

# *Remembrance*

## *African Activist Archive Project*

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### **Zimbabwe Parliamentary Election of 1980: A Personal Recollection**

**By Tilden J. LeMelle**

It was a beautiful Sunday morning as happens only in Southern Africa in the beginning of autumn. The sky was a deep blue canvas dotted with billowing white cumulus clouds floating lazily toward the horizon. The cool/warm Zimbabwean late morning air breezed zephyr-like as I sat in the back of the moving open military truck with rifles pointed at my head by obviously drunken Rhodesian Force soldiers. How did I get myself caught up in this incongruous situation I wondered--thousands of miles away from the comfort and security of home in New Rochelle, NY, and my academic administrative office at Hunter College?

The immediate answer was obvious. I had agreed to join George Houser, Executive Director of the American Committee on Africa and Director of the Committee's tax exempt affiliate, The Africa Fund, as part of a UN approved unofficial delegation to Zimbabwe to monitor the 1980 parliamentary elections. Those elections had been scheduled as a result of the agreements reached at Lancaster House to resolve the crisis created by the so-called Internal Settlement which had resulted in a sham African majority government headed by Bishop Abel Muzorewa. The Muzorewa government had not been recognized by the international community and in the US efforts by Dixiecrats and other pro-white rule supporters had been defeated in Congress. President Jimmy Carter had vetoed the Senate's vote to lift sanctions. The crisis in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia could only be resolved through a negotiated agreement which included the formerly excluded representatives of the nationalist political parties that had taken up arms against continued minority white rule – ZAPU and ZANU. The election, scheduled for the last three days of February 1980, was the most important and final step in the long struggle to achieve democratic majority rule in what was to become the nation of Zimbabwe. As a member of the board of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and its interim president for several years and a member of the Board of The Africa Fund, when George Houser invited me to be a part of the ACOA delegation, I did not hesitate to accept. That is how I found myself on the back of a Rhodesian Force military truck with guns pointed at my head on one of the most beautiful Sunday mornings I had ever seen and felt in my lifetime.

I was not alone in that predicament. Our group included George Houser our organizer and leader; Cynthia Cannady, an attorney representing TransAfrica and the NAACP; Robert Edgar, a professor from Howard University; Ted Lockwood, Executive Director of the Washington Office on Africa. Joining us also as a friend of ACOA was Mike Shuster who was officially registered as a journalist of Pacifica Radio. Our plan of action was to meet with all of the contending African candidates and their supporters on separate days and to travel through different parts of the country to see for ourselves how the election campaigns and the actual balloting were being conducted in order to evaluate whether the process had been fair and free. To accomplish this we would divide into two groups, meet in the evening at our lodging and discuss our findings. Mike Shuster would summarize the substance of our discussions as the basis for filing his live reports on Pacifica. The plan was a good one since we knew all of the competing candidates and through the ACOA George had worked many years with them personally both on the Continent and when they traveled to the US to address the UN and seek support or to the UK to seek British official and popular support for non racial majority rule. It worked exceptionally well and that success eventually led to our being arrested by the Rhodesian Force soldiers.

We should have known that sooner or later we would run into trouble with the Rhodesian Forces. The ACOA had been founded in 1953 at the request of Walter Sisulu to George Houser to educate the American public about the tyranny of Apartheid in South Africa. Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) had been but an extension of South Africa's legacy of white minority rule legitimized by an ideology of white supremacy and European superior military force. Its founder, Cecil Rhodes, had made it clear: **Equal rights for civilized men**. And Africans were not considered civilized. Pursuing Sisulu's request, the ACOA had become the pioneer (and for many years the only) organization in the US supporting the decolonization and liberation efforts of African leaders throughout the Continent. Its membership was denied travel visas to Southern Africa. Its journal, *Africa Today*, had been officially and unofficially banned in most of the southern tier. George Houser had been declared a prohibited immigrant by the old regime. Accordingly, while we anticipated no problems from members of the contending African political parties, George and I expected that sooner or later something would happen to impede our plans to travel independent of the government orchestrated junkets in which most of the official delegations understandably participated. An uneasy ceasefire existed but fighting continued in the countryside and bombings occurred in the cities. Traveling unescorted could be dangerous. During our stay in the country several journalists had been killed reportedly caught in the crossfire of the combatants.

The first threatening encounter occurred shortly after we passed through customs. Houser had anticipated trouble since he had been listed by the British as a prohibited immigrant before the Universal Declaration of Independence (UDI) by Ian Smith and company. For purposes of the electoral campaign, officially Rhodesia had reverted to its colonial status as a British colony and the British governor, Lord Christopher Soames, was in charge. George had alerted me to this fact and we deliberately chose a queue that would take us through a post staffed by an African customs agent in the hope that he would not have been given a list or photo of prohibited immigrants. We passed through without any

problem and breathed a sigh of relief when we were assembled outside waiting for our drivers and George was changing some traveler's checks. Just before the cars arrived to pick us up, the African agent emerged from his station and began to call for a mister George Houser. George and I knew what it was going to be all about and hoped for the best. I accompanied him into an inner office where we were confronted by a white South African who had lost a part of an arm in combat with the African guerilla fighters. Fortunately, George had prepared for this eventuality and had obtained an official letter from Anthony Parsons who represented the UK at the UN. Before George had produced the letter of admittance from Parsons, the chief customs agent told him that he could not stay in Rhodesia and had to catch the next plane leaving for Gaborone. The agent was clearly angry at being trumped by George and after a telephone call to the Governor's office, George was allowed to enter the country and remain until March 1.

As planned, we traveled throughout the country interviewing ordinary citizens. We met with the heads of the several parties and their key personnel and it became clearer each day that all of the contenders were running to beat ZANU- the party headed by Robert Mugabe. Joshua Nkomo and Mugabe had joined in an uneasy partnership as the Patriotic Front but ran as separate political parties for the election. Nkomo ran on his Patriotic Front party line (renamed from ZAPU-PF shortly before the election) and Mugabe on his ZANU-PF party line. Ndabaningi Sithole ran as a splinter ZANU party and Bishop Muzorewa's party was the UANC, the United African National Congress. There was a feeling that all but Mugabe's ZANU-PF would be willing to form a coalition government with Ian Smith whose party had already won the 20 seats reserved for whites. The thinking among the many journalists who had wide experience in covering such elections was that no African party could win a clear majority of the eighty (80) seats reserved for African members of the new government. There was also a feeling that Mugabe and ZANU-PF were too radical and if ZANU-PF did win a majority of the seats severe violence would follow and South African troops would invade the country and keep ZANU-PF from governing.

The political atmosphere throughout the country was tense. Although there was a truce, the four armies/militias in the country still were accused of violating the truce. We saw signs of intimidation everywhere. Stories were told of beatings. A curfew from sun down to sun up was imposed on the tribal trust lands. When entering any public building, all hand bags, briefcases, etc., were inspected by armed police and soldiers. Whites were allowed to carry arms openly and, though the weapons had to be checked upon entering a public building, the sight of all of those weapons in the open was chilling and at times scary. Being a black man in a white supremacist country at war with black African guerilla fighters was not reassuring to say the least. There were reports of bombings of offices and even churches. I can remember the Sunday before that of our arrest, Cynthia Cannady and I decided to attend Mass at a nearby Catholic church. During Mass I couldn't help but think that a bomb might go off any second. Additionally, as we walked back to our quarters, it suddenly dawned on me that, although Cynthia's passport listed her as "Negro," she could easily be perceived as white. And I wondered if observers seeing us walking along the street might think that I, a black man, was walking in friendly conversation with a white woman. In Rhodesia, such an act could lead to severe

punishment if not death for a black or “coloured” man. At the outdoor political rallies we attended the perimeters of the open spaces were always guarded by uniformed men with rifles. Throughout the country there were randomly set up checkpoints where vehicles occupied by Africans were stopped and searched. Vehicles occupied or driven by whites were usually waved through.

While traveling through the country had its risks, it also provided us the opportunity to see the unparalleled Garden of Eden like beauty that visitors to Zimbabwe speak of. The trip that George Houser and I took to Bulawayo, Gwelo and the Motopos Hills area of southwestern Zimbabwe could be likened to a trip through the Paradise of Adam and Eve. One could easily see why Europeans would be drawn to settle and want to keep possession of the territory. Rich in arable land for agriculture and minerals for industrial development, there was nothing comparable in Europe. Cool mornings and evenings almost imperceptibly wafting in and out of a softly warming noon and afternoon breeze would be more than enough to fight for. Multi-colored flowers, shrubbery and birds made me muse that Paradise must have been located in Zimbabwe.

While in Salisbury we attended the official evening press briefings held by the governor’s office. Word had gotten around that our group traveled independently of the sponsored government tours. Accordingly, after the official briefings journalists often approached us to learn of our findings which often varied in part or in whole with the government’s reports. I believe that our reports as much as anything else led to that fateful Sunday morning. To be upstaged and challenged by an unofficial delegation of American activists surely must have annoyed British and Rhodesian authorities. The latter were already unnerved by the prospect of real majority rule by former guerrillas who had destroyed life and property—Paradise Lost. Ian Smith’s promise of a thousand years of white minority rule was so short lived and abruptly ended. Maybe they had to be taught a lesson? A little harassment.

The Sunday morning on which we were arrested was a day we had decided to drive with some ZANU friends to the Chiota Tribal Trust Land. George Houser, Cynthia Cannady, Mike Shuster and I joined four ZANU members who had been campaigning in the area. Our intention was to just talk to people we would meet to learn of their personal experiences in the lead up to the imminent balloting. We stopped at the Furamera School staffed by Wesleyan Methodists and spoke with the headmaster and several teachers. Initially reluctant, they informed us about the intimidation tactics used by government forces to dissuade the local people from participating in ZANU activities. As we were continuing on our way to the village of Mahusekwa we came upon a distraught African man who waved us down. We stopped to talk to him and noticed that he had obviously been injured. As he was recounting how he had just been beaten by government soldiers, we could see a cloud of dust rising in the distance and coming in our direction. It was a military vehicle with a number of armed soldiers excitedly waving their weapons in the air. The driver of the vehicle stopped abruptly and the soldiers jumped off the truck with rifles pointed at us loudly shouting something I could not understand. Naively thinking that the soldiers did not know that we were monitors under UN aegis, I reached to a back pocket to get my UN issued identification and several rifles were immediately pointed at

me and the sergeant yelled that anyone who moved would be shot. I quickly moved my hands from my body to indicate that I had nothing to hide.

Mike Shuster and I were made to climb onto the back of the vehicle to sit with guns pointed at our heads. Cynthia Cannady was put in one car with a driver and two soldiers. George Houser was made to drive the second car with two soldiers in the back seat with guns pointed at his head. We departed for where I did not know but I thought, as the others later acknowledged, that this might be the end. We were in an isolated Tribal Trust Land. The soldiers were yelling the name Durban who, we later learned, was a feared and desperately wanted ZANU guerrilla fighter they thought they had captured. The truck and cars moved slowly along the road as we wondered if this was our last contribution to the African Liberation efforts.

My comrade, Mike Shuster of Pacifica Radio sat across from me. He had an almost expressionless yet bewildered look in his eyes as we rolled along the rural road of the Chiota Tribal Trust Land. Was he fashioning in his mind how he was going to report this event if he survived the ordeal? My thoughts turned to many things—my family, unfinished work, what might be the worst that could happen to us, etc. I remembered observing the local people walking alongside the road going in an opposite direction from ours. They were dressed in their Sunday best, undoubtedly coming from or going to Sunday church services. Some waved as they walked by. It was not clear whether they knew some of the soldiers personally or were just waving out of traditional courtesy or fear. As we rolled along it was clear that whatever the soldiers were going to do it was not going to happen immediately. Conversations were going back and forth on walkie talkie radios so I concluded that they were communicating with their superiors and we were going to be brought to some base or camp. I must confess I was looking forward to meeting someone in a position of higher authority than the sergeant who commanded the soldiers.

As we were headed to unknown places, I began to think rationally about our circumstances. I convinced myself that the Rhodesian authorities must have known who we were. We had checked in with the US interest desk in Salisbury. The governor's office had given George permission to enter the country because of the letter from Sir Anthony Parsons. Our flight from London had stopped in Nairobi, Kenya, where my brother, Wilbert, was US ambassador. He had boarded our plane to greet us as he was also leaving for consultations with President Jimmy Carter and State Department officials. So everyone of some authority in Zimbabwe must have known of our every move. I learned upon my return to the US that, indeed, our whereabouts were known and my brother had learned of our arrest while in conversations with President Carter. The State Department immediately had sent notice to Zimbabwe that the Americans must not be harmed.

Once I was convinced that we were safe for the time being my thoughts turned to more pedestrian matters. Our oldest daughter had been admitted to Wellesley College for the coming September. We had set up a college fund consisting of some stocks and bonds and my mind turned to how those securities were doing in the markets. I would know

only when I could pick up the Thursday edition of the Herald-Tribune, if I got out of this mess. Realizing what I was thinking in the midst of the noise and guns I began to understand how people could jump to their death in the 1929 crash of financial markets on Wall Street and around the world. Faced with possible death, even accidental, my thoughts turned to a small, but very important, investment for my daughter's college education.

Eventually we arrived at a military base in Mahusekwa. As we entered the base, loud cheers rang out. The soldiers thought that their comrades had captured the feared ZANU guerrilla, Durban. We were separated from our ZANU African companions and were questioned briefly by Rhodesian officers. They wanted to know who we were and why we were with those ZANU "terrorists." As we stood together under a tree after answering the questions, we were joined by a young white soldier who we learned came from Australia. Asked why he would travel so far from home to risk his life for a non Australian country he replied that he had tried to join the Rhodesian forces during the real fighting. He had been refused as an individual, but when Rhodesia returned to colonial status and commonwealth troops were recruited to police the transition to majority rule, he found his opportunity. He had wanted to fight communists and terrorists who were trying to destroy Western European civilization. He told us we were lucky we had not been killed as terrorists.

We were returned to our cars and taken to Marandellas where the regional office of the Special Branch Police was located. Revealing the fixed Rhodesian mind set we were asked if we had been intimidated by the ZANU men. Houser responded that the only intimidation that we suffered was at the hands of the government soldiers and Special Branch Police. We were in the country to carry out our United Nations mission to observe the election campaigning and final balloting. It was clear that as with the South African customs officer, Houser had pushed another hot button. We were eventually released to ourselves and warned that we should get back to Salisbury before sunset. To be driving on the highway at night could cause us to be killed!

We returned to our quarters before sundown. We agreed that it would be safer for Cynthia to leave her room at the women's lodge and join us. She would sleep on a sofa that was available in what was a kind of living room in the men's lodging. Mike Shuster also decided to not return to his quarters a few blocks away. He would also spend the night in the men's quarters with the rest of us. As we were exchanging our reactions to the day's experiences and discussing with Mike the report he would file to Pacifica headquarters in New York, the whirr of a helicopter rotor was heard and the sound seemed to hover over our building. There was a long moment of expectant silence followed by an even longer sigh of relief when the sound began to move away into the distance. Mike filed his report and everybody retired exhausted and glad to be alive. We still had work to do.

The next day I accompanied George Houser to report to the British authorities the previous day's incident of harassment. The report was met with an impersonal comment

that we should be glad that we were alive. We could have been killed on site or caught in the crossfire between ZANU “terrorists” and the government forces.

We continued our work. Some went to the area near the Mozambique border where ZANLA troops (the ZANU’s military wing) had been very active. George and I went to Gwelo to a rally for Nkomo. We all joined forces again in Salisbury. Balloting was fast approaching and we tried to find out if the Patriotic Front (ZANU and ZAPU) would join to form a coalition government if neither won a clear majority. The balloting began with uncertainty. We would know the results only after we had left the country. The balloting was most inspirational in that for three days the polls were open with long queues that stretched for blocks. People came from all over to vote. They were not deterred by the knowledge that thousands of soldiers from the contending camps were still armed and bloody fighting could be triggered if a favored candidate did not win. They were not deterred by the rumor that a coup backed by South African troops would occur if Mugabe’s ZANU party won a majority of the votes.

For all the rumors and the tense environment, more than 93 percent of potential voters cast their votes. There were no incidents of any significance. That the balloting went smoothly is a testament to the good sense of all of the people of Zimbabwe.

Our group returned separately. Some had other stops to make. I returned by myself not knowing what the voting results were. On the plane to London were several monitors from the US who represented the ultra conservative American Enterprise Institute. They were convinced that communists would take over the country if the government was controlled by any coalition other than that of the parties of the Bishop and Ian Smith. We had had some heated conversation in Zimbabwe in the lead up to the voting. I had settled down to relax on the long flight to Heathrow when the captain’s voice broke through the PA system to announce the final results of the election. Bishop Muzorewa won only three seats—8 percent of the vote. Nkomo’s ZAPU won 20 seats. Mugabe’s ZANU won 57 seats—an overwhelming majority. I could not help but find my way to the rear of the plane where the American Enterprise Institute group was sitting. They were even more convinced that Zimbabwe would become a communist country doing the dirty work of China and the Soviet Union.

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It is now twenty eight (28) years and three months plus since that memorable day of the electoral victory of Robert Mugabe and ZANU. What began as a government of reconciliation and moderation has now deteriorated into a sham democracy no better than the one it defeated. The same kind of brutality and intimidation that was suffered at the hands of the European colonizers is being meted out to those who would oppose the Mugabe government. Many of the older leaders and freedom fighters are gone. The promise of reconstruction and improvement in the quality of life for so many who for so long had suffered the indignities of a repressive colonial government has been replaced with the reality of a like repression suffered now at the hand of one’s own African freedom fighter President.

The experience is one I shall never forget. It was a price worth paying for a just cause. For some years I had an interest in returning to Zimbabwe as a visiting professor at the University of Zimbabwe. The entire campus, the buildings, the flowers, the classrooms were all so beautiful. The faculty was so full of hope. The memories are still vivid in my mind. Some months after returning to my routine of daily personal and professional life, while sitting on the commuter train from Grand Central to New Rochelle, a young black man boarded the train wearing a fashionable outfit for the times—a suit of army camouflage fatigues. Upon seeing him, I was momentarily frozen in time on the back of that military truck with guns pointing at my head. It was good to be back home!

The longsuffering people of Zimbabwe still await freedom. *A Luta Continua!*

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