CHAPTER 5

Intransigent Diplomat: Robert Mugabe and His Western Diplomacy, 1963–1983

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Introduction

It is difficult to succinctly summarize the diplomatic style of a leader who began his career in the early 1960s and remains influential more than 50 years later. Robert Mugabe’s career does point to a certain predictable pattern of diplomatic behavior that is evident throughout the changing contours of Zimbabwean history. In many ways, this predictability allowed him his successes as a diplomat while also becoming an inherent weakness, as he remained consistent while the diplomatic world transformed around him. Still, one aspect of his diplomacy—the ability to push intransigence with certain audiences and individuals while at the same time privately demonstrating his tacit support for, and vulnerability to, the interests of world powers—helped him overcome the more tragic implications of a leader unable to change with the times.

On the one hand, as other chapters in this volume will attest, Mugabe’s greatest contribution to Zimbabwean history has been his ability to avoid the “sellout” label he himself so often used to characterize his Zimbabwean political competitors, as well as political leaders in SADC, the AU, and the UN over the years. Perhaps this was no more important than during the period 1976–1983, when Zimbabweans were forced to take sides in the competition between various African nationalists vis-à-vis their relationship with Ian Smith’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) government. The ability of Mugabe to maneuver beyond his rivals, whether it was Joshua Nkomo as his partner in the Patriotic Front or Bishop Muzorewa and the United African National Council (UANC) before, during, and after the 1980 elections, makes it clear that Mugabe was the more skilled politician in terms of portraying himself as the least compromised among the possible leaders of Zimbabwe. For the historian of Zimbabwean politics and social movements, Mugabe’s and ZANU’s popularity at the time of the 1980 transition to majority rule is beyond question, and a large part of that popularity arose from Mugabe’s consistent employment of an intransigency in negotiations with his internal rivals, with the Smith regime, and with international brokers determined to see
a negotiated settlement of what was then called the “Rhodesian crisis.” The more difficult question to answer is the extent to which Mugabe’s image of a noncompromising diplomat fits with the historical evidence.

This chapter argues that this intransigence was not as solid as portrayed by ZANU’s propaganda and rhetoric of the time and that once in power in the early 1980s, Mugabe’s diplomatic relations with the West began to unravel as the realities of his hard-line treatment of internal rivals stood in stark contrast with the popularity and goodwill he had developed as a leader willing to reconcile with whites and those who had fought against him during the war of liberation.

**Congo Crisis: Setting the Stage for Cold War Rhodesia**

It was in the early 1960s that Cold War rivalries entered Central Africa during the Congo crisis. It was here that the Zimbabwean nationalists, themselves still in the early stages of forming a cohesive nationalist movement, and one that was only beginning to develop important international diplomatic linkages, first took their cues from the unfolding Congo crisis (Scarnecchia 2011a). The relatively inexperienced Zimbabwean nationalist leadership—at least in terms of diplomacy—learned a number of lessons from the Congo crisis. Most importantly, they were able to watch Katanga’s leader Moise Tshombe gain the attention of the world powers through his secession from the Congo and then through the defense of the Katanga against the Congolese and the UN forces. The nationalists observed the extent to which the Central African Federation (CAF), made up of Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Southern Rhodesia, defended Tshombe against both the UN and the Congolese central government. They also observed how the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, which became public in February 1961, effectively helped to mobilize political support against the white Rhodesian state as well as assist in forging pan-African links through a common rhetoric that linked Lumumba’s assassination to the Cold War goals of the West.

The Congo crisis did not, however, hinder African nationalists in Zimbabwe from continued dealings with Americans for financial support, as all the major nationalists remained in close contact with the Americans, as well as with the AFL-CIO, for financial support during the period 1960–1964 (Scarnecchia 2008). In some ways, the rhetorical attacks on Western Cold War meddling in Africa seemed to increase with the amount of contact Zimbabwean nationalists had with the Americans. For example, the National Democratic Party’s (NDP) publication *Radar* had promoted this anti-imperialist view in December of 1960, a month before Lumumba’s assassination:

> When Africans invited the United Nations to come to the rescue of a Belgian-betrayed Congo, they never intended to introduce cold war politics into Africa. Africans have learnt now the folly of entrusting the freedom of a country to an organisation that is controlled by one big imperialistic country…Conflicting interests plus the unwillingness of the Western Block to follow out policies that will free the Congo have been responsible for the deadlock at the United Nations. In Africa all trouble comes from conspired and planned subversion of African States by one or other of the Western Alliance.