

International news

For 23 years Andrew Meldrum reported from Zimbabwe. On Friday he was forcibly deported. Here, he describes how a country which offered so much inspiration to Africa became, under its leader Robert Mugabe, a pariah

From joy and hope to corruption, tyranny and the misery of poverty

Andrew Meldrum

Night visits to my home by threatening men in vans with blacked out windows. Attacks vilifying me in the state press as a "terrorist", an "agent of imperialism" and "a liar". Threats, by phone, email and conversations with "friends", in which I was told that I would not be safe in this country.

These were all signs of the antipathy of President Robert Mugabe's government to a journalist chronicling the decline of his long and torrid rule.

Over the past year I have been harassed, arrested, thrown in jail, put on trial, acquitted and finally - this weekend - deported from Zimbabwe.

For those 12 months I continued to live and work there, to write about the country's political crisis, the economic meltdown that has turned one of Africa's most prosperous economies into one of its poorest, and the abuses of human rights and other democratic freedoms.

In short, I watched how the regime transformed a functioning democracy into a police state. I first arrived in Zimbabwe in 1980 when the country won its independence and majority rule. I was a young journalist full of enthusiasm for Robert Mugabe's new order, his policy of racial reconciliation, his socialist measures to improve the education, health and standards of living of black Zimbabweans. It was a heady time, when the entire country was infused with irrepressible optimism.

Sadly, this optimism never lasted, and by 1982 I found myself uncovering and reporting on the horrific mass killing of Zimbabwean civilians by the army's Fifth Brigade, Mugabe's praetorian guard. The chain of command led directly to Mugabe.

Only the most ruthless could overthrow Ian Smith's system... that was Robert Mugabe!

but he remained a plausible leader. The lot of the majority of Zimbabweans continued to improve.

Zimbabwe remained a beacon beaming the light of hope on South Africa's dark system of minority rule. Anti-apartheid activists of all colours flocked there and insisted that its democracy pointed the way for South Africa's future. It also became a hive of South African spies carrying out assassinations and terror bombings. It was an engrossing place to work as a journalist.

When Nelson Mandela was freed, Zimbabwe was the first country he visited, underlining the crucial role it had played in the struggle against apartheid. But South Africa's progress was not entirely good news for Robert Mugabe. The international community ceased to see him as the lesser of two evils, compared to apartheid. A wave of democracy swept across southern Africa in which Malawi's Hastings Banda and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda were toppled by overwhelming votes.

When Mugabe proposed to declare Zimbabwe a one-party state, members of his own party's central committee blocked it, saying that they would be going against the democratic tide, and that they could enjoy de facto one-party rule without the trouble of imposing de jure control.

Compared to the glowing magnanimity of Nelson Mandela, Mugabe appeared bitter and spiteful. A turning point came in August 1996 when, while opening the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, he spewed out a hate-filled tirade against gays.

I remember scribbling down his furious words describing gays as "worse than pigs and dogs" and suggesting that homosexuality was akin to having sex with dead bodies. A group of schoolchildren sat dumbfounded by the speech. From that point on Mugabe's international image began its decline to despot.

This should not paint a picture that everything has been negative in Zimbabwe. My experience there has been overwhelmingly positive. Friends who are doctors, teachers, artists and lawyers banded together to create a community always encouraging fairness and democracy. But by 2000 the opposition to Mugabe's rule had grown so great that the churches, women's groups, human rights defenders and lawyers groups pressed for a new constitution.

Mugabe agreed but, wily as ever, he created a document which increased his power rather than reduced it. His draft constitution was presented to the country in a referendum in February, 2000.

Despite saturation coverage in the media, the voters rejected it. It was a stinging slap in the face. Two weeks later the first invasions of white-owned farms began. Mugabe was fighting back. The invasions were illegal but the police were ordered not to take any action against them. It was the beginning of the transformation of the police into a political entity which simply carries out its master's bidding.

In June 2000 came the parliamentary elections. The opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), had

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1980 The honeymoon: Robert Mugabe salutes supporters after returning from exile to fight the general election. 'It was a heady time, when the entire country was infused with irrepressible optimism'



2003 The grim reality, clockwise from top: a boy in drought-hit Blinga; a bloodied victim of an assault by Robert Mugabe's 'war veterans' in Harare; orphans left alone by the Aids epidemic; an invaded white farm

already won widespread popularity and campaigned valiantly despite a programme of violence in which more than 200 people, virtually all opposition supporters, were killed. The MDC narrowly lost the election, which all credible international observer teams said were not free or fair.

In addition to the often ugly political developments in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, he has tragically failed to give effective leadership in the two huge social challenges facing the country, Aids and famine.

Aids spread so rapidly that a few years ago Zimbabwe had the world's highest HIV infection rate: 30% of the adult population. Shying away from effective public education, the government created an Aids fund and then allowed Mugabe's cronies to loot it.

After Mugabe's seizures of white-owned farms little was done to keep the land cultivated. It was no surprise when famine gripped the country. Even when more than half the population were forced to depend on international food relief, Mugabe could not resist trying to starve areas which supported the opposition.

Repression of the press began in 2000. Just before the parliamentary elections, immigration officers served deportation orders on the BBC correspondent Joe Winter. He won a court order giving him a week to pack and wind up his affairs.

But that night government thugs went to his house, ransacked it and terrorised him, his wife and their young daughter. Winter left the country and within days the government deported the legendary South American journalist Mercedes Sauvages, whom we called La Paolona for her fearless reporting on human rights abuses.

'I am determined to continue reporting on these abuses in the hope that they will stop'

A few months later the Telegraph's correspondent, David Blair, was forced to leave the country. Because he was a foreign journalist in the country.

The determination of the Zimbabwean press, particularly the reporters on the privately owned Daily News, the Zimbabwe Independent and the Standard, inspired me with their commitment to exposing corruption, beatings, torture, murder and other unsavoury aspects of Mugabe's rule.

The printing press of the Daily News were blown up, the editor of the Standard, Mark Chavundira, and his reporter, Ray Choto, were abducted by army officers and viciously tortured. Yet Zimbabwe's journalists refused to be deterred from writing about events as they happened.

Systematic human rights abuses, the thwarting of democracy, corruption - these are the issues any journalist is obliged to cover. I cannot go to work, the best work I could, and that led to my arrest and imprisonment last year.

After my trial and acquittal and the government's failed attempt to deport me, I returned to my work. The steady drip of articles vilifying me in the state press did not get me down, largely because of the hearty support and encouragement I received from people of all colours and walks of life when I walked on the street.

That support, and phone calls and emails from fellow Zimbabwean journalists helped me to shrug off the government's threats.

But last Friday I was abducted and thrown out of the country, despite a court order to halt the action.

When all is said and done, I still blame Ian Smith for Zimbabwe's troubles today. He ran a system which deprived the majority of their rights and dignity. The Rhodesian regime was violent but only violence could unseat it.

Only the most ruthless could overthrow Smith's system, and that was Robert Mugabe. Violence begets violence, and we can see now that Mugabe only values his own power and will use any force to maintain it.

I am angry at how Mugabe has subverted Zimbabwe's democracy and reduced people to misery. I am appalled that the police kidnapped the opposition member of parliament Job Sikhala a few months ago and tortured him with electric shocks. I am furious that the regime has targeted ordinary citizens such as Raphina Madzokery, who has been hospitalised twice for torture, has seen his home destroyed and now lives on the run with his wife and three children.

I am determined to continue reporting on these abuses in the hope that they will stop, and to help bring the perpetrators to justice.

I am confident that the people of Zimbabwe will succeed in restoring the country's democracy and basic freedoms, and will rebuild the economy to prosperity.

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