

world

Leaders pay tribute at Mugabe funeral

Foreign dignitaries and opposition leaders attended service for Zimbabwe's founding president

AFP | Harare

Zimbabwe gave former leader Robert Mugabe a state funeral yesterday with African leaders paying tribute to a man they lauded as a liberation hero but whose 37-year rule was defined by repression and economic turmoil.

Mugabe, who died in Singapore last week aged 95, left Zimbabwe deeply divided over his legacy with his country still struggling with high inflation and shortages of goods after decades of crisis.

He died on an overseas medical trip almost two years after former army loyalists forced him out in 2017, following a power struggle over what was widely perceived as a bid to position his wife Grace as his successor.

Former and current African leaders, including South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa and Kenya's Uhuru Kenyatta, arrived to crowds chanting and drumming liberation songs at the less than half-filled 60,000-seat national stadium in Harare.

Mugabe's casket, draped in the green, black, gold and red Zimbabwe flag, was marched slowly into the stadium, accompanied by a military band and an escort of officers. His wife Grace, in a



Robert Mugabe's coffin is flanked by military officers at the national sports stadium in Harare

black veil, and family followed behind.

African leaders and officials from Cuba, Russia and China all praised Mugabe as a pan-African hero for his past as a colonial-era guerrilla leader.

"We honour and remember our African icon. He had many allies and followers... Our motherland is in tears," Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa said.

South African leader Ramaphosa's speech was briefly interrupted by jeers and whistles from the crowds until he apologised for recent xenophobic attacks on African migrants, including Zimbabweans, in Johannesburg.

Mugabe's final burial at a national monument will only happen after a new mausoleum is built in about 30 days. That decision was taken after his family

ended a dispute with Mnangagwa, a former ally who turned against his rule in 2017.

Mugabe's body was returned from Singapore on Wednesday to a country he helped found as an anti-colonial rebel who helped end white-minority rule.

Later, Mugabe turned to repression and fear to crush dissidents and govern for nearly four decades during which he became an international pariah



Zimbabwe's former President Robert Mugabe ruled for nearly four decades before he was ousted in a coup in 2017

for his takeover of white-owned farms.

"You can't talk about Zimbabwe without Bob. Zimbabwe is Bob. It took a man like Bob, his bravery, to get independence," said Norman Gombera, 57, a school principal in Harare. "Bob did his best under the circumstances. There is no country without a problem."

Bitter legacy

A young Mugabe was once jailed in the former British colony Rhodesia for his nationalist ideas. But he swept to power in the 1980 elections after a guerrilla war and sanctions forced the

Rhodesian government to the negotiating table.

In office, he initially won international praise for promoting racial reconciliation and for extending improved education and health services to the black majority.

But he soon turned to the repression and fear that would mark his regime for decades.

Though still lauded as an African icon, at home many Zimbabweans will remember Mugabe more for the increasingly tyrannical rule and economic mismanagement that forced millions to flee the country during decades of crisis.

Many are struggling to survive despite Mnangagwa's vows of more investment and jobs in the post-Mugabe era.

"The fruits of his tenure are the shortages. That is what we remember him for," said Steven, a consultant shopping near the stadium.

"He has made sure there is no opposition and he succeeded. There is no reason to go to his funeral."

Always divisive in life, Mugabe's funeral arrangements were also caught up in a dispute between Mnangagwa and the family over where and when the former leader should be buried.



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