

BOOK REVIEW

Blessing-Miles Tendi. *The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru, the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Contents. Index. Illustrations. Index. 339 pp. \$130.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781108472890.

Solomon Mujuru (*nom de guerre*, Rex Nhongo) was the first black commander of the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA); he died on August 16, 2011, after a fire broke out inside his Ruzambo farmhouse in Beatrice. His death was as controversial as his life, the story of which is comprehensively articulated in Blessing-Miles Tendi's book, *The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru, the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker*. The book is a fascinating account of Zimbabwe's politics and history traced from the colonial years through the liberation war to the experiences of the post-colonial state, as seen through the life of Rex Nhongo.

Written over nine chapters with a preamble, Tendi traces Mujuru's life story from his childhood to his participation in the liberation struggle in colonial Zimbabwe, first as a ZAPU member and ZIPRA fighter before switching to ZANLA and ZANU in the 1970s. He rose to become the second in command to Tongogara in the ZANLA forces. The high point of Mujuru's participation during the war was his orchestration of the rise of Robert Mugabe to the presidency of ZANU in 1976 (80–84). This specific and decisive role leads Tendi to anoint Mujuru as the “kingmaker.” Mujuru's support for Mugabe was underpinned by nepotism, though, as Mugabe was Mujuru's nephew. The war was characterized by many struggles and much chaos, which sometimes threatened its progress. The chaos of the time showed that ZANU was not a rules-bound organization (119), an attribute that is perpetuated to this day. As the war ended and ZANU PF won the 1980 elections, the new government consolidated the three armies, and Nhongo was appointed the army commander of the newly established ZNA. Mistrust grew during the integration process, culminating in the massive violence that became known as Gukurahundi between 1982 and 1987. Nhongo oversaw the ZNA while Gukurahundi was perpetrated; however, he is absolved of culpability because the foremost active 5 Brigade was directly under the orders of State Security and the Prime Minister.

Mujuru retired from the army in 1992 to enter politics full time. Challenging Mugabe's hold on power, he became influential in his party, outmaneuvering Emmerson Mnangagwa in the race for the party's vice presidency in 2004. He successfully orchestrated the election of his wife, Joice, as the first-ever female vice president of the party and country. In addition to his participation in national politics, Mujuru became an active business entrepreneur with a penchant for primitive accumulation. The height of this primitive accumulation was his violent seizure in 2001 of Guy Watson-Smith's farm during the contemporaneous land invasions. Mujuru was also promiscuous and a womanizer, which Tendi refers to as "doing masculinity." His political, business, and philandering exploits created an antagonistic relationship with other elite members of the party and army, notably Mugabe, Mnangagwa, and Chiwenga. These tense relationships with his erstwhile colleagues fueled the speculation that Mujuru's death was not entirely accidental. Conspiracy theories flew around suggestions that Mujuru's death was an inside job hatched by his enemies in the party, despite an inquest into his death which dismissed any foul play.

In his narrative, Tendi draws on wide-ranging sources, notably more than one hundred interviews with key figures in the military and politics, and across five countries, namely Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Tanzania, Britain, and Pakistan. Tendi's references confirm the variety of sources on which he relied, and for this, he must be highly commended. Notable themes in Zimbabwe's political history emerge. Topical subjects familiar in Zimbabwe's historiography, such as ethnicity and tribalism, "struggles-within-a-struggle," sexual and political violence, forced recruitment and mobilization of masses, discipline and punishment, Gukurahundi, as well as the evolution of a predatory state, and the "Zimbabwean crisis," all found expression in the book. In this regard, Tendi joins a long list of scholars who have addressed these subjects. His ability to weave and connect disparate themes deeply immersed in historiography takes the book beyond a simple biography to a comprehensive study of Zimbabwe's political history.

Was Mujuru truly a "kingmaker," as Tendi would want us to believe? While he was instrumental in the rise of Mugabe and Joice to the ZANU presidency and vice presidency, respectively, this alone fails to make him a kingmaker, especially given his failure to rise to the occasion in instances that could have cemented this status. For instance, although Mujuru eventually orchestrated Mugabe's rise, he had earlier refused to sign and endorse the Mgagao Declaration, which first pushed for his elevation (71–73). Even more, the fact that the two people Mujuru backed were relatives points more to nepotism than kingmaking. On several occasions, Nhongo distanced himself from critical decisions, some of which he had initiated. Nhongo betrayed his ZIPA Military Committee members when he secretly briefed Mugabe about the happenings in the camps (83). At the 2006 ZANU PF Congress, Mujuru backed down from his intended challenge of Mugabe's candidacy for the 2008 elections in the last hour (256–57). In 2008, he once again prevaricated and refused, at the last minute, to support the candidacy

of Simba Makoni for the presidency, despite having assured his colleagues of his support (259–60). All these accounts of Mujuru's prevarications raise questions about his kingmaking intentions.

In spite of the foregoing criticism, Tendi's book significantly contributes to the history of Zimbabwe's anti-colonial struggles and liberation war. By demonstrating the collaborative guerrilla operations between southern African liberation armies, the book adds a transnational dimension to Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, which rarely gets attention from scholars. Furthermore, Tendi innovatively deploys biography and life history in historical and political studies to earn himself a high place in the historiography of Zimbabwe's liberation war. Readers with an interest in politics, history, and biographies will find this book captivating.

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