



IOL

#Zimbabwe: SA could've stopped Mugabe

Michael Morris

November 18, 2017

There's an irony - and not a gentle one - in the anonymous account from an anxious Harare resident this week that "normal broadcasting" had been disrupted on the day of the military intervention, and "they have been playing (liberation) war songs".

In the moment - only hours after Zimbabwean troops took to the capital's streets on Wednesday - the unnamed man who spoke to TimesLIVE wondered with understandable apprehension: "we don't know what kind of a message they are sending".

"When they say they are weeding out criminals how come normal broadcasting has not resumed?"

No doubt, he was not alone in pondering what lay behind the day-long fare of liberation hits - or, conceivably, in fearing that even if Robert Mugabe goes, liberty might not come after all. In the all-too-common post-independence story of soaring, then dashed hopes, "liberation" and liberty have not always turned out to be the same thing.

Lofty declarations that accompany the freedom of nations seldom mean much for the actual freedom of the people who live in them if the plain, on-the-ground understanding of what it really means to individuals, and why it really matters, is absent.

The consequences are not abstract. In a 2008 report published by the Cato Institute, Zimbabwean MP (later a minister, now a senator) David Coltart wrote that "Mugabe and his cronies are chiefly responsible for an economic meltdown that has turned one of Africa's most prosperous countries into a country with one of the lowest life expectancies in the world".

Coltart went on: "Since 1994, the average life expectancy in Zimbabwe has fallen from 57 years to 34 years for women and from 54 years to 37 years for men".

"Some 3500 Zimbabweans die every week from the combined effects of HIV/Aids, poverty and malnutrition. Half a million Zimbabweans may have died already. There is no freedom of speech or assembly in Zimbabwe and the state has used violence to intimidate and murder its opponents."

Indicators from other sources since then paint a depressing picture: less than a quarter (17.3%) of Zimbabwean children between 6 and 23 months receive the recommended minimum acceptable

diet for adequate nutrition (2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey); Zimbabwe is considered a low-income, food-deficit country, ranked 156 out of 187 developing countries on the Global Hunger Index (UN Development Programme 2014 Human Development Report Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience), and 76% of rural households live on less than \$1.25 per day, compared to 38% in urban areas (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, Poverty, Income, Consumption and Expenditure Survey: 2011/2012 Report). Zimbabwe's is a lamentable narrative of the promise of freedom being at first obscured, then eroded, by its opposite, a liberationist logic that contrives to justify tyranny.

The galling truth for South Africans is that we are not untainted by the costs of this ideological sleight of hand.

It might well be unfair to say South Africa connived in Zimbabwe's decline and the abuse of its people, but there is little doubt successive administrations and the organisations and activists who cheered them failed abysmally to live up to their avowed constitutional commitment to democracy and human rights, non-racialism and human dignity which sometimes seem, as a result, a mantra mouthed more out of habit than conviction.

There is, after all, little doubt the first steps on the road to this week's crisis in Zimbabwe were taken at least a decade and a half ago when, either through faintheartedness or misplaced liberationist fraternalism, South Africa turned a blind eye to the Mugabe regime's flagrant electoral abuses and lent its credibility to the man who authored them.

Africa watcher Simon Allison put it bluntly in November 2014 when he wrote: "We know that Zimbabwe fixed elections and we know that South Africa knowingly helped them get away with it."

He was writing just days after the publication of a damning document the government had kept from the public for 12 years - and had to be compelled to release by the Constitutional Court (the result of a six-year legal campaign by the Mail&Guardian).

The Khampepe Report by Constitutional Court justices Dikgang Moseneke and Sisi Khampepe on widespread abuses, intimidation and irregularities in the 2002 elections in Zimbabwe "entirely discredits" that of the 50 person-strong SA Observer Mission (SAOM), Allison wrote. The observer mission had "reached a rather different conclusion", having told reporters shortly after the vote that "(It) is the view of the SAOM that the outcome of the 2002 Zimbabwe presidential elections should be considered legitimate".

In the same month (November 2014), Institute for Security Studies consultant Liesl Louw-Vaudran quoted Paul Graham, author of a chapter in a Freedom House report on efforts to deepen democracy around the world, as saying that if the Khampepe report had been released at the time, it could have had far-reaching implications for Zimbabwe and South Africa. The risk, as Zimbabwe now knows, is the penalty of liberation without liberty.

South Africans, more than most, should have known as much and acted more decisively when it could have made a world of difference.