

Speech: Robert Mugabe tarnished the jewel that is Zimbabwe, now is its chance to shine again: article by Boris Johnson

The most accurate description of Zimbabwe in the era of Robert Mugabe came from a fellow leader of the struggle against white rule. It was Samora Machel, then president of Mozambique and a fervent enemy of colonialism, who told Mugabe in 1980 that Zimbabwe was the “jewel of Africa”, adding: “Don’t tarnish it!”

Machel was right – both in his tribute and his sense of foreboding. If you sat down and designed a country with glittering prospects, then you couldn’t do much better than Zimbabwe.

This is a fertile land of immense scenic beauty, from the Eastern Highlands to the rugged bush of Matabeleland, with an abundance of natural resources, including prodigious quantities of diamonds and platinum. There is an educated population, plentiful wildlife and what were some of the best roads and railways in Africa.

Throw all this together and you get a nation that is almost over-endowed for success. And yet Mugabe has somehow succeeded in tarnishing this jewel, just as Machel feared he would.

This is partly because a corrupt elite has been allowed to pillage Zimbabwe’s natural resources and embezzle its wealth, leaving the people poorer in per capita terms than they were at Independence in 1980.

But the headlong collapse of Zimbabwe’s economy can be traced back to the onset of the land seizures in 2000, which amounted to a deliberate policy decision by Mugabe to wreck one of his country’s most important assets.

To understand just how ruinous this behaviour was, remember that commercial agriculture was Zimbabwe’s biggest single export industry, providing jobs and livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of people. The farms, once seized and redistributed, were often allowed to fall into ruin, their fields left fallow and their expensive irrigation systems broken up for scrap.

The result was mass unemployment and the worst bout of hyperinflation ever recorded, measured in billions of percentage points. Today, in one of Africa’s most fertile countries, many are close to starvation. The image that people in Britain have of Zimbabwe is not of the Victoria Falls or spectacular wildlife, but stolen farms and the bandaged victims of the regime’s brutality. And now this disturbing story of plunder and misrule has reached what may be a turning point.

In the early hours of Wednesday, soldiers from the Zimbabwean army deployed in central Harare, taking control of state television and surrounding Mugabe's private and official residences. President Jacob Zuma of South Africa telephoned Mugabe the same day and – according to an official statement – Mugabe reported that he was unharmed but confined to his home.

This extraordinary sequence of events follows months of vicious political infighting. Mugabe had sacked the vice-president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, launched a purge of the ruling Zanu-PF party, and positioned his wife, Grace, as a contender for the presidency. It was the dismissal of Mr Mnangagwa and the improbable rise of Grace Mugabe that appear to have goaded Zimbabwe's military chiefs beyond endurance.

We cannot tell how events will unfold in the days ahead. I spoke on Wednesday to our Ambassador in Harare, who is closely following developments. For the moment, we must urge all Britons who live in Harare to stay at home until the situation becomes clearer.

But there is a path ahead that offers hope. Under the constitution, presidential elections are due to be held between February and August next year. Until the momentous events of Wednesday, the prevailing assumption was that Mugabe would seek another term in office, regardless of the fact that he will turn 94 next February.

Suddenly, everything has been cast into doubt. In this new situation, what matters more than anything else is for the presidential elections to go ahead, in accordance with the constitution. In order to unlock the immense goodwill for Zimbabwe around the world, the country needs a legitimate government. There must be free and fair elections to allow the country's people to decide their own future. And the most urgent task for Zimbabwe's leaders is to press ahead with reforms that are vital for economic recovery.

Throughout Zimbabwe's 37 years of independence, British governments of every party have followed essentially the same approach. Our starting point is a profound sense of friendship with the people of Zimbabwe; we wish them well, we know that feckless leadership has squandered the immense potential of their homeland.

All that we have ever wanted is for Zimbabweans to be masters of their own fate, as expressed through free elections. The path to a legitimate government now lies open. I hope that Zimbabwean politicians will take this opportunity, remembering that their country has so many strengths that even Mugabe has failed to tarnish it irreparably.