

Arthur Mutambara

'Not playing the MDC game'

In 2003 **Leo Zeilig** quizzed Arthur Mutambara, the newly installed leader of the anti-Morgan Tsvangirai faction of Zimbabwe's Movement for Democratic Change, on his radical student past, his political beliefs and how he saw his political future.



BACKGROUND TO INTERVIEW

Arthur Mutambara has made a dramatic return to Zimbabwean politics. He was a prominent student activist in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, and his reputation rests on this. He was the secretary and later president of the students' representative council at the University of Zimbabwe from 1988 to 1990. Students still refer affectionately to the period as the 'AGO era' - as he signed himself. Those years are widely regarded as the seed-bed of the first urban opposition to the government, which some maintain stalled the regime's plans for a one-party state.

Students were among the first to criticise the government, breaking with Zanu-PF several years before the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). The break, in 1988, was dramatic, as students had

recently staged demonstrations in support of President Robert Mugabe as 'revolutionary intellectuals'. Mutambara was a leading figure in organising student opposition. In 1989 he was arrested with fellow-leader Munyaradzi Gwisai, for organising a demonstration that compared the Zimbabwean regime with the apartheid government. The two leaders were thrown into the maximum security prison, Chikurubi, to general outrage. Morgan Tsvangirai, the young leader of the ZCTU, denounced the arrests and the victimisation of students. His protests were rewarded with imprisonment.

By 1990 Zimbabwe had changed permanently, and Zanu-PF became the sullied party of liberation. Other civil society groups emerged to voice their grievances. In this year

Mutambara left Zimbabwe on a Rhodes scholarship for Oxford University, where he completed his PhD. He then moved to the US, where he worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Nasa. In 2002 he returned to Africa.

This interview explores the period of activism that made Mutambara famous, and the motivations of a man who now leads one faction of the Movement for Democratic Change. It was conducted in 2003 when Mutambara was the director of payments at the Standard Bank in Johannesburg, responsible for developing a payment strategy for banks in Southern African countries. In the interview, Mutambara displays the confidence, even arrogance, of the student movement he once led.

Tell me about your background?

I grew up partly in the rural areas. I saw a bit of the war, though I was too young to fight. But I attended meetings and have a very soft spot for people who pick up guns to drive out the oppressor.

What characterised the AGO era?

We were the de facto opposition in Zimbabwe, and our agenda was driven by the national agenda, as opposed to sectional interests. We fought and negotiated for students on pay-outs, but the key element was the national agenda, against the one-party state. We were also strongly opposed to corruption and mistaken government priorities, where money was being spent on white elephants.

And you were unique in doing that?

We put down the foundation. But we were fighting him from the left. We said Mugabe had done nothing for workers; Mugabe is a stooge of imperialism. Consequently we got no support from white farmers, the British or the US. At that time the Brits, the US and white farmers were in bed with Mugabe. I take strong exception when the democratic forces in Zimbabwe pander to the interests of the Brits and US, when the foundation of the movement was anti-imperialist and pro-socialist.

What ideas inspired you at the time?

We were driven by egalitarianism and socialism. Economic rights are fundamental rights. So our definition of democracy had a working class aspiration. Then we said: 'Look, we are the barometer of social consciousness, because there is no opposition.'

What did this mean to you going to university?

I've always believed in both academic excellence and social responsibility. You don't impress me if you come with a first class and that is all. But you also don't impress me if you come with a third, or a fail, or you are sent down. So a combination of academic excellence and social activism. University was an opportunity for my mind, I read *Das Kapital* in my first years. We used to go to the Soviet Embassy to get books, and from the Cuban embassy. I had lots of books and I read and read.

Why is your period of student unionism regarded as the high point of the movement?

It was a turning-point, where Mugabe was going from liberator to villain. Now you can criticise Mugabe and no one notices. When we did it, it was a novelty. We said there is no solution in Zanu; the solution is outside. We looked very radical and extremist, but everyone is doing it now.

Secondly, we read; we believed in ideas. Gwisai, Beti [Tendai Beti, current general secretary of the other MDC faction], we read everybody - Mao, Trotsky, Stalin, Lenin, the Black Panther Party in the States,

Malcolm X, King, Mugabe. We were thoroughly exposed and we had bold ideas.

My confidence came from academic excellence. When you are president of the student union and fail in your exams, you are doing a disservice to the union, because you are easy propaganda. So we believed in doing well. That is why I got a Rhodes Scholarship and went to Oxford and Gwisai went to

Columbia. That is why I am a PhD and why I have three books. I'm not sure how many young people who came after us realised the importance of academic discipline. What you get from the school system is miseducation; education is self-acquired. And self-education is acquired from reading outside the curriculum.

What was your most striking memory of those two years?

It is not personal; it was how we stopped Zanu from maintaining a one-party state. Being part of the process of killing that project and of the foundation of democracy in Zimbabwe. I don't put much premium on my arrest and detention in Chikurubi for 21 days.

But to be a 22-year-old student in a maximum security jail must have affected you ...

We didn't get caught up on the glamour or glory; we believed in the immortality of our cause. When I was locked up they bought CIO [the intelligence service] directors to talk to me. I gave them a piece of my mind, and said if Mugabe has any guts he can come and talk to me.

Can you describe an occasion when you met a senior government politician?

There was a vicious encounter with Mugabe himself at a graduation ceremony in 1990, when I was still president. He was officiating. The tradition then was that the procession was led by the SRC president and at the back was the national president. We go into the hall and do the ceremony and then come out to what was called College Green, where people have drinks and talk. The vice-president

came with Mugabe to introduce him. Mugabe wanted to do 'small talk'; he said something like: 'How many graduates were there this year? When I graduated in 1951 there were nine graduates in the country.'

I said: 'No, I want to talk about national issues. We are completely against the one-party state by any means necessary.' Because I knew I was only going to have one second with him.

Mugabe said: 'Oh well if you take such strong views, we are going to be very dismissive.' I said: 'We have already dismissed your views.' The vice-president intervened. Mugabe is a very arrogant and proud man; he was livid. We were quickly encircled by his sycophants; but there was nothing they could do. He had initiated the conversation and I took the conversation where I wanted it to go. His circle remained after he had gone, saying: 'How can you speak like this to the president?' I replied: 'He is just a human being who happens to be president, and he is not above reproach.'

Mugabe is a very petty character, he is very insecure. He is overrated; he is not intelligent, only very shrewd. He understands power.

He could have made life very difficult for you.

Who cares. That encounter tells you where we were coming from. Every opportunity was an opportunity to fire from the hip.

Don't you ever catch yourself thinking: 'Here I am in one of the largest banks in Africa.' Is this a fairly extraordinary job for you?

If I am going to be active as a politician or activist, I need to

understand how the bank works; how international capital works. I have the technology thing; I have the revolutionary stuff; and now these skills. This is where we come short. The bourgeoisie – or the petty bourgeoisie – have a monopoly on strategy, business, economics, micro-economic policy. They know this stuff better than we do. I could have read on my own but I needed to work within this environment. This job has given me an opportunity to travel to 12 African countries, to understand Africa. I am learning about the economy of Nigeria, Uganda, national payment systems, ATM machines.

What advice would you give the movement today?

The movement should not be populist; it should be principled. The US cannot give us a sustainable solution in Zimbabwe, you have to be anti-imperialist. You have to be pro-worker and pro-poor peasant. We were not popular in 1989. Our view only held by a minority, but now people talk about us because we were right.

My advice to the student movement: you are not the MDC, and you will help by criticising them. Your historical role is to be the conscience of the people. The system won't teach you how to revolt, but I couldn't have done it without being at university. The pursuit of formal education can provide a platform for proper education, which is self-education.

We need to make sure we back up activism with substance. You [student activists] need more experience. Maybe that is how I justify my long meandering for 14 years. People said: 'Why did you go to Oxford? You should have gone

political.' I missed the opportunity of being active, but I also got an opportunity to learn. And also you make a little money – and that is another message. Independent finance is very critical at a personal and party level. I'm not talking about being a rich man, but an independent source of finance frees you. If you have no independent finance your opinion can be bought.

This is the problem we have with the MDC – he who pays the piper calls the tune. Who are they getting the money from? From white farmers, the British.

Students I know in Zimbabwe wanted me to ask: Where do you see yourself in the future of Zimbabwe?

I am coming, but I don't want to play the MDC game. My role in Zimbabwe and Africa will be to make a difference. But a difference predicated upon skills. I am a technologist by training and political activist by instinct. I have been in the struggle in England and America. All different types of struggle. I wanted to teach at the University of Zimbabwe, but they rejected me. I have three books. I wanted to be a teacher. At the interview some of the questions were: 'If you come here are you going to be an academic or political activist?' 'I see you have given all these political talks at Harvard, Yale; are you going to be an academic or activist?' So South Africa is plan B for me. Let me learn about something different. You can read about the struggle but if someone says, 'corporate finance', 'private equity', will you understand? I am in a bank to demystify this stuff.

I am increasing my value proposition to the struggle.

16