AS MUGABE FADES
ZIMBABWE AT THE CROSSROADS

Robert Forsyth talks with **David Coltart**

Senator David Coltart is one of the most prominent pro-democracy activists and human rights figures in Zimbabwe. Born and schooled in Zimbabwe, he trained in law at the University of Cape Town before returning to establish a legal centre in Bulawayo, the second-largest city in Zimbabwe after the capital Harare. In 2000 he won a parliamentary seat as a candidate for the Movement for Democratic Change, and in 2009 was re-elected as a Senator and became Minister for Education, Sport and the Arts in a government of national unity.

For three decades, he kept detailed notes and records of all his work, including a meticulous diary of cabinet dealings, the source material for much of his recent book *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe* (reviewed in the Winter 2017 issue of *Policy*). Although over the years Coltart has been threatened, detained, spuriously prosecuted, and has survived several attempts on his life, he remains an outspoken advocate for democratic change.

On a recent trip to Australia, he spoke with Robert Forsyth about how Robert Mugabe's long reign might end, the colonial legacy in Africa, and what Australia can do to help avert the 'perfect storm'—to quote Coltart—that is emerging in Zimbabwe as elections loom in 2018.

Robert Forsyth: In your book you describe 50 years of struggle and it ends unresolved. If we could come back in 50 years time do you think things would be better?

David Coltart: I'm an Afro-optimist. I'm not an Afro-pessimist. If you look at the last 30 years in southern Africa, the exception is Zimbabwe. If you think of where South Africa was 30 years ago, apartheid was still taking its very violent and evil course. There was one-party rule in Namibia, Zambia and Malawi. Yet in that time apartheid has gone, and Namibia, Zambia and Malawi as well as Botswana and Mozambique have all changed leaders.

The one exception to this positive change has been Zimbabwe where Robert Mugabe has been in power for 37 years. But I think it's going to change too. We're finally going to take a step towards embracing democracy. I often say that democracy is not an event, it's a process—and we've got a long way to go. It would be a miracle if a nation that has had decades of oppression suddenly embraced a democratic culture. Nothing that I believe in is premised on the belief that it will happen overnight. But we have to change course.

The Right Reverend Robert Forsyth is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies.

David Coltart is a leading political and human rights figure in Zimbabwe and author of the recent book *The Struggle Continues: 50 years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe* (Jacana Media 2016).

RF: How do you think Mugabe's rule might end?

DC: It's very hard to tell at this stage. But ZANU-PF have invested an enormous amount in the Mugabe brand and when he goes—whether he dies, or retires, or becomes incapacitated—it's going to shake ZANU. He's the glue that holds it together. So even though there is intense competition taking place over who will succeed him, the one thing they are agreed on is that he should remain in power for as long as possible. And the military support that as well.

Mugabe himself fears the loss of power because he knows what he is guilty of. He knows that he was the architect of the genocide in the 1980s and he knows that the moment he loses presidential immunity from prosecution he faces a problem. His much younger wife knows that when he goes she faces a problem in terms of her ill-gotten gains—when she jokes about pushing him into cabinet in a wheelchair she's deadly serious. So people who think that he may retire need to take into account this convergence of interest within his own party and within his own family that he stays in office for as long as possible.

There's no doubt that there are people waiting in the wings of ZANU-PF who would seek to perpetuate his style of government, but our assumption is that ZANU-PF will be greatly weakened by his passing and it will be very hard for them to hold the party together as we know it today. The transition won't be immediate but we think Mugabe's passing will start the long process towards Zimbabwe finally accepting democracy.

RF: In terms of your optimism, what about the republic of South Africa and Zuma?

DC: We need to understand what's happening in South Africa. I don't think it's an irreversible regression that South Africa is experiencing. Zuma has been a very poor leader but in some ways I think South Africa might be inoculated against bad leaders. There are very good people waiting in the wings even of the African National Congress, who have a vision for a democratic multi-racial South Africa.

The colonial legacy

RF: Africa is still a troubled continent, although not necessarily the most troubled. Is the issue colonialism or African culture?

DC: It's a combination. There's no doubt that colonialism had adverse effects. What it rooted in Africa was a culture of intolerance and autocracy. If you take Zimbabwe and South Africa as an example, colonialism or white minority rule entrenched domination of one race by another. People who take a superficial view of Zimbabwe believe that it's dominated by ZANU-PF. It's actually dominated by a minority ethnic group—not even a Shona dominant ethnic group but one dialect of the Shona ethnic group.

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RF: Is this due to the colonial powers favouring one group?

DC: Not really. It's due more to the structures that were set up by colonialism. For example, the Ian Smith government had an absolute monopoly over broadcasting. They controlled it. Mugabe took over and perpetuated that system.

RF: You say in your book that Rhodes begat Smith and Smith begat Mugabe.

DC: Naming a country after a living individual gets it off to a very bad start indeed. What it says to the population is that the individual Big Man is more important than the people.

RF: Does that also strike a chord in African society as well?

DC: It played into an existing system of tribal chiefs whose word was absolute and who couldn't be questioned. That was then translated into political power.

Part of the problem is that at independence, many constitutions vested too much power in the executive and too little power in the legislature, the judiciary and the fourth estate or media. In the case of Zimbabwe you had a government wielding power, the Rhodesian Front, and then a party acquiring power, and when it came to negotiations they both wanted a strong constitution. By that I mean a constitution that favoured the winner and a strong executive. So the first-past-the-post Westminster system, which was used in Britain and which is wholly inappropriate for an emerging democracy, was used. It results in a party that dominates and controls the media so that it then has an almost absolute dominance over parliament and minority voices are drowned out.

In terms of the Big Man mentality and the dominance of one tribe, or one culture and one set of traditions, what we need to move towards in Africa is respect for a multiplicity of cultures and traditions. That's very important, and it doesn't just apply to the racial divide. It applies very much to the ethnic divide and black Africans of different mother tongues. In Zimbabwe there are 11 national languages but two dominate. In fact, one—the Shona language—predominates. But you have ten other ethnic, indigenous African languages and cultures that have been suppressed by this one dominant tribe. That needs to change. And it *is* changing, but it's a long process.

We have good race relations, evidenced by the fact that I stood in a constituency that was 98% black and won by an overwhelming majority.

RF: One of the effects of colonialism is that the boundaries of the nation are arbitrary and don't correspond to the ethnic composition of the nation. Am I right?

DC: The Berlin conference in the late 19th century was in many respects a disaster. They literally had a map of Africa and without any regard to existing ethnic and tribal groups they just drew lines on it. In Zimbabwe, for example, the British and the Portuguese agreed that they would divide Mozambique and Zimbabwe not on the basis of ethnic divisions but altitude and the mountains along the east.

RF: So it's a state with many nations.

DC: In Zimbabwe and Mozambique, on either side of this divide, you have people who speak exactly the same language. Of course, what has happened in South Sudan is a realisation of the need to recognise those divisions. But it's a perilous path, which is why the African Union as a policy has said that these colonial boundaries have to stay. Once you start the process, for example if you look at South Africa and Zimbabwe, the whole southwest of Zimbabwe ethnically, traditionally and culturally is much closer to South Africa than the rest of the country.

RF: What is it then that makes a person want to be Zimbabwean despite their ethnic connections with others and alienation from the dominant culture?

DC: In some ways Zimbabwe has a better opportunity to build a nation-state. It has very clearly defined physical boundaries with mountains to the East, the Zambesi to the North and the Limpopo to the south. That sort of binds us together and has created a very definable nation state.

I'm also optimistic about the country because of its almost unbounded potential. We have wonderful people and high literacy rates. We have good race relations, evidenced by the fact that I stood in a constituency that was 98% black and won by an overwhelming majority. People didn't look at my skin colour. That's not the case in South Africa. In terms of mineral reserves, we have some of the largest reserves of platinum, gold and diamonds. We have amazing tourist attractions, rich agricultural lands and good rains. We have everything, save for democracy and that takes time. The tragedy of Zimbabwe is that it's a nation with enormous potential, which has been denied.

RF: I'm interested in the role of religion. In your book you talk about your Christian faith and what Isaiah and others said. There's a lot of religion in

Zimbabwe. And there are good churches but also places where there were corrupt church officials. So what is the role of religion for good and ill in your country?

DC: It's a problem throughout Africa. I remember Christian missionaries coming back from Rwanda prior to the genocide that occurred there and the description of the church was that it was a mile wide and an inch deep. There's a lot of religion in Africa and relatively little faith. Zimbabwe is no different. It's a predominantly Christian country with a tiny Muslim minority and a lot of traditional African religions that the Catholic church in particular has managed to adapt. But because it's religious and not faith-based, there's often a disconnect or gap between the profession of faith and its outworking.

There are some remarkable exceptions. The Catholic church has played a very powerful social justice role in the country, in speaking out against the excesses and oppression of white minority rule, and post-independence playing a major role speaking out and exposing the genocide which occurred in the 1980s. So there are exceptions. I'm not overwhelmingly critical of the churches. All I'm saying is that given the number of people who profess a religious faith, the fruit isn't as evident as one would hope it would be.

The role of the West

RF: What about the West? We all united against Smith, but it hasn't turned out as well as we thought. What would you say about the role of the West in Zimbabwe?

DC: We can never just blame the West. We have made our own mistakes. The Universal Declaration of Independence was an appalling decision that resulted in war and has left a dreadful legacy that still poisons our nation today. But the West too has made very grave errors of judgement going right the way back to the way the federation was ended (involving southern Rhodesia, northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland) to the way in which Britain in many respects simply wiped its hands of it all when it was clear that war was inevitable and gave up on intensive shuttle diplomacy. Lancaster House has in many respects exacerbated our problems—Lancaster being the peace conference at the end of the civil war which brought Mugabe and Smith and others together to devise a new constitution amongst other things.

RF: Is there kind of a reverse racism in the West in that black African leaders are treated with a different standard?

DC: I think that there's a huge guilt complex in the West over past colonial injustices which sometimes leads to black African leaders being held to a different standard. Coming back to Zimbabwe, the British had overwhelming evidence of the genocide that Mugabe was responsible for in the 1980s and yet in 1994 they gave him an honorary knighthood. To give them credit, they reversed it in 2008 but the damage was done.

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The biggest problem we face now in Zimbabwe—and the rest of southern Africa—is Western indifference. It's not so much Western involvement or a Western agenda. The West is preoccupied understandably with ISIS. Britain is completely absorbed by Brexit. Trump has a different foreign policy agenda towards Africa and human rights are very low on that agenda. So at best Africa will be ignored. At worst, some of our dictators may be embraced if they are prepared to do business.

Taking a very practical view aside from the moral view, and particularly with respect to Europeans, they are faced with the spectre of refugees across the Mediterranean. If they don't tackle the underlying trade inequalities—such as the tariffs that are applied—between Europe and Africa, and do more to bolster education and investment in Africa, young people in Africa will continue to lose hope and see their futures lying in Europe. Africa could compete, but because of protectionist policies—in France in particular and to a lesser extent in Britain—

African products are denied entry to Europe. These structural problems must be addressed.

RF: China has invested heavily in Africa. The West may be indifferent, but China is not indifferent.

DC: China's role in Africa is predominantly rooted in business, although it used to have an ideological interest. China is motivated by the opportunities it sees in Africa, particularly in the supply of raw materials. In Zimbabwe China's interest is in business so long as these interests are not jeopardised. They are not all that locked into ZANU-PF. We know that they have said to ZANU that they are not happy with Robert Mugabe because their business interests are being undermined—and they've said that cognisant that Mugabe going would destabilise ZANU-PF.

What African countries need to do is look at their investment policies and anti-corruption laws to make business investment more attractive for American, European and Australian companies so that they are more likely to invest and compete with China. Zimbabwe has shocking laws now, but when we get those investment laws rectified it will be a great investment destination with enormous potential.

We need concerted proactive shuttle diplomacy to build a consensus with our neighbours in the region to hold the Zimbabwean government accountable to its own constitution.

RF: What role can the Australian government play?

DC: Australia has a responsibility to become more engaged in Zimbabwe, which is a proud member of the Commonwealth. Australia can lobby the Commonwealth and India to support leaders in southern Africa in building a consensus to confront Mugabe. They need to tell him unequivocally to comply with the constitution that was agreed on in 2013 and leave office. They can guarantee that he will be protected and will live out his days peacefully. But ZANU-PF is ignoring the constitution and must be held to it as we move to a new election in 2018.

We are entering a dangerous period in Zimbabwe's history. First, Mugabe is 94 years old next year. He is increasingly frail, out-of-touch and unable to effectively control the different factions in his own party. For all that one might say against him, one thing he has done over the past 37 years is to hold his party and the military together. And to that extent the country has been stable, although fundamentally unjust. Now we face serious divisions, including in the military and secret police.

Second is the state of opposition. Like oppositions in Serbia and elsewhere that have had to survive in dictatorships, it has been poisoned by the political culture and has contributed to the current malaise. The opposition Movement for Democratic Change flirted with violence in 2005, and split. It has allowed personality interests to supercede national interests. And it is seriously divided.

Compounding the situation is the state of the economy. There are shortages again, industry has all but collapsed and the manufacturing sector is under severe strain. So the economy is tanking, causing rising tensions among poor people in particular.

Considerable influence could be brought to bear to avert this perfect storm from erupting in Zimbabwe. We need concerted proactive shuttle diplomacy to build a consensus with our neighbours in the region to hold the Zimbabwean government accountable to its own constitution. Intensive shuttle diplomacy has worked before; for example, when South African President Thabo Mbeki led pressure on ZANU-PF to accept a transitional government in 2008.

Zimbabwe is key to southern Africa and southern Africa is key to Africa. After 30 years of change, it has become the most stable region is Africa. Zimbabwe is smack bang in the middle. It has the ability to destabilise not only neighbouring South Africa but also the southern African region if it implodes. Conversely, it could boost the region and set it on a very positive course if encouraged to follow a more democratic path.