Mugabe, the Dictator

By Emmanuel Magaisa

Dictators around the world share a lot of commonalities. As an avid student of history, I would like to take you through the short history of one of the most notorious dictators of modern times. History has a tendency of repeating itself yet not necessarily in the same country or to the same people. I will draw for you the similarities between Adolf Hitler and Robert Gabriel Mugabe. At the end of the day, I would like Zimbabwean people to think again and look at what options we have to take our country forward, if we have any at all.

Hitler became leader of the German Workers Party through manipulation. He was a good orator who also believed that “a lie repeated so many times will ultimately gain belief”. He railed against the Treaty of Versailles and delivered anti-Semitic tirades, blaming the Jews for Germany’s problems. He was arrested and jailed in 1923. He believed in acquiring power by legal means, “…Instead of working to achieve power by an armed coup we shall have to hold our noses and enter the Reichstag …..If outvoting them takes longer than out-shooting them, at least the results will be guaranteed by their own constitution! Any lawful process is slow. But sooner or later we shall have a majority – and after that Germany.” Hitler stated while in prison in 1924.

He surrounded himself with people who worshipped him e.g. Goebbels, “Great joy. He greets me like an old friend. And looks after me. How I love him.”

When Hitler campaigned he offered something to everyone; work to the unemployed, prosperity to failed business people, profits to industry, expansion to the army, social harmony and an end of class distinctions to idealistic young students and restoration of German glory to those in despair. He promised to bring order amid chaos, a feeling of unity to all and the chance to belong. He would make Germany strong again, end payment of reparations to the Allies, tear up the Treaty of Versailles, stamp out corruption, keep down Marxism and deal harshly with the Jews.

Hitler’s SA (storm troopers) gave him problems. They were violence prone; they wanted to become a new German revolutionary army. They embarrassed him by wreaking havoc in the streets despite his orders to lay low.

He promised, “In the Third Reich every German girl will find a husband!”

In 1932, just before the elections, murder and violence soon erupted on a scale never before seen in Germany. Roaming groups of Nazi Brown shirts walked the streets singing Nazi songs and looking for fights. Here is what Gregor Stressor said in 1932 “Whatever happens, mark what I say, from now on Germany is in the hands of an Austrian, who is a congenital liar (Hitler). A former officer who is a pervert (Rohn) and a clubfoot (Goebbles). And I tell you the last is the worst of them all. This is Satan in human form.”?? What of Moyo Jonathan (the big “headed” professor)? The Bright’s Matonga of this world? George Charamba?
Hitler as the new chancellor of Germany had no intention of abiding by the rules of democracy. He intended only to use the rules to legally establish himself as dictator as quickly as possible then begin the Nazi revolution.

He replaced police officials loyal to the republic with Nazi officials loyal to him. The police were ordered not to interfere with the SS and SA under any circumstances. Goering then ordered the police to show no mercy to those deemed hostile to the state (meaning hostile to Hitler), especially the communists. An Emergency Decree was passed: “Restrictions on personal liberty, on the right of free expression of opinion, including freedom of the press, on the rights of assembly and association; and violations of privacy of postal, telegraphic and telephonic communications and warrants and/or house searches, orders for confiscation as well as restrictions on property as well as restrictions on property, are also permissible beyond the legal limits otherwise prescribed.” Fifty-one (51) anti-Nazis were murdered. The Nazis suppressed all political activity, meetings and publications of non-Nazi parties. The very act of campaigning against Nazis was in effect “illegal”.

This is just a glimpse of the dictator that Hitler was in Germany. Could Mugabe have learnt his history quite well? And in his pretence to a Marxist-Leninist he won elections in 1980. He demolished (PF) ZAPU and massacred the Ndebele people in the 80’s as an excuse to flush out so-called “dissidents”. He has always been an advocate of a one party state from the time he came into power.

Here is a list of other African dictators:

1. **Idi Amin Dada** – he ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979. His rule was characterised by human rights abuses, political repression, ethnic persecution, extra-judicial killings and the expulsion of Asians from Uganda. The number of people killed as a result of his regime is unknown; estimates from human rights groups range from 100,000 to 500,000. Amin was driven out of Uganda by Tanzanian forces during Julius Nyerere’s rule. Do we have presidents of this calibre in Africa at the moment?

2. **Mobutu Sese Seko** – Was president of then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). He nationalised foreign owned firms and forced Europeans out of the country. In many cases he handed the management of these firms to relatives and close associates who stole the companies’ assets. This precipitated such an economic slump that Mobutu was forced to try and woo foreign investors back. (Did Mugabe learn anything from this? *not likely*). He was re-elected in single-candidate elections in 1977 and 1984. He worked hard on little but to increase his personal fortune. He owned a fleet of Mercedes-Benz vehicles that he used to travel between his numerous palaces, while the nation’s roads rotted and many of his people starved. Infrastructure virtually collapsed, and many public service workers went months without being paid. Most money was siphoned off to Mobutu, his family and top political and military leaders. Only the Special Presidential Division – on whom his physical safety depended – was paid adequately and regularly. There was rampant inflation with the rapid decline in the real value of salaries, strongly encouraging a culture of corruption and dishonesty among public servants of all kinds. Mobutu was the subject of a massive personality cult. The evening news on TV was preceded by an image of him descending
through clouds from the heavens, portraits of him adorned many public places, government officials wore lapels bearing his portrait, and he held such titles as “Father of the Nation,” “Saviour of the People,” and “Supreme Combatant.” Mobutu left Zaire on the run from rebels.

3. Jean-Bedel Bokassa (Central African Republic) – In the early days of his regime, Bokassa formed a new government called the Revolutionary Council, invalidated the constitution and dissolved the National Assembly, calling it “a lifeless organ no longer representing the people”. In his address to the nation, Bokassa claimed that the governed would hold elections in the future, a new national assembly would be formed, and a new constitution would be written. He also told his countrymen that he would give up his power after the communist threat had been eliminated, the economy stabilized, and corruption rooted out. He then barred all other political organisations from the country except MESAN. In 1979 riots in Bangui, the capital led to a massacre of civilians. Around 100 school children were killed after protests. Operation Barracuda was launched to depose Bokassa.

4. Samuel Doe – He took over the government of Liberia after a bloody military coup in which the then sitting president was savagely murdered, and after the entire cabinet was put on trial, they were all executed except one. Doe then surrounded himself with members of the (small) Krahn-tribe. In July 1985 Doe lifted the ban on political parties and formed his own, the National Democratic Party of Liberia. The elections held were neither free nor fair but Doe was declared winner with 51 percent of the poll. When Quiwonkpa attempted to overthrow the government in November 198, he was killed, his body mutilated and publicly displayed. This was followed by excessive and brutal reprisals by the Krahn-led Liberian Army against the Mano and Gio, in Nimba County and this resulted in sparking the civil war which ultimately resulted in Doe’s death. In 1990, Doe was captured, tortured, mutilated and finally brutally killed and the gruesome details were videotaped. It also needs to be noted that before Doe died he had been offered safe passage to the United States. He refused but sent his wife and children away to safety.

5. Charles Taylor – In 1997 after the civil war, which ended Doe’s rule in Liberia, Taylor won the elections in a landslide victory taking 75 percent of the vote. The election was judged free and fair. Taylor’s victory was attributed to the belief that he would resume the war if he lost. He famously ran on the slogan “He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him.” As president he was known for his flamboyant style and overtly quasi-religious hypocrisy. Upon being charged by the UN of being a gunrunner and diamond smuggler during his presidency, he publicly appeared in all white robes and begged God for forgiveness (while denying the charges). He has also been paraphrased to have said that “Jesus Christ was accused of being a murderer in his time.” He resigned in 2003 after being offered immunity in Nigeria as part of a peace deal to end yet another civil war in Liberia. He is now being tried for war crimes in The Hague.

6. Mengistu Haile Mariam – Headed the junta (Derg or Dergue) which overthrew the government of Emperor Haile Selassie in a bloody coup. The Derg send sixty senior officials of the emperor’s government to the firing squad. Mengistu emerged as its undisputed leader after orchestrating the physical elimination of rivals from within the Derg. In 1976 Mengistu gave a dramatic send-off to a campaign of terror that he officially dubbed the “Red Terror.” He
threw to the ground before a huge crowd in the capital Addis Ababa bottles filled with a red substance representing the blood of enemies of the revolution: the “imperialists,” and the “counter-revolutionaries,” as members of rival leftist groups were labelled by the Derg. In particular, the campaign targeted students and young people suspected of membership in the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Thousands of young men and women turned up dead in the streets of the capital and other cities in the following two years. They were systematically eliminated mainly by militia attached to the “Kebels”, the neighbourhood watch committees which served during the Derg period as the lowest level local government and security surveillance units. The Kebeles required families to reimburse the administration for the price of bullets used to kill victims when they reclaimed their bodies for burial.

(Anything reminiscent of Mugabe?)

When famine in 1984 hit areas in northern Ethiopia partially held by rebels of the Tigray and Eritrean People's Liberation Fronts (TPLF and EPLF respectively), Mengistu's government for a while blacked out information about the famine. It later used the disaster as a pretext to forcibly relocate hundreds of thousands of villagers from northern Ethiopia to areas in the south. The Dergue argued that its "villagisation" campaign, as it came to be known, was meant to relocate people from food deficient areas to the fertile plains of the south. In reality, the move was meant to empty rebel-held areas from potential supporters. Again, victims of government action during the forced relocation were in the hundreds of thousands. A 1991 Human Rights Watch report, "Evil Days: 30 years of war and famine in Ethiopia," gives a detailed account of this dark period in Ethiopia's recent history during which it is estimated that at least half a million civilians were killed as a result of the Dergue actions.

The Dergue was deposed in 1991 by the Ethiopian people's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of regional and ethnic rebel groups led by the TPLF. In the province of Eritrea the EPLF established a provisional government that steered the province to full independence by 1993, with the blessing and cooperation of its former ally the TPLF.

Mengistu is now a fugitive harbouried in Zimbabwe by another dictator Robert Mugabe and has now been tried in absentia and sentenced to death by an Ethiopian court.

The list goes on.

Coming back to home: Mugabe came to power in 1980 through elections deemed by and large to be free and fair. Remember the electorate was always reminded of going back to war and there was no other credible party anyway except (PF) ZAPU which was as tribal based as ZANU (PF). Unfortunately the Shonas make a greater percentage of the Zimbabwean population hence a landslide for Mugabe's ZANU (PF).

Mugabe worked his way through the ZANU (PF) ranks. In the process there have been allegations and rumours that have been doing the rounds ever since. The death of Herbert Chitepo, Josiah Magama Tongogara and many others after Zimbabwe's independence. The massacre of civilians by Gukurahundi in Matebeleland in the 80's. Mugabe is still presiding over the present killings going on in Zimbabwe today.
The country is suffering runaway inflation, rising unemployment and increasing food shortages. Part of the population was deprived of shelter and livelihood during “Operation Murambatsvina.” The army was used to pursue blood diamonds and riches in Congo to feed the greed of Mugabe and His cronies (Imagine a country’s army being used as mercenaries for individual gain). White farmers have been driven out of Zimbabwe on the pretext of land reform. The farms have ended up in the hands of Mugabe and his cronies. There are parastatals, the army and other state institutions being run by ZANU (PF) and factories will follow.

After all is said and done, the question is with the talks “Where to now Mugabe?”

First and foremost Mugabe is Mugabe. He has never negotiated in good faith and to expect him to start now is wishful thinking. Mugabe is in between a rock and a hard place. He has nowhere to move. The most unfortunate fact of them all is that any serious change in government in Zimbabwe means that most if not all present government officials will have to face either the Hague or criminal prosecution, leaving behind them vast wealth, posh cars, stolen farms and all the luxuries. Imagine from all this into jail….what would anyone do except dig in, hold on and try everything to keep themselves in power.

The conclusion is that the talks will fail. The issue here is that if the scenario of the dictators mentioned above is anything to go by, the bottom line is that they never give up power, elections or no elections. In fact they use elections to legitimise their governments. They can only be taken out using the only language that they understand – the gun. Tsvangirai and the MDC need to have learnt the lessons of history and acted accordingly. They should have prepared for all eventualities and be ready when the time came – maybe enter into elections backed by a fighting force or prepare a force ready to prevent what has happened to the decimated and displaced population of Zimbabwe – or a youth contingent ready to defend itself or common villagers from persecution for supporting MDC. A lot of time has already been wasted. Imagine if the revolution had started soon after the referendum or the 2000 elections. So there you have it, this is the truth and with the talks we are going nowhere. Mugabe never tolerated opposition in whatever form and it has been proven for 28 years and more. If anybody thinks the leopard will change its sports, then they are just deluding themselves.