CHAPTER 4

RESISTING CHANGE: MUGABE AGAINST
THE PEOPLE’S STRUGGLE IN
ZIMBABWE, 1998–2005

Introduction

Robert Mugabe, trained as a school teacher much like John Hume, carries the distinction of being Zimbabwe’s greatest savior and its darkest nightmare. In 1980, 20 years of grinding civil war in Zimbabwe came to an end and freedom fighter Robert Mugabe led his nation to liberation from white colonial rule. The entire world watched with the highest hopes as this resource-rich nation embarked on creating a nonracial democracy and an economic example for the rest of the continent. As the twenty-first century dawned, a tragic turn of events finds Zimbabwe—still led by Mugabe—in political, economic, and social free-fall. The hopes that this independence leader could carry the southern African nation of 12 million into a peaceful adolescence have been crashed on the rocks of poverty and selfish rule. In 1998, massive protests rocked the nation and galvanized support for the opposition trade union movement. The following year, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) emerged to push for a multiparty democracy. Despite international and domestic support for the MDC, and against all trends in the region, Mugabe managed to strengthen his grip. In fact, while his unpopularity at home peaked in the first few years of the millennium, by 2004 Mugabe’s skillful intermestic policy making reversed some of his most significant losses.

While nominally the head of a parliamentary democracy, in reality Mugabe is an authoritarian leader. Although one may think that the processes of leadership are vastly different in a non-Western, nondemocratic country, an investigation of contemporary Zimbabwe shows a leader using several common strategies. By turning the domestic situation in Zimbabwe into an “intermestic” issue, Robert Mugabe worked with and changed domestic and international circumstances to fit his agenda of staying in power in the midst of ruin and opposition. The case of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe shows that when the international community misunderstands the mechanisms of leadership, efforts to isolate a repressive regime can have devastating results. Indeed, in February 2000, the Zimbabwe opposition...
movement, southern African leaders, members of the Commonwealth, the European Union (EU), and the United States all thought the writing was on the wall. Robert Mugabe, head of state of Zimbabwe since the first post-independence elections in 1980, had finally been defeated symbolically in a referendum on his proposed constitutional changes. A few months later, in June 2000, the MDC won 57 of 120 seats in a parliamentary election. To observers at home and around the world it was only a matter of time before Mugabe agreed to end his one-party rule. While foreign actors exerted what influence they thought they could to undercut his influence, in 2005 Mugabe still called the shots and in March of that year won another presidential election.

This chapter tells the tale of how Mugabe managed to tie together and manipulate international and domestic contexts to his favor. After a discussion of the historical background, the subsequent section describes the obstacles faced by Mugabe, addressing domestic and external factors that posed challenges to his agenda of staying in power. A later section describes his intermestic policy making by examining how Mugabe employed the four leadership strategies.

**Historical Background**

In the 1970s, Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) made a loose alliance with Joshua Nkomo’s smaller Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) to lead the “People’s Struggle” in Rhodesia—the long fight against British white settlers to rule what became Zimbabwe. A settlement brokered by Britain in 1979, known as the Lancaster House agreement (named after the location in Britain of the negotiations) provided for elections in 1980 and a plan for coexistence between the majority blacks (about 96 percent of the population) and tiny white minority (about 4 percent). The new government was bound to maintain many of the agreed structures for seven years and could not change the constitution for ten years. Robert Mugabe was elected as prime minister in a parliamentary system, where his ZANU-PF took most of the seats. Nkomo’s ZAPU was the other major party (though much smaller), and the whites were guaranteed 20 of the Parliament’s 100 seats for seven years. Another aspect of the Lancaster House agreement had great significance for the current situation: former colonial power Britain and also the United States agreed to give aid to enable the new government to purchase land for redistribution from whites to blacks. This aspect was crucial because the struggle for land was the basis of the liberation war. The agreement also established that land must only be redistributed on a “willing buyer, willing seller” basis.

After surprising the world by promising in his inaugural address to promote reconciliation in Zimbabwe, Mugabe set out to consolidate his power. From 1982 to 1987, he waged war in the southwest part of the country that was Nkomo’s stronghold. Mugabe kept much of the powers created by the white government during the war, such as emergency legislation that would later be employed and even strengthened to limit dissent. The fighting, estimated to have killed 20,000 of Mugabe’s enemies, ended with the Unity Accord of 1987 in which Nkomo was co-opted into the government as one of two co-vice presidents. Part of this