



LADY MACHIAVELLI

Leïla Trabelsi, wife of the former President of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, poses for a portrait at the Presidential Palace in 2009.

Opposite Tunisians hold up a portrait of Leïla Trabelsi in front of the prime minister's office in January 2011. They rallied for five days while the interim cabinet prepared to make a clean break from the old regime.

SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED

If a great woman can be found behind every great man, then behind every dictator lurks a female force to be reckoned with. Amy Fallon looks into the lavish lives of Leïla Trabelsi and Grace Mugabe - Africa's most despised First Ladies - whose love of spending and power almost puts their husbands to shame



Even for a woman whose name has come to symbolize the greed and corruption that has taken root in her country, it was an audacious and desperate move. While protesters rioted in Tunisia, with looters ransacking shops and gunfire echoing in the streets, Leila Trabelsi – whose husband, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, had just been ousted from power after 23 years – had one last-minute errand to run.

The 53-year-old First Lady, known as the Lady Macbeth of Tunisia and always dressed in designer outfits, made her way to the bank. There, Leila, whose husband had just resigned after weeks of protests over corruption, repression and unemployment, allegedly demanded £38-million (R440-million) worth of gold bars for safekeeping. ‘The governor tried to resist, but Leila pulled out her cellphone and called her husband,’ *The Australian* newspaper reported Ezzeddine Saidane, from another bank, as saying. According to French intelligence officials, the call sealed the deal and the

1,5 tonnes of bullion, representing one quarter of Tunisia’s gold reserves, changed hands.

Hours later the couple fled the north African country on Leila’s ‘shopping plane’, reportedly to Saudi Arabia, where they were given refuge. While the riots continued in the Tunisian capital, Leila’s daughter Nesrine, 24, and her playboy husband, Sakher El Materi, opted for Disneyland Paris. The Bank of Tunisia denies Leila’s presence, but it seems a move like this would not be out of character. ‘That’s the sort of thing Leila Trabelsi would do. And she wouldn’t have the slightest qualm about doing it,’ French author Catherine Graciet, who co-wrote *La Régente de Carthage* (about the ex-First Lady) told Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper.

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POWER COUPLES

Above Ben Ali, flanked by his wife Leïla, greets the crowd before delivering his speech at the start of the 2009 presidential election campaign. **Below** Robert and Grace Mugabe at their wedding in 1996.

Opposite, from left The Mugabes on a visit to Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2001; the couple arrives at OR Tambo International Airport in Jo'burg in 2009.

By the time Ben Ali, 74, was forced to resign on 14 January 2011, his wife was more despised than he was. 'She is the chief of all this infection,' said Tunisian journalism professor Salwa Charfi. The country's revolution was sparked by the death of vegetable trader Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010. After police seized the vegetable cart by which he earned his living, he set himself on fire out of desperation. He became a martyr to Tunisia's unemployed, whose lives couldn't be more different from the Trabelsi family's. (The eventual overthrow of Ben Ali inspired the first protests in Cairo against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who has fled his homeland, leaving behind a corrupt legacy spanning 30 years. Although the family's funds have been frozen – it's rumoured that they amassed anything from R14,4-billion to R504-billion while in power – it's not known how much money they have hidden elsewhere.)

Over the years, Leïla Trabelsi's family used their name to build up a £3,5-billion (R40,5-billion) fortune. The Trabelsis acquired a stake in Tunisian banks, airlines, internet providers and radio and TV stations. As for *Madame la Présidente*, she owned luxury cars, palatial homes and a designer wardrobe. Not bad for the daughter of a fruit and nut seller who was brought up in a poor area of the country's capital, Tunis, with her 10 brothers. She married at 18 and already had a child when she met Ben Ali, who was then Tunisia's interior minister. Ben Ali was still married to first wife Na'ima el-Kafy when Leïla, nicknamed 'Leïla Gin' after her favourite drink, gave birth to their daughter. After he deposed Tunisian independence hero Habib Bourguiba in a 1987 coup to become president, Ben Ali got a divorce and wed Leïla in 1992.

She set about appointing members of her family to high-profile positions, leading to them being branded

'the Mafia'. The Family, as they are also known, is said to have demanded a share in companies and used their contacts to get whatever they wanted. 'She was extremely powerful in running her family and ensuring they had their hands on very large parts of the economy,' says Graciet of Leïla. 'She also had political power-making decisions about government posts and firing ministers.' The Family's extreme unpopularity was revealed in cables released by WikiLeaks in December. 'Tunisians intensely dislike, even hate, First Lady Leïla Trabelsi and her family,' wrote then-US ambassador Robert Godec in 2009. 'In private, regime opponents mock her; even those close to the government express dismay at her reported behaviour.' After Lebanon's *Al-Akhbar* newspaper published the cables, its website was blocked by Tunisia. WikiLeaks also revealed the existence of Leïla's son-in-law's pet tiger, Pasha, who was fed chickens and prize cuts of beef while many Tunisians struggled to feed their families.

The similarities between Leïla Trabelsi and Grace Mugabe, the wife of Robert Mugabe (who has ruled Zimbabwe for 30 years) are striking. Like Leïla, Grace, or Disgrace as she's often called, had an unglamorous start in life.

It was while working as a junior secretary in the president's office that she was thrown into the path of Mugabe, 41 years her senior and then still married to Sally Hayfron (a teacher known for her charity work, who is still considered the mother of Zimbabwe). Grace was at the time married to air force pilot Stanley Goreraza and they had a son together. Yet that didn't



stop her from setting her sights on Mugabe, who had a better reputation back then than the international pariah status he enjoys today. By the time Sally died of kidney failure in 1992, Grace had given birth to Mugabe's daughter Bona and son Robert Peter Jr. Mugabe.

They were married four years later, before 12 000 guests, in a ceremony described by the London *Daily Telegraph* as 'Africa's wedding of the decade'. Many Zimbabweans and experts on the country agree this was when things turned sour. 'The feeling is that Mugabe's own slide into corruption was owed to her sense of acquisition and dominance over others,' Stephen Chan, professor of International Relations at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, told *Marie Claire*. 'Her early, amazingly bad taste is now far more educated, but there's no doubt the Harare oligarchs are into bling, and Grace was for a while their style leader.'

Her infamous spending sprees led critics to label Grace 'the First Shopper'. She reportedly blew £75 000 (R870 000) in two Paris fashion houses in one day in 2008. Like Leila, she regularly uses her personal plane to visit Malaysia and Singapore for a spot of retail therapy – or she commands jets from Air Zimbabwe.

Hong Kong is also often on the itinerary, and it was there that she beat up British photographer Richard Jones in January 2009. On assignment for the UK's *Sunday Times*, Jones was punched by Mrs Mugabe as she left the Shangri-La hotel. 'If she would do that in the streets of Hong Kong in public where there is a rule of law... I can't imagine what she would do when she's in her own country to anyone she didn't like,'

said Jones. The photographer was left with nine cuts, abrasions and bruises to the face and head caused by the diamond-encrusted rings Grace was sporting.

These knuckle-dusters have become part of Grace's signature look, along with her Ferragamo shoes. When asked why she spent so much on shoes while so many Zimbabweans were dying of cholera and HIV/AIDS, Grace explained she had 'very narrow feet'. Even at home, Grace abuses her privileges and flaunts her wealth. 'Reputedly empty-headed and vain, she had her nails painted almost hourly at Victoria Falls by a beautician on her personal staff,' wrote veteran African journalist Heidi Holland in *Dinner With Mugabe*.

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Then there is her portfolio of properties. Harare's Borrowdale and Borrowdale Brooke suburbs are home to her mansions. Grace allegedly sold her 'Gracelands' mansion to close friend and Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi for about £3-million (R35-million). It is palatial in size, with 30 bedrooms, and Grace was accused of using government funds to build it. 'She has her own houses nearby where she can take refuge whenever she and Mugabe argue,' said Chan. If recent rumours are true Grace, now 45, may be spending more time there sans the president. Last October it was reported that she had been conducting a five-year affair



with Gideon Gono, head of Zimbabwe's central bank and one of Mugabe's best friends.

Gono, 50, and Grace have both been accused of 'extracting tremendous diamond profits from Chiadzwa [mine]' in a WikiLeaks cable quoting a former US ambassador. Grace is now suing Zimbabwe's *The Standard* newspaper, which published the claims, for £9.6-million (R111-million), insisting in court papers that she is the 'mother of the nation'.

So why is there a trend of these second wives becoming spendaholic megalomaniacs? Cheryl Rezek, consultant clinical psychologist and the author of *Life Happens*, says people tend to repeat behaviour imposed on them. 'The oppressed become the oppressors, the abused the abusers,' she says. 'Those in power act as role models so others then believe it's all right to act in those ways.' Rezek says the 'second wave' are motivated by power, greed, status and anger or contempt. More significantly, they know the power they hold over their partners. 'Central to a man's ego is the approval of his partner,' says Rezek. 'His prowess, sexual or otherwise, is fundamental to his self-esteem. He will adapt his beliefs and values in order to gain and maintain his partner's approval and admiration, often regardless of the consequences. Powerful men often want a more powerful partner than themselves.'

What does the future hold for Leila Trabelsi, now that her beloved has been toppled from power? With an Interpol arrest warrant being issued for her, her husband and five other family members, Leila's

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shopping days are numbered. But Lady Grace appears to have more options. With Mugabe, 86, calling on Zanu-PF to prepare for elections, Grace can continue to run things from behind the scenes. But it's unlikely we'll ever see a President Grace. 'There are far too many other ambitious people and she has no constituency within the ruling Zanu-PF party. Vice-president Joice Mujuru is a far more powerful woman and was a genuine war hero in the liberation struggle,' says Chan.

While there are other First Ladies – such as Simone Gbagbo, wife of Ivory Coast's President Laurent Gbagbo – rising up within the ranks to give Grace and Leila a run for their money, it's likely that anyone else will go down a shrinking violet in the history books when compared to these two. As Graciet says of Leila, she is a 'Machiavellian figure... intelligent, ambitious, calculating, manipulating and utterly without scruples or morals. In short, she is absolutely fascinating.' **mc**



THE DICTATOR AND I

Leila Trabelsi and Grace Mugabe are not the first, nor will they be the last First Ladies to become drunk on power. We take a look at some of the more startling dictators' wives from the past

Imelda Marcos (above right)

Who A beauty queen and a singer known as the Muse of Manila, who married Ferdinand Marcos (above left) in 1953.

Known for Spending vast quantities of money while her country suffered. She owned several properties in Manhattan (she decided not to buy the Empire State Building for R5.35-billion as it was 'too ostentatious'). After her husband's regime toppled in 1986, the couple fled their home, where Imelda left behind 2 700 pairs of shoes, 15 mink coats, 508 ballgowns and 100 handbags.

Where is she now? Back in the Philippines, where she opened a shoe museum. 'Filipinos don't wallow in what is ugly. They recycle the bad into things of beauty,' she says. She has run for president and faced corruption charges.



Michèle Bennett

Who A divorcée secretary who became the wife of Haitian president Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier. Their wedding in 1980 cost a whopping \$3-million (R21.5-million).

Known for Her cruelty and her love of shopping. While in exile, her notebook was seized by investigators. It contained mind-boggling numbers: \$168 780 (R1.2-million) for clothes at Givenchy and \$270 200 (R1.9-million) for jewellery at Boucheron.

Where is she now? Living in France. It's been suggested Duvalier lost a large amount of his fortune in their divorce.



Mirjana Markovic

Who A professor of sociology and magazine columnist, Mirjana was said to be the driving force in her marriage to Slobodan Milosevic, the Yugoslav president, a.k.a. the Butcher of the Balkans. She was known as Lady Macbeth or the Red Witch.

Known for Her squeaky voice, crying in public and ruling her husband with an iron fist.

Where is she now? In exile in Russia. Serbian prosecutors have accused Mirjana of making tens of millions of pounds through cigarette smuggling.