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Remembering Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe

Written by Geoffrey Van Orden on 20 February 2018

Morgan Tsvangirai | Photo Credit: PA Images

Geoffrey Van Orden, who knew Tsvangirai, reflects on his legacy and on Zimbabwe's future.

Only one week after the European Parliament voiced its hope that Zimbabwe would take a new path, we must sadly mourn the loss of Morgan Tsvangirai, a tireless campaigner for a democratic Zimbabwe.

After a long fight against cancer, Tsvangirai died on 14 February, aged 65. He was a humble and charismatic politician who helped shape the politics of Zimbabwe for some 20 years, leading the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

He rose to prominence in the 1980s as a trade union activist, gaining fame as a talented orator,
becoming Secretary-General of the Congress of Trade Unions and later President of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA).

In 1999 he made his greatest contribution to the people of Zimbabwe through the formation of the MDC. The new party provided a viable and credible alternative at the ballot box, harnessing the frustrations of the urban classes in particular, criticising the economic mismanagement, the disregard for the rule of law, and daily human rights abuses of the Robert Mugabe regime.

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The MDC gathered rapid support and shocked Mugabe’s ruling party in the 2000 parliamentary election by taking almost half of the seats. By 2008 Tsvangirai secured 47.9 per cent in Zimbabwe’s presidential election forcing the first run-off in the nation’s history in spite of the suspected electoral rigging in favour of Mugabe. Sadly, the runoff brought widespread violence and intimidation against the MDC’s supporters forcing Tsvangirai to withdraw.

International outcry followed and the mediation talks led by South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki resulted in the first post-independence coalition in Zimbabwe and Tsvangirai was sworn in as Prime Minister in February 2009.

As Prime Minister he was quickly side-lined by Mugabe who was unwilling to concede any real political power. Despite this the MDC did triumph in stabilising the nation’s moribund economy, through the adoption of the US dollar as the national currency. This achievement however wasn’t fully recognised or appreciated by the Zimbabwean electorate and in 2013 he suffered a crushing defeat in elections again riddled with fraud. It is thought that this was the darkest period in Tsvangirai’s career, one which he never fully recovered from as he was left powerless to prevent divisions growing within the MDC.

Throughout his lifetime Tsvangirai was unwavering in his conviction that the fate of Zimbabwe could be changed through sheer determination and held little regard for his own personal safety in his quest to try and achieve change.

His perseverance is humbling. Arrested in both 2000 and 2003 on allegations on treason and violently assaulted whilst in custody in 2007, he survived four assassination attempts. The most notorious of these was in 1997 when he claimed that assailants tried to throw him out of a skyscraper building. Even Mugabe, his long-time nemesis, is said to have grudgingly admired his courage and determination.
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His personal life was also not spared from violence. In 2009 his wife, Susan Nyaradzo whom he had married in 1978 and with whom he had six children, was killed in a traffic collision. The tragedy of the event struck a cruel blow to the man who was still in his first month as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe and robbed him of much needed emotional support.

Tsvangirai challenged Mugabe three times at the ballot box, continuously aspiring for his country, the former ‘bread basket’ of Africa, to bloom once again even when those around him continued to strangle it of life.

Having met him many times over the years, and first in 2002, I was struck by his fundamental decency and drive to make Zimbabwe prosper. It is a tragedy that he was outmanoeuvred by Mugabe, who managed to hold on to power for 37 years until his ungraceful departure in November last year. It saddens me that Tsvangirai’s commitment to democratic decency and his dealings was ultimately his undoing.

I hope that the opportunity created by Mugabe’s departure and the upcoming elections scheduled for later this year creates the chance for Tsvangirai’s vision of a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Zimbabwe to come to fruition.

It is undeniable that his death has left a void at the heart of the struggle for a free and democratic Zimbabwe.

On behalf of the Friends of Zimbabwe in the European Parliament, from all parties and countries, we send our heartfelt condolences to his family and to the people of Zimbabwe, who have lost a great champion.

About the author

Geoffrey Van Orden MEP (ECR, UK) is the Chair of the European Parliament’s friends of Zimbabwe group.

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