

## FROM VILLAIN

Despite presiding over violent land seizures, economic collapse and widespread poverty and hunger, former international pariah Robert Mugabe looks set to win next week's national elections in Zimbabwe. **Anthony Ham** reports.

**T**here has never been a worse time to be a dictator: Muammar Gaddafi is dead, Hosni Mubarak is in prison and Bashar al-Assad is a pariah. But one member of the rogues gallery – Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe – may yet defy the trend.

At the height of his infamy, Mugabe presided over what then British prime minister Tony Blair called “a corrupt and ruinous regime”, while US president George W. Bush described him as “tyrannical”. Even Prince Charles labelled Mugabe’s government “abhorrent”. Western governments imposed sanctions, the Commonwealth expelled Zimbabwe from its ranks and the British press took to likening him to Adolf Hitler.

Mugabe’s pariah status owed much to his controversial policies on land redistribution. In 2000, with Mugabe’s blessing, armed militias seized white-owned farms and handed the title deeds to the president’s supporters. Also, Mugabe relentlessly pursued and persecuted political opponents. Agricultural output and export earnings crashed. In very short order, Zimbabwe’s economy went from being the breadbasket of southern Africa to its basket case.

Although there was little stomach for military intervention to remove Mugabe from power, the policy of Western governments was clear – Mugabe was a villain and his people should overthrow him.

Fast forward to the present and the story is radically different. In national elections to be held on July 31, Mugabe, nearly 90 and in power since 1980, is the clear favourite. In March this year, the European Union and Australia quietly lifted most of their sanctions against high-ranking Zimbabwean officials. The US and UK have, just as quietly, resumed dialogue with Mugabe’s regime. And Zimbabwe’s economy is again growing. It is one of the most remarkable political comebacks of recent years. Or as Mugabe himself puts it: “I have died many times. I have actually beaten Jesus Christ because he only died once.”

Robert Mugabe, like so many African leaders of his generation, began political life as a freedom fighter in a guerilla war against repressive colonial rule. While most African countries were winning their independence in the 1960s, Zimbabwe, or Rhodesia as it was then called, remained an outpost of apartheid-style government.

When independence finally came in 1980, Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) party won

57 out of 80 parliamentary seats and he became the country’s first black prime minister.

Mugabe’s early speeches suggested that he had chosen the path of national reconciliation above vengeance. He promised to uphold human rights and property rights, and he recognised the “common interest that knows no race, colour or creed”. He even issued a rousing call for forgiveness: “I urge you, whether you are black or white, to join me in a new pledge to forget our grim past, forgive others and forget.”

Aside from winning plaudits from world leaders, the call to reconciliation was a wise political strategy. White civil servants, in the absence of trained black counterparts, were necessary for good governance, while white commercial farmers formed the backbone of the national economy.

But Mugabe’s calls for reconciliation were little more than skin-deep. He threatened to continue the civil war if he lost the election and his victory was marred by allegations of political violence and vote-rigging. When he failed to win a single seat in



Zimbabwe’s Ndebele-speaking south, the political homeland of his erstwhile independence colleague Joshua Nkomo, Mugabe launched a brutal military assault, killing an estimated 20,000 people in the process.

In 1987, Mugabe declared himself president and he won elections – each marred by violence – in 1990, 1996 and 2002. Mugabe’s hold over Zimbabwe was iron-clad.

There were some signs of progress. Throughout the 1980s, Zimbabwe recorded a respectable average annual growth rate of 4.5 per cent. Mugabe’s government also funded an impressive social program that saw infant mortality and malnutrition rates fall by half. A former school teacher, Mugabe made education a priority, and adult literacy reached close to 90 per cent,

one of the highest rates in Africa.

Even so, white and black Zimbabweans lived in an uneasy peace. At independence, white farmers owned about 70 per cent of the best farming land despite representing just 1 per cent of the population. The gross disparity was underpinned by a “willing buyer, willing seller” policy mandated under the independence agreement that led to black majority rule. The policy was funded, for the most part, by the British government.

In 1997, however, the economy faltered and the first signs of discontent with Mugabe’s rule began to surface. In the same year, Tony Blair’s recently elected Labour government unilaterally announced that its funding for the program of land redistribution would cease because the money was being used to buy farms not for landless peasants but for Mugabe’s ruling elite.

When Mugabe sought to push through a constitutional referendum allowing his government to confiscate white-owned land without compensation, a majority of Zimbabwean voters rejected the provision. Stung by an unprecedented popular rebuke, Mugabe unleashed armed militias known as “war veterans” on the country’s white-owned farms.

Zimbabwe began to unravel.

Mugabe bullied his way to a much-disputed election victory in 2002, but with many commercial farms under attack, Zimbabwe’s economy collapsed.

Average annual income, which had been \$US950 per capita at independence in 1980, fell to \$US400 in 2003. Robert Guest, then Africa editor of *The Economist*, described it as “the most dramatic peacetime collapse of any country since Weimar Germany”.

In 2008, his ruling ZANU-PF party lost parliamentary elections to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai. Tsvangirai, who had been severely beaten by government thugs the year before, also outpolled Mugabe in the first round of the presidential poll, but withdrew from the run-off after Mugabe’s militias turned on the opposition.

Then Mugabe changed tack. Although he gave every sign of doing so unwillingly, he submitted to regional mediation and ultimately agreed to form a reconciliation government: Mugabe remained as president with Tsvangirai as prime minister. Willing or not, it would prove to be a masterstroke by the old warrior.

The first signs that the West’s sustained campaign against Mugabe was weakening came in 2010 when a Sussex University team published a report that concluded that “there is no



single, simple story of the Zimbabwe land reform”. The report pointed out that agricultural output was rebounding (agriculture is responsible for one-fifth of Zimbabwe’s GDP and the sector employs two out of every three Zimbabwean workers) as small-scale black farmers reaped the benefits of redistribution.

Earlier this year, the book *Zimbabwe Takes Back its Land* took a similar line, arguing that “in the biggest land reform in Africa, 6000 white farmers have been replaced by 245,000 Zimbabwean farmers. These are primarily ordinary poor people who have become more productive farmers.”

This year, both the US and European Union have sent official delegations to Harare, and Reverend Jesse Jackson emerged from a meeting with Mugabe to announce that “We are anxious for sanctions to end. We will not be satisfied until the barriers are removed between our two great nations.” Even the British government met in London with senior ministers in Mugabe’s government.

Most dramatically of all, Zimbabwe’s all-white Commercial Farmers Union, the strongest opponent of the