



It is a matter of public record. Mugabe sent troops into the DRC and occupied parts of the country where, co-incidentally, some diamond mines could be found. From that he earned some hard currency. What is not in the public record but what we can assume, is that he then financed himself and his army with that hard currency. Things could not be better. Real cash flow and military virility - a force in the sub-continent.

In domestic politics hard currency is very important. Why?

Many Zimbabwe watchers have played with the romantic illusion of a Leipzig uprising. The people will fill the streets and their mere presence would be so overpowering that the government collapses: like the Communists in the old East Germany, after the Leipzig demonstrations, or like the Orange revolution we saw as recently as this year in Ukraine; and another one a bit earlier in Georgia. The common thread is masses in the street; no shooting; government falls. Inspiring.

It is of course not a new tactic: the Tsar lost power to the Bolsheviks in 1917 when his police refused to shoot the demonstrators. The Shah of Iran went through a similar shock 62 years later when his security forces refused to shoot street demonstrators. Two centuries earlier, Napoleon illustrated the same thing the other way round: he simply used a few cannons (never mind rifles) to clear the streets of Paris, the stability was instantaneous and the little man went on to greater things.

Mugabe certainly knew about these lessons from history. Keep the troops/police on your side and if anybody so much as looks into the street you “klap” them. Very important, the population must know that you will “klap”! Credibility is all.

Mugabe built his credibility by making sure that he was ruthless and seen to be ruthless. Started with massacres in Matabeleland soon after he took over from Ian Smith. North Koreans helped. Everybody knew about the Fifth Brigade. And so the people do not venture into the streets of Harare, because they know this is no Shah or Tsar or weak East German Communist. This is a Napoleon who will clear the streets.

All because the army will follow his orders. They get the benefits of hard currency. So the DRC was an important part of Mugabe’s game plan.

But then a setback developed. A peace conference was convened by Thabo Mbeki at Sun City - paid for by the SA taxpayer. (Did wonders for Sun International’s

turnover.) Took a few months. During that time we were treated to stories, not on the intricacies of DRC peacemaking, but shopping sprees to Sandton by the delegates and the high life they enjoyed while embedded at Sun City. But eventually peace was made and it held, in spite of some reversals. Bottom line: Mugabe left the DRC.

And the loss of hard currency is showing – petrol, food, soldiers marching. Because of Sun City. Mugabe today is much weaker than he was when in the DRC.

This is unlikely to challenge Mugabe’s domestic position. We have consistently taken the view that Zimbabwe is no ripe plum waiting to fall in the lap of democracy and progress – it is rather a North Korea. Leadership well entrenched; ruthless and happy to sacrifice an entire population. Much more North Korean than Georgia or Ukraine. We think this view has been vindicated.

So domestically Mugabe will carry on, presumably until he dies in power. If he retires, he will end up in jail, so he cannot retire.

But regionally he is a shadow of his former self. Not much left of the real cash flow, military virility and a force in the sub-continent status he had when he occupied part of the DRC. True, few criticize him. Also true that an old guard like retiring president Mkapa of Tanzania refers to him as an African elder that should be listened to. Also true that few take notice. Where Zimbabwe was once seen as a model to be followed, very few now think that way.

Mugabe once refused to make way for Nelson Mandela in the region’s Safety & Security chair. Now he attends the inauguration of Mozambique’s new president, sits next to Mbeki and for five hours nobody talks to him (just Sally!). Even his own friend Gadaffi is no longer around. Between the Americans and the South Africans Gadaffi has been seduced into respectable behaviour (but that is another story).

Any consolation for the people of Zimbabwe? No. Any alleviation of their terrible plight? No. But for the region it is important to take note of the trend: from the strong man to the North Korean like an outcast. And all because there was a peace conference at Sun City.