



Dining with a despot all too willing to risk everything

A new book offers an inside look at Zimbabwe's tyrannical President Robert Mugabe, writes **Sian Powell**

ROBERT Mugabe will destroy Zimbabwe simply to prove a point. The emotionally fragile tyrant can't cope with rejection and it is clear that the suffering people of Zimbabwe have comprehensively rejected him. His party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, has lost control of parliament for the first time in 28 years and Mugabe is viciously scrabbling to retain the presidency.

Heidi Holland, a Johannesburg-based author, was recently granted perhaps the only long interview with Mugabe in years. She asked him whether he was willing to sacrifice the welfare of Zimbabwe to prove a political point.

"He said yes," she remembers. "He didn't argue it. It didn't strike him as an unacceptable position."

It was just before Christmas last year that Holland sat down in the Zimbabwean President's office. She reminded him that in 1975 he had eaten dinner in her home in Salisbury (now the Zimbabwean capital of Harare). Mugabe had just been released after 11 years in prison; he would spend several months in what was then Rhodesia before going into exile in Mozambique.

Mugabe didn't recall the dinner, nor did he remember Holland, but she brought up enough particulars for him to begin to connect with her.

The 84-year-old despot is the product of British colonialism and a childhood spent in a Catholic mission station, a combination that has given him a peculiarly warped sense of self. He appears to sincerely declaim his fight for the people of Zimbabwe while the nation is writhing in chaos and deprivation.

Mismanagement and inflation, now reaching 165,000 per cent, has plunged a once-prosperous nation into ridiculous poverty.

Holland believes that Mugabe, while clinically sane, is divorced from reality. "He is going to destroy Zimbabwe and do whatever it takes," she says.

Her new book, *Dinner with Mugabe* (Viking), includes in-depth interviews with several of the people in Mugabe's life, including his brother and his priest, as well as the material divined during her 2½-hour interview. She also asked three psychologists for their views on his emotional state. "Our conclusion was that he's elected to live in a reality bubble as a form of denial," Holland says. "He's completely out of touch with reality."

The once-revered guerilla had a difficult childhood, forced to negotiate with the white mission priest for permission to visit his ostensibly heathen grandmother. Holland says Mugabe never had any friends, and as a younger man he turned to books and study for solace. He has earned seven degrees, six of them during his 11 years as a political prisoner.

"Mugabe has a very fragile personality and he's positioned himself in such a way that he can't possibly be wrong, he can only be right," Holland says. She remembers that just before she interviewed him she

saw a massive banner strung up, saying: "Mugabe is Right."

Anyone who says Mugabe is wrong is dealt with severely. Zimbabwe Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai was savagely beaten for daring to oppose him.

In recent weeks a campaign of violence and intimidation has screamed across Zimbabwe, wreaking vengeance on those who voted against the President, and who may again try to vote against him in any presidential run-off.

"He's very self-involved," Holland says. "Now he's exhibiting his response to rejection. This emotional stuntedness of Mugabe's means he can't take criticism and humiliation. He is a man who really is out of touch with reality, but not mad."

She believes he is greedy for power, rather than greedy for personal wealth. Although it appears that many within ZANU-PF have lined their pockets at the expense of the Zimbabwean populace, Holland does not think Mugabe is personally avaricious. She remembers his office was spartan when she interviewed him, and an aged portable radio was sitting on his desk.

"His main status symbol is his young, greedy, pretty wife," Holland says. Mugabe took up with Grace before his first wife, Sally, died, and she has given him the image of a young and virile man, as well as presenting him with three children. His only child with his first wife died while he was in prison.

Grace, Holland says, is a "shopaholic and an airhead of note". She has been called Zimbabwe's First Shopper and observers believe she has had no dampening effect on her husband's fury, unlike his first wife, who used to coax him into moderation.

Mugabe is chiefly furious with Britain, the nation that ruled Rhodesia with a leaden hand, Holland says. "He's a guy who's tried his whole life to be British," she explains. "He came to power with this great relationship with Britain."

But, she says, he believes Britain reneged on promises it would assist Zimbabwe with land redistribution. Promises were made by Britain, but the assistance

was initially withdrawn by Margaret Thatcher when the funds were misused, Holland says. Assistance was then restored, and withdrawn again.

Mugabe is nursing pent-up fury, hurt and humiliation. His resentment of the coloniser is palpable, yet somehow pathetic. "When the land grab began, he said: 'We thought Britain would see what was happening and do something about it,'" Holland says.

She believes Britain should engage Mugabe to try to ameliorate the situation in Zimbabwe. Sanctions haven't stopped him, they have merely fuelled his resentment. "Zimbabwe can get a lot worse because at its helm is a man who will do absolutely anything to prove his point," she says.



For those who take heart in the idea that, at 84, Zimbabwe's President doesn't have much time left to brutalise the nation, Holland points out that Mugabe's mother was nearly 100 when she died. It's a figure that sits in stark contrast with the average life expectancy in Zimbabwe, down to 34 for women and 37 for men.

Mugabe, though, is fighting to continue crushing the country. Reinvigorated by the prospect of battle, he has taken up the gauntlet. "I think he's in the process of going back to war," Holland says. "If you look at the pattern of violence in the country, it's happening in very specific areas. It looks to me as though he's setting himself up to win a run-off."

It matters little that Mugabe will not control the parliament. Holland says that when he first came to

power he inherited draconian emergency powers from the last white leader of Rhodesia, Ian Smith. He used those powers to rule for 14 years, and Holland says he can invoke them again at any moment.

"As you can imagine, in such a terrorised state people will consider very carefully the consequences of going against Mugabe once he reasserts himself," Holland says.

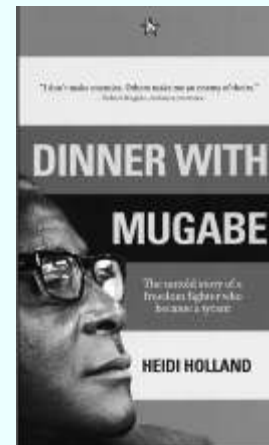
It may be, then, that Zimbabwe is in for a sixth term of Mugabe rule, the inflexible, autocratic thuggish regime that has driven the nation into the ground.

"He's a guy who looks at the world as good and bad, there's nothing in the middle, there is no compromise," Holland says.

"He's the all-or-nothing man."



Ally: Robert Mugabe, right, with South African President Thabo Mbeki



Opponent: Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai