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A History of Violence

**Observers often ask the same question
about Robert Mugabe: what went wrong?**

From the liberation hero of the 1980's to a
despot in 2007 with his people and much of
the world against him. The question can be
answered in one word: nothing! Nothing
went wrong, it was bad from the start and
merely grew worse.

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Robert Mugabe

What went wrong?



After he took power in 1980, Mugabe made clear his intention to nationalise the Press which he did in 1981, without a word of complaint from the Commonwealth or from the Western countries that now condemn his rule.

Two years later, in 1983, he sent the North-Korean-trained Fifth Brigade into Matabeleland where they massacred somewhere between 10 000 and 40 000 men, women and children. The minority Matabele tribe were the only real opposition to Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF* party and their leader, Dr Joshua Nkomo, was forced into exile.

Over this time, several opposition figures were jailed, freed by the courts and imprisoned again under powers that gave the state authority to hold people indefinitely without trial.

In 1987, with the Matabele crushed and at least 100 000 having fled the country, Nkomo was given the ceremonial role of vice president on condition he dissolve his own political structures. Zimbabwe became a de facto one-party state.

In the 1990 election, Mugabe's former friend and guerrilla leader, Edgar Tekere, set up the Zimbabwe Unity Movement and stood against ZANU-PF. Tekere's rallies were broken up by riot police, his party was shunned by the state-controlled newspapers and electronic media and it became clear that any effort to challenge the ruling party would be met with force.

As the economy collapsed, dissent grew but changes to the constitution had centred all power in the hands of Mugabe and his ministers. It even became illegal to write anti-government graffiti on a toilet wall.

By 1992, unemployment had passed 50 per cent and at the end of the decade, three out of four people were out of work. Elections had become a farce and less than a quarter of eligible voters bothered to cast their votes.

Public dissatisfaction came to a head in 2000 when Mugabe lost a referendum aimed at changing the constitution to further concentrate power in his hands and to nationalise white-owned farms. Despite the public having voted against the proposals, the government went ahead with land seizures.

An election later that year would have seen ZANU-PF swept from power but high levels of violence, intimidation and fraud granted the party a narrow victory over the new Movement for Democratic Change led by former trades union boss, Morgan Tsvangirai.

From that time, the abuse has continued and grown. A youth militia, set up in camps across the country, has been trained to rape and torture those who speak out against the government. In 2002, human-rights groups including Amnesty International, recorded more than 40 000 individual cases of state-sanctioned assault, torture and murder.

Somewhere between three and four million Zimbabweans now live in exile with an estimated 2000 crossing into South Africa every day.

The violent land seizures resulted in 1.5 million farm workers being displaced along with the farm owners. Food production collapsed and the best farms ended up in the hands of ministers, and the military elite.

Zimbabwe now has the world's highest inflation and fastest-shrinking economy, but the crisis did not come out of nowhere: rather it is the culmination of 27 years of misrule.

Certainly there were periods of stability and brief economic growth, but the denial of human rights and press freedom dates to the start of Mugabe's rule in 1980.