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Written by Administrator

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Speaking exclusively to The Sunday Times, Robert Mugabe's former vice-president announces her bid for power in Zimbabwe

Christina Lamb Published: 21 February 2016

It sounds like something penned by Shakespeare on acid. An evil tyrant rules over his people for decades, owing his power to his military commander, who then perishes in a mysterious fire. That man's widow, Joice Mujuru — widely known as Comrade Spill Blood — then sees herself as the rightful successor to the ageing tyrant, only to find that the latter's wife has other ideas.

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Today, as Robert Mugabe, the world's oldest head of state, turns 92, he will get a most unwelcome birthday present. He faces his first challenge from within his innermost circle — a gauntlet thrown down by his former vice-president, the woman who used to call him Father. Joice Mujuru has chosen today to launch her own opposition party, People First.

When I meet her in her house in Zimbabwe, she is understandably nervous. Resplendent in a scarlet jacket, with golden boots dangling from her ears, she fusses about where to sit. Taking on one of the world's last totalitarian regimes is a risky business — especially from someone who was embedded at the very heart of it. For years, Mugabe has retained power by playing potential rivals in his Zanu-PF party off against each other. But recently something has changed. There is a sense that Zimbabwe is in the dying days of empire.

"I think this is pointing to the end," says Mujuru. "He no longer has the energy to tell them to stop, and no one listens to him. He has no respect now — from anybody. It's painful." According to Mujuru, Mugabe often falls asleep in cabinet meetings. "He would speak for 15 minutes then nod off and I would then chair the meeting, with everyone ignoring the fact he was asleep."

Making this challenge is not something Mujuru, 60, has done lightly. For almost 35 years, she was at Mugabe's side. She was the youngest minister in his first cabinet, while her husband was his army chief. For 10 years she was his vice-president, widely seen as his heiress apparent. But then Mugabe's own wife, Grace, 50, began to nurture political ambitions of her own. Known as Gucci Grace or the First Shopper — she is said to have once spent £75,000 on a single spree in Paris — she was apparently worried about securing her future and that of her four children. In September 2014 she launched her own campaign. "They say I want to be president," she told one rally. "Why not? Am I not a Zimbabwean?"

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Mugabe has long been thought to be suffering from ill health. Last month he was rumoured to be on the verge of death in a clinic in the Far East, yet he still insisted he had no plans to retire, saying: “I will be there until God says come.” Some believe that Grace is already running things. “Her power only lasts as long as he is there,” says Mujuru. “She said she will buy him a wheelchair that will make him speak even when he’s dead.”

One of Grace Mugabe’s main targets is Joice Mujuru. “She saw me as a threat — they both did,” says Mujuru. Grace went on state TV to denounce Mujuru, accusing her of wanting to kill Mugabe and of having consulted witch doctors to bring about his death. Is that true? “I’m a Christian and a member of the Salvation Army,” Mujuru retorts. “I have never used magic. A head of state using his platform to lie and believing stories about frogs being kept in a calabash, and if one dies then he will die? I said to myself, ‘What a backward man.’” Appeals to the president got her nowhere. After one cabinet meeting, she asked Mugabe if he really believed she wanted to kill him. “I am hearing it from the ministry of intelligence,” he replied.

Horrified, Mujuru told him: “Father, if you are my shed and protecting me from the sun, how can I take an axe and destroy that shed? I’d be a mad person. I am only banking on you to look after me.” She left that meeting in fear. “My mouth was completely dry,” she recalls. In December 2014, Mujuru found herself unceremoniously sacked as vice-president. “It was the shock of my life,” she says.

Today, she describes herself as a “grandmother and a chicken farmer”. She has 10 grandchildren and 135,000 chickens on a farm seized at gunpoint from a white farmer as part of Mugabe’s landgrab. Mujuru may be out in the cold, but she still lives the life of a Zanu-PF apparatchik, dividing her time between the farm and a vast house in the northern suburbs of Harare, complete with tennis court, large empty swimming pool, gazebo and black-marble fountain gushing water — despite the country’s worst drought and famine in decades.

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For someone who left school to join the bush war at 18, and who rose to No 2 in the regime, she seems tense. She is not used to speaking to western journalists — for years, we were banned. She knows the risks of speaking out. Throughout the interview, she never uses Mugabe's name, referring instead to "He", as if he were a deity.

We begin by talking about her childhood as the daughter of subsistence farmers in Mount Darwin, in what was then the British colony of Rhodesia. Like most black children at the time, Joice found herself at schools that taught carpentry, agriculture and domestic science rather than academic studies. "African children were expected to go into stereotype jobs," she says. "Girls would be nurses or schoolteachers and males policemen or land agents."

She was saved by the Salvation Army, which arranged her a scholarship at a high school. She was starting her O-levels when guerrillas came to her village in November 1973 to recruit for the bush war against the white regime. "They explained why this war was being carried out. I was one of the only girls in my village who had gone to high school, and they gave my example as someone who could have completed my education if I hadn't been derailed into the African schools."

She signed up. She was given a semi-automatic rifle and rudimentary training, and in February 1974, aged 18, she shot down a Rhodesian helicopter. "We'd been told, 'If you see a helicopter, count as if you are measuring three unseen helicopters in front of it, and keep shooting at that point, and the shot will meet the real helicopter.' I don't know how it happened, but the bullet hit

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the helicopter and I saw it catching fire and the soldiers all disappearing, then it came down 2 or 3km away and I heard the sound of it dropping. Then I ran.

"If they had captured me, I would have been killed. But heavy rain came, which saved me from the dogs and horses the whites sent after me, and I followed the drains, which were full of water, so the dogs couldn't get my trail." Later, she fell ill with cerebral malaria.

While she was recuperating, Joice met her future husband, Solomon Mujuru. "I didn't then expect us to become long-lasting partners, but he was a likeable person, and when I realised the war would be long and I was growing up and needed a partner, and he did, too, we decided to formalise it." She says Solomon helped cement Mugabe's power base. "My husband used to risk his life to go and talk to [Mugabe]... then come back and talk to the other commanders to accept him. [Mugabe] owed a lot to him and the family."

When independence from Britain came in 1980, it was "very exciting... it was about rebuilding the country and uniting the society. We were working with the white people who tried to kill us, but when you talk to each other, you realised human beings were all the same. We didn't want to kill, we wanted to change the system."

She describes Mugabe's inaugural speech on independence ("This is now time to beat our swords into ploughshares") as a model of reconciliation. "I don't know if he was just stage-managing or really believed it then," she says.

Aged 24, and by then the mother of two girls, Mujuru had become the youngest minister, in charge of sports and culture. "It was very difficult juggling being a mother, a student, doing a job you don't understand," she says. "I don't know how I did it, only God knows."

In that first decade, Mujuru says they were intent on improving the country. "At that time I didn't see anything wrong or amiss, as I was focusing on my job." She now describes the regime as "a full dictatorship". But how can people trust someone who was part of the system for so long and shared in its spoils? "It's difficult to pick a good sheep among the bad," she replies. "But people will vouch they saw me doing good things and never heard me giving a hate speech or encouraging others to kill or beat each other."

In August 2011, Joice was woken by a phone call from a maid on the farm, saying the house was on fire and her husband was inside. Solomon Mujuru had retired from the military and politics in the 1990s and was busy mining diamonds, but remained in the politburo and was seen as the only person who would stand up to Mugabe. Still in her pyjamas, Joice drove to the farm, arriving around 1.30am. "Harare fire brigade was there, but had no water," she recalls, "so we had to use the farm bowsers, and we tried to pour water on his body. There was a blue, blue flame, almost 1½ to 2 metres high, not normal at all. It seemed to me there was some kind of accelerant."

That wasn't all that was strange. Solomon seemed to have made no effort to escape. The carpet underneath his body was not burnt. Joice believes he had been shot first. A local white farmer who rushed to the scene said he believed a white phosphorus grenade was used to burn the body. "I can't say who did it, but they know, the people in power. It will come out," says Joice. "Mugabe?" I ask. She purses her lips.

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Even so, she stayed in the cabinet and campaigned for Mugabe in the 2013 elections. He won an unexpected landslide. Was it rigged? "I never saw the rigging... I am sure it was a very small clique that was doing it."

After her husband's death she took over the farm, taking a £1.7m bank loan to expand. "I love farming," she says. She insists that when she was informed (by letter) that she had been sacked, she intended to retire. "It was the people who came and asked me, 'Comrade Teurai Ropa [Spill Blood], we want you to lead us, we want someone who can listen to us.' So I agreed. I will lead them."