
MY MEMORIES OF ALOIS TAKAWIRA MANGWENDE

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Even though our memories of the positive deeds of our deceased loved ones often fade with time, there are others that remain engraved in our psyches because of their sheer magnitude and significance.

There are people who, *despite having passed on long periods back*, remain ever present in us, their legacies living on in the hearts and minds of those of us who were fortunate enough to have interacted with them.

For me, one such person who shall forever endure in my soul, until my own time of departing mother earth, is the omnipresent politician and businessman Alois Takawira Mangwende.

I was fortunate enough – as a then young journalist to have covered Mr Mangwende at the peak of his business and political career in the 1990s. I experienced his disarming charm, his brilliance, his unconditional love for humanity, his high aptitude, sagacity and perceptiveness in both politics and business, first hand. He is one man, like my own biological father, who has also since long passed, who will never fade in my memory.

Following a largely successful first decade of economic and social progress after independence in 1980, the 1990s presented a period of difficulties for Zimbabwe. The

country suddenly found itself enmeshed in various socio – economic, political challenges. It was also a time when criticism of the ruling ZANU PF party, which had delivered the country from colonial bondage, remained as unfashionable as it had been unfathomable at independence.

Yet Mr Mangwende, alongside his peers Sydney Malunga, Lazarus Nzarayebani and Margaret Dongo emerged as the principled mavericks unafraid to criticise their own party whenever they felt it was veering towards wrong paths. This resultantly thrust them into national prominence as they stood out – like sore thumbs – over their outspokenness at a time when obedience to party and leader was a sacrosanct ritual.

Of all these mavericks of that time, Mr Mangwende made a lasting impression on me. He never sought the publicity that cast him into the national limelight. He earned it on account of the sheer authenticity of his approach to political discourse. His political work was not about grand gestures; it was about advocating for the ordinary *povo* to ensure that their basic survival needs were met as per the virtues of the liberation struggle. He was a paragon of humility, integrity, self – effacement and flawless charm. It is often said that there is “nothing like an honest politician”. Mr Mangwende remains a grand exception to that sobriquet.

Because of his sheer integrity and astuteness and likeable demeanour, I was not surprised when he became the only maverick to be picked up by President Mugabe for a senior appointment. The then president appointed him to the key post of Deputy Minister of Labour and Social

Welfare. The people of the whole Mashonaland East would subsequently catapult Mr Mangwende to the all too powerful position of Chairman of ZANU PF in that province. Earlier, at his parliamentary debut in 1990, the people of Murehwa North had put him in parliament unopposed. The Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), that Edgar Tekere had formed as a breakaway and that had seemed quite threatening at its debut election, saw no point in challenging Mr Mangwende.

If he had lived longer, there can be no doubt Mr Mangwende was destined for even greater things. After all, he was already at the pinnacle. It's the 10 ZANU PF provincial chairpersons who largely determine the course of the party.

As I got to know him better and became a regular visitor to both his private and government offices, he became a father figure and mentor. One particular incident remain etched in me. His parliamentary aide had left a message at the Modus Publications switchboard for me to contact her. There were no cellphones then, and Modus journalists always scrambled to get lines to make calls out of the squalid newsroom at 27 Charter Road. When I finally accessed a switchboard line from my extension, I returned the call and the aide informed me Mr Mangwende wanted to see me over a story I had written which contained incorrect information. He was not happy at all, the aide said.

The story in the long defunct, Daily Gazette, had stated that the mavericks, Messrs Mangwende, Nzarayebani, Malunga, Ms Dongo, and others were contemplating forming a break away party from ZANU PF.

I started trembling at the prospect of meeting Mr Mangwende. The previous week, I had had a nasty experience with another ZANU PF politician, Christopher Chigumba (may his soul rest in eternal piece), who had summoned and yelled at me at his Rezende street *Gumbas* Supermarket in full view of his staff and customers to my utter humiliation. He had taken umbrage with a story I had written about his then on-going feud with another political heavyweight of the time, Forbes Magadu. In that era of political correctness, most politicians detested rigorous scribes from the independent media. They considered us “opposition activists” and Mr Chigumba felt my story had cast him in bad light though he did not dispute the objective facts.

If Mr Mangwende was to repeat what Mr Chigumba had done to me, I just hoped it won't be in front of a crowd. What met me at parliament instead was a smiling, cheerful, handsome face. He spoke to me like a father counselling a son. He respectfully refuted my story. “ZANU PF lives in my blood,” I remember him saying. “I will never leave the party and the party will never leave me. I will die in the party. Any suggestion that I can be part of any breakaway is mischief.”

I should at least have made an effort to contact him before writing the story, he complained. “After all, isn't balance the essence of your profession...?,” he asked. I explained that I had but failed to reach him. I then wrote his rebuttal but for some reason, that story never went beyond News Editor Farai Makotsi's desk. I complained to Editor Mike Hamilton who nonchalantly referred me back to the News Editor.

When Mr Mangwende's rebuttal did not make it in the next two editions of the Daily Gazette, I decided to do the unusual. I took a carbon copy of my story and went straight to his parliamentary office to prove that I had done my part but the editors had ignored the story. I had to do this because of the sheer grace he had exemplified when I met him. I was deeply embarrassed that Messrs Makotsi and Hamilton had neglected one of their core-duties to give an aggrieved person the right of reply. It was probably unintentional as they were astute professionals. In that period of Remington typewriters and physical hard copy stories (with no computers to keep proper records of stories inboxed) many things fell off Mr Makotsi's in-tray. He was famously a man of the brown bottle who sometimes neglected things not out of spite, but because he was not always on his desk. Though he remains the best writer I ever worked under.

"I understand mwanangu (my child). I will complain to your editors directly... What they did was wrong," Mr Mangwende said. He actually never did, a good thing for me as my editors would not have been amused that I had reported them to him over their act of gross omission. But the incident marked the beginning of a close father, son relationship that endured until his death. I became a regular guest at both his parliamentary and private business office located near 27 Charter Road and the then Federal Hotel, a favourite drinking spot for journalists from the Modus group. But instead of joining my colleagues in the Federal, I often opted to be at Mr Mangwende's private office unannounced to learn from a man who had become my role model. I would sometimes find him alone and we would talk and laugh the hours

away. I would sometimes join the queue of people waiting to see him. He never turned anyone away.

“If we don’t engage you (as journalists) to explain our policies and actions, you will continue misquoting us,” he would often say. “I always want to help the media tell the truth, but I cannot do that by avoiding you but by engaging you…….”

I believed then, as I still do now, that if all politicians shared Mr Mangwende’s philosophy on the media, many of the acrimony that was to characterise relations between politicians and journalists from what they regarded as the “dissident media” would have been avoided.

And true to his boundless sense of humour, I was at his office the morning after Margaret Dongo had announced the formation of her Zimbabwe Union of Democrats (ZUD) some years later. “Why are you not reporting I am a ZUD committee member……,” he joked, and we laughed. He died in ZANU PF as he had vowed.

We became so close that when I decided that journalism alone was not for me. As I saw the poor salaries in the profession constricting my endeavours, I first went to Baba, as I called him to share my aspirations and seek his counsel. The rest is history. I owe my first success and experiences in business as a then young entrepreneur to him. I established a fledgling gold stamping mill business at Empress near Kadoma to the assistance he rendered me. He interceded between me and the then MD of CBZ bank, Gideon Gono, to enable me to access a loan that was to alter the course of my life. Journalism then became just a hobby for me, simply because I enjoyed the

profession, and the access it created to meet various people. I no longer had to practise the craft for a living. All thanks to Baba.

Mr Mangwende's approach to business was rooted in the belief that true success is measured not by profits alone, but by the impact one has on the lives of others. And so, he smiled when I one day informed him my venture had grown from three to sixty employees.

Though he was a successful businessman, it never showed. He was not flashy. His business office was a sanctuary for many, a place of warmth, laughter and unconditional acceptance. His humility and generosity were the foundations of his being.

Though time has passed, my memories of him continue to guide me, reminding me to approach life with the same compassion and grace he embodied. His influence over many was a like a quiet but powerful river, carving its path through life, forever leaving its mark. He remains ever present, his legacy living on in the hearts of many who were fortunate enough to know him. His kindness and wisdom still echo in my heart. He left an indelible mark on everyone he encountered.

His life was a testament to the power of public service, and his legacy should continue to inspire individuals who strive to make meaningful contributions to society.

Alois Mangwende's career was marked by a deep sense of duty to his community and country. As a politician, he consistently put the welfare of the people above personal gain, pushing for policies that prioritized economic development, social justice, and the empowerment of the

marginalised. His work in both the private and public sectors revealed a rare commitment to national progress. Throughout the years, I interacted with Baba Mangwende up close range, I never once saw him yell or shout down anybody. He was always calm and collected even when angry. He did not exhibit any outward anger as we often saw from other politicians who regarded their constituents as their subjects.

His dedication to uplifting others, his commitment to justice, and his unwavering belief in the potential of his countrymen should be etched into the fabric of our shared history. Even in his absence, he remains a beacon of hope, reminding us all that one person, with a heart full of purpose and a hands-on approach to problem-solving, can make an enduring difference.

Continue resting in eternal peace Baba Mangwende. I will always miss you till our next encounter.