)He reigned over Zimbabwe for nearly four decades with an iron fist, and infamously claimed that "only God" could ever remove him from office. But now, at the age of 93, President Robert Mugabe is witnessing his rule's historic end.

Mugabe had been teetering on the brink of political ruin since the country's military seized power in the capital Harare, on Wednesday. It was the most serious attempt to overthrow the leader since he came to power 37 years ago.

Tiring of his political overreach, members of his own party turned against him after he dismissed Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa to make way for his ambitious wife Grace. The veteran leader will be remembered for waging a campaign of fear, oppression and violence in a bid to maintain power, and for leading a country once called the breadbasket of southern Africa into poverty.

The descent into tyranny didn't take long.

Mugabe began his political career as the hope of his country, a leader in Zimbabwe's fight for independence and a figure regularly compared to South Africa's venerated freedom fighter Nelson Mandela.

As a revolutionary guerrilla leader, Mugabe fought white-minority rule and spent years in jail as a political prisoner.

After 10 years in prison in his country -- then known as Rhodesia -- he earned university degrees in education, economics and law from the University of London. In the mid-70s, he took on the leadership of the political wing of the militant liberation movement, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), based in Mozambique.

Robert Mugabe Fast Facts

From there, he helped orchestrate an armed resistance, emerging as a war hero both at home and abroad when the conflict ended in 1979.

He became the first prime minister of the newly independent Zimbabwe after elections in February 1980.

Articulate and smartly dressed, Mugabe came to power commanding the respect of a nation. He had a strong head start, inheriting a country with a stable economy, solid infrastructure and vast natural resources.

As former US diplomat Samantha Power wrote in 2003: "Mugabe knew that whites drove the economy, and he was pragmatic." Under his leadership Zimbabwe modernized, she noted. "It had a network of paved roads, four airports, and ... a rigorous and inclusive education system." But by 1983, it became clear that his administration would be merciless to any opposing his rule. He presided over forces that carried out a string of massacres in opposition strongholds. The country's Fifth Brigade is believed to have killed up to 20,000 people, mostly supporters of Mugabe's main political rival.

In 1987, Mugabe's grip on power tightened when a new constitution replaced the office of prime minister with an executive president. He's the only person to have ever held that office.

Land acquisition and more power grabs

Heading into the 1990s, Zimbabwe had the continent's fastest growing economy and was a leader in education and literacy rates.

Mugabe was reelected by a popular majority in 1990, and found more ways to cement his rule, including revising the constitution to extend the president's term to six years.

Zimbabweans then began experiencing a gradual erosion of their rights -- and their riches. A 1992 law allowed the government to purchase land by force from white landowners who were expelled if they objected. The land was resettled and redistributed to black Zimbabweans. The law prompted an exodus in the tens of thousands and a downward spiral in the economy led to hyperinflation. At the peak of the crisis, prices were doubling every 24 hours and monthly inflation peaked at 7.9 billion percent in 2008, Cato Institute economists estimate.

Mugabe was widely accused of rigging elections to keep winning office. In March 1996, he was reelected in what essentially became a one-man race, with opponents dropping out before the vote.

Voters turn on Mugabe

In 2000, Mugabe and his ruling Zanu-PF party suffered their first ever major defeat. Voters rejected a new constitution that would have allowed the government to seize property owned by white descendants of predominately British settlers without paying them compensation.

In the period that followed, some 4,000 farmers and landowners were forcibly displaced, and the great majority of the land was given not to poor black farmers, but officials and party members loyal to Mugabe and his family, who had no experience in running farms.

The breadbasket of Africa suddenly stopped producing. Large-scale commercial agriculture, which at one point accounted for upwards of 40% of the country's export economy, was replaced in the most part by sustenance farming.

Exports dropped off and malnourishment swept the country. The World Food Program and foreign aid agencies stepped in to feed millions of Zimbabweans, while international aid and foreign investment dried up. The United States and European Union imposed economic sanctions on the country.

In a 2009 interview with CNN, Mugabe insisted that land reform was "the best thing (that) could have ever happened to an African country."

"Zimbabwe belongs to the Zimbabweans, pure and simple," Mugabe said. He argued that white Zimbabweans, even those born in the country with legal ownership of the land, had a debt to pay. In 2002, the US and EU imposed targeted sanctions on Mugabe and some senior Zanu-PF party members after widespread reports of human rights violations.

A new contender

Mugabe faced the first formidable challenge to his rule in 2002 with the rise of opposition MDC party leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Mugabe managed to secure 57% of the vote compared to Tsvangirai's 42%, but the election was widely condemned as rigged.

In the years that followed, Mugabe sought to stamp out the opposition. His government charged Tsvangirai with treason, and passed increasingly tough laws aimed at stifling independent media and public dissent. Despite the country's worst famine in 60 years, he issued orders to white farmers to stop working their land and vacate, enforcing the redistribution of land from whites to blacks.

In 2003, Mugabe withdrew Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, the 52-nation organization of Great Britain and her former colonies. Human rights groups accused Mugabe's regime of using starvation as a tool for domestic support.

In response, he initiated a "look east" policy, forging closer ties with the country's old ally China, securing lucrative investment and trade contracts.

By 2008 the West had well and truly turned against Mugabe, with major institutions stripping him of his honorary degrees and a knighthood.

Election fraud, violence and arrests forced Tsvangirai to drop out of the race that year. Mugabe, the sole candidate, won his sixth term in office. He later signed a power-sharing deal with Tsvangirai, who became prime minister and brought about an end to months of unrest. A year later, Mugabe celebrated his 85th birthday with a lavish party that cost a reported \$250,000, even as the country remained in an economic and health crisis. He continued to hold such birthday events annually, last year spending a reported \$800,000 and celebrating in a region suffering drought and food shortages.

He rebuffed repeated calls to step down, insisting he would only leave office when his "revolution" was complete.

"Only God who appointed me will remove me," he infamously said, "not the MDC, not the British."

Zimbabwe political crisis: What's happening?

Mugabe attempted to blame international sanctions for his country's economic woes, telling CNN that they were unjustified and illegal.

"The continued imperialist interference in our affairs is affecting our country adversely," he said at the time.

In 2010, he threatened to seize all Western-owned investments in Zimbabwe unless the sanctions on him and his loyalists were removed.

He won yet another election in 2013, his opponents eventually dropping a challenge to the result in court. A year later, he fired eight members of his Cabinet as well as his deputy at the time. US President Barack Obama extended sanctions on Mugabe and his inner circle for another year before leaving office in January.

In recent years Mugabe had given his second wife, Grace, a greater role in the country's political affairs. She was considered a leading candidate to fill the role of vice president after Mugabe fired Mnangagwa earlier this month.

Now, Zimbabweans are nervously awaiting the post-Mugabe era. Importantly, the likely successor -- Mnangagwa -- represents the old guard from which Mugabe emerged, and some fear a victory for him will have the country pass from one tyrant's hands into the hands of another.