

Zimbabwe and the 'Ruling Party Syndrome'?

by GWYNNE DYER

'No-one will stop us from ruling this country. You will be lost if you don't vote for ZANU-PF,' said President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe. A bit more arrogant than the usual election pitch in most parts of the world, perhaps, but not unusual in Zimbabwe, one of the southern African countries suffering from 'ruling party syndrome.'

There are plenty of military coups and dictatorships elsewhere in Africa. In parts of the Sahel, indeed, they come and go as frequently, and as pointlessly, as weather fronts. But the single party that rules for decades and monopolises all the political space available is a specialty of southern African countries that had to fight 'liberation wars.'

Most of the countries in West and East Africa got their independence in the early 1960s with little or no fighting: the exhausted European empires just gave up and pulled out. One or two had brief anti-colonial insurgencies, like the Mau Mau in Kenya, but the norm is for ethnically-based political parties to compete for power more or less democratically.

Further south, where there were powerful white settler minorities, it took long guerilla wars to end European rule, and that required a different kind of organisation.

African ethnic differences still mattered, but most southern African countries, starting with Angola, former Rhodesia and Mozambique and extending all the way down to South Africa, developed militarised liberation movements embracing most or all of the local African ethnic groups.

They all won power in the end, of course - but then they stayed together and became the more-or-less permanent ruling party in their country: ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Party) in Zimbabwe, FRELIMO in Mozambique, MPLA in Angola, SWAPO in Namibia, and the ANC (African National Congress) in South Africa.

SWAPO and the ANC managed to preserve a democratic political system, mainly because there was not major military action on their own territory except for their northern borders. And although they utterly dominated their respective political systems, civil rights, free speech and the impartial rule of law survived. So did a fair degree of prosperity.

And then there's Zimbabwe, where fully one-quarter of the population has moved to the neighbouring countries in search of work and only a quarter of the adults still living at home have regular jobs.

Per capita income in Zimbabwe in 2022 was only \$100 a year higher than it was forty years ago, just after independence, and half of that was probably remittances from family members working abroad. Yet the country is not poor; only its people are.

The election this Wednesday will be the usual charade, with the outcome determined by ZANU's control of the media, the police and the courts, but some brave souls still defy it. Most of them belong to the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), and they know they won't win this time. (One of their members was stoned to death by ZANU activists last week.)

Yet they will win eventually, because everybody in Zimbabwe - literally everybody - knows that the regime is corrupt and the system is rigged. Indeed, everybody except its direct beneficiaries hates it.

Robert Mugabe, the hero of the independence war, ruled the country with an iron hand for 37 years until he tried to fire his vice-president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, at the behest of his wife, Grace Mugabe.

Mnangagwa, another liberation war hero (known as 'The Crocodile?'), overthrew Mugabe instead, but rules in exactly the same imperious and ruthless style. However, he is now 80, and there are no more liberation war heroes coming up behind him.

The ANC in South Africa will lose its majority in parliament in next year's election, after 29 years of unchallenged rule. It will just acknowledge its defeat and start trying to make some sort of coalition government. In fact, it already has its feelers out.

ZANU has already been in power for longer than that (43 years), and its time is also almost up.

The transition there may be rougher than that in South Africa, where the ANC never directly controlled the military and the courts always remained independent, but ZANU's role as Zimbabwe's eternal 'ruling party' is unlikely to survive.