

BRIEFING

ZIMBABWE: THE COUP THAT NEVER WAS, AND THE ELECTION THAT COULD HAVE BEEN

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ON 14 NOVEMBER 2017, the Zimbabwean military launched ‘Operation Restore Legacy’ in a bid to force President Robert Mugabe out of office and facilitate a transfer of power to his former Vice President, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The intervention was triggered by Mugabe’s move to sideline senior military figures—including army chief Constantino Chiwenga—and to sack one of their closest political allies, Mnangagwa, just over a week earlier. The president justified this ‘night of the long knives’ on the basis that some of the most influential figures in the country had been plotting to undermine his authority. However, ultimately Mugabe’s gambit only served to weaken his hold on power.

In the three years that followed the 2014 ZANU-PF congress,¹ the race to succeed Mugabe—who is now 95—had split the ruling party into two rival factions: ‘Lacoste’, led by Mnangagwa and with strong links to the military and key branches of the state; and the ‘G40’ (from Generation 40) group, a less coherent ragbag band of younger politicians that included several prominent Ministers and was associated with, but never effectively led by, the president’s second wife, Grace.² For nearly four decades until late 2017, Mugabe had consistently performed a clever balancing act, playing one faction off against the other and fostering internal rivalries that kept all sides accountable only to the centre. However, when he removed Mnangagwa, the president effectively sided with G40,

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1 On previous factions, see Oliver Nyambi, ‘Of weevils and Gamatox: Titles, names and nicknames in ZANU PF succession politics’, *African Identities* 14, 1 (2016), pp. 59–73.

2 Chipso Dendere, ‘To understand the coup in Zimbabwe, you need to know more about Grace Mugabe’, *Washington Post*, 15 November 2017, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/15/to-understand-the-coup-in-zimbabwe-you-need-to-know-more-about-grace-mugabe/>> (11 January 2019).

destabilizing the regime and thus setting in motion a course of action that would ultimately lead to his own downfall.

In addition to being unpopular—there was little support for Grace Mugabe’s political ambitions in the country³—the president’s belief that Mnangagwa and Chiwenga could easily be politically neutralized significantly underestimated their influence. Forced into a corner, this politico-military axis moved swiftly to prevent the detention of Chiwenga, relocate Mnangagwa to South Africa for his own safety, effectively place Mugabe under house arrest and take control of the streets of Harare.⁴ These actions involved the considerable use of force. Tanks were deployed in key locations, Mugabe was held against his will and those who resisted the assertion of military control—or were expected to—were detained and questioned, often brutally.

However, this part of the story of Zimbabwe’s political transition is rarely told, because those who stage-managed the process went to great lengths to create the impression that it was anything but a coup. Instead, the world was presented with a cleverly and carefully curated piece of political theatre. The central tenet of this performance was that both the military intervention and the period of intense political negotiation that it gave rise to were little more than a form of internal housekeeping.⁵ Within this narrative, Mugabe was said to have resigned of his own volition on 21 November after losing the backing of the party that he had led since independence.⁶ Similarly, Mnangagwa’s political ascension was curated so that it appeared to have emerged from an orderly process within ZANU-PF itself—and hence to represent a civilian, rather than a military, transfer of power.

This performance, which involved allowing Mugabe to attend a public event to maintain the charade that he was free to move about as he pleased,⁷ was necessary because Lacoste leaders planned to use economic recovery as the foundation of its domestic legitimacy. Given Zimbabwe’s perilous economic position, the success of this plan rested on securing

3 Sisonke Msimang, ‘The fall of Africa’s most hated first lady’, *The New York Times*, 22 November 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/opinion/sunday/grace-mugabe-zimbabwe.html>> (10 January 2019).

4 McDonald Dzirutwe, Joe Brock, and Ed Cropley, “‘Tracherous shenanigans’ – The inside story of Mugabe’s downfall”, *Reuters*, 27 November 2019, <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-zimbabwe-politics-mugabe-special-repo/tracherous-shenanigans-the-inside-story-of-mugabes-downfall-idUKKBN1DQ0AB>> (14 February 2019).

5 Piers Pigou, ‘Zimbabwe’s very peculiar coup’, *International Crisis Group*, 16 November 2017, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/zimbabwe/zimbabwes-very-peculiar-coup>> (12 January 2019).

6 *BBC News*, ‘Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe resigns’, 21 November 2017, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42071488>> (12 January 2019).

7 Jason Burke and Alex Maher, ‘Robert Mugabe makes first public appearance since military takeover’, *The Guardian*, 17 November 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/17/zimbabwe-military-claims-progress-in-takeover-talks>> (12 January 2019).

significant international financial assistance and investment. In turn, this depended on persuading regional bodies and the international community to back—or at the very least acquiesce to—Mnangagwa’s leadership.

The greatest threat to this plan was that the transition would be labelled a ‘coup’. As a result of growing international norms against unconstitutional transfers of power over the last 20 years, this would not only have led to Zimbabwe being suspended from the African Union,⁸ but could also have undermined the prospects of international financial assistance from the United States and, in turn, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The importance of legitimating the transition therefore motivated the new government’s actions at every turn. In this sense, the central challenge for President Mnangagwa was similar to that facing leaders in countries such as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda: how to legitimize a regime with dubious democratic credentials.

Against this backdrop, Mnangagwa’s decision to hold an ‘early’ election can be seen to have been motivated by two factors. First, the need to legitimate his rule both domestically and internationally. If ZANU-PF could win a competitive election, difficult questions about the ‘military-assisted transition’ would quickly fade.⁹ Second, the president’s desire to establish a strong mandate to assert his own authority over the ruling party and government itself. From very early on in the life of the Mnangagwa administration it was clear that the new political dispensation was beset by civil-military tensions.¹⁰ These related both to the distribution of political power and economic resources. Unsurprisingly, senior military figures expected to be rewarded for their role in removing Mugabe, and one of Mnangagwa’s first acts was to appoint Chiwenga as Vice President. Almost immediately, rumours began to swirl around Harare that the former army chief had demanded that a quota of positions within the party and bureaucracy be reserved for military leaders. Such claims resonated with Zimbabwean citizens in part because the last two decades have seen a gradual process through which the state has been militarized.¹¹ Within

8 Joining the ranks of countries such as Mauritania (2005), Guinea (2008), Madagascar (2009), Mali (2012) and Egypt (2013).

9 David Pilling, ‘A year in a word: Military-assisted transition’, *Financial Times*, 26 December 2017, <<https://www.ft.com/content/11fb6f04-e41b-11e7-8b99-0191e45377ec>> (12 January 2019); ‘Zimbabwe’s “military-assisted transition” and prospects for recovery’, *International Crisis Group*, 20 December 2017, <<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b134-zimbabwez-s-military-assisted-transition.pdf>> (12 January 2019).

10 Owen Gagare, ‘Tensions between Mnangagwa and army commanders grow’, *The Zimbabwe Independent*, 16 February 2018, <<https://www.theindependent.co.zw/2018/02/16/tensions-mnangagwa-army-commanders-grow/>> (12 January 2019).

11 JoAnn McGregor, ‘The politics of disruption: War veterans and the local state in Zimbabwe’, *African Affairs* 101, 402 (2002), pp. 9–37; Jocelyn Alexander, ‘Militarisation and state institutions: “Professionals” and “soldiers” inside the Zimbabwe Prison Service’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 4 (2013), pp. 807–28.

this fluid and contested political environment, a commanding election victory promised to give the president a stronger mandate, and hence insulate him against further military intervention.

It initially looked as if Mnangagwa had managed the electoral process perfectly. The government allowed the opposition to campaign in rural areas, generating a palpable sense that political space had been opened up. But it was also careful to retain tight control over the media, especially in rural areas, and this, along with low-level intimidation of opposition supporters meant that the government enjoyed considerable advantages of incumbency. As a result, ZANU-PF achieved the 'sweet-spot' of competitive-authoritarian elections,¹² allowing just enough freedom to make them appear credible but not enough to risk losing.

However, after voting had been completed and his first-round victory announced, Mnangagwa's perfect script began to fall apart. When opposition protestors took to the streets of Harare following allegations that the presidential election result was being rigged in favour of ZANU-PF, they met with a hardline military response that led to the death of seven people. Then, in early 2019, protests against an increase in the price of fuel—amidst a deteriorating economic situation—were brutally put down by the security forces, while access to the internet was shut down, bringing back memories of the Mugabe era. This raises a challenging question: how do we explain the apparent inconsistency in the president's approach?

This briefing seeks to shed light on how we should interpret recent events in Zimbabwe by providing an overview of the key themes of the 2018 elections. In doing so, it highlights the rapidly shifting political playing field on which the new president found himself. In particular, we show that in an effort to legitimize his undemocratic rise to power, Mnangagwa positioned himself as the 'change' candidate and resorted to a mix of political theatre and soft reforms to endear himself to both Zimbabweans and the international community. The ruling party ceded enough ground to make claims of reform credible, while retaining sufficient control over the key levers of power to ensure a favourable election result. However, the shocking events of 1 August 2018 and early 2019 have cast a long shadow over the new administration. The discrepancy between this violent crackdown and the president's strategy up to that point suggests that he was either disingenuous about his intentions or that he is not in full control of the state.

It is too early to make a definitive decision between these possibilities, but both have significant implications for the future of Zimbabwean politics. If the former is true, the discrepancy between the president's official statements in favour of peace and dialogue and the human rights abuses

12 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. 'The rise of competitive authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 2 (2002), pp. 51–65.

committed by the security forces is best interpreted as a ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine, designed to deceive the world into thinking that Mnangagwa is a ‘dove’, and signals that ZANU-PF has found a smarter way to sustain authoritarian rule. If the latter possibility proves to be closer to the mark, the civilian status of the Zimbabwean government is under threat—if it has not already fallen—and the continued militarization of the state and economy means that political and economic reforms are increasingly unlikely. Either way, the prospects for democracy are bleak.

The electoral context: balancing participation and control

While winning a credible election made good political sense, it was easier said than done because Mnangagwa was not an easy candidate to sell. Having been a crucial cog in the Mugabe machine for over thirty years, he was poorly placed to depict himself as the agent of change. From the inauguration on, the Mnangagwa presidency was also dogged by allegations that he had played a leading role in human rights abuses and election rigging and demands for an apology for the Gukurahundi massacres of the early 1980s. He also lacked a personal electoral constituency and had repeatedly lost elections for lesser positions. This placed the government in a difficult position: a credible election was essential to provide a strong foundation for the new regime, but a fully free and fair election risked defeat.

In many ways the election was a masterclass in how to revitalize and re-legitimize a government without risking losing power. There were two elements to this. First, Mnangagwa effectively ran against his own political legacy, denouncing the Mugabe regime and presenting himself as the ‘change’ candidate. As part of this process, he promised extensive reforms and global re-engagement, frequently repeating the mantra that Zimbabwe was ‘open for business’. Second, meaningful improvements in the electoral landscape were introduced. Despite initial scepticism among the opposition, the campaign was significantly more open than that of 2013. Opposition candidates could hold rallies in rural areas that had previously been closed off to them and fears that the government would move to take control of social media—either by arresting critical bloggers or simply taking the internet down—failed to materialize. At the same time, some of the democratic gains secured during the political transition, when those in control of the process were encouraged to voice their criticism of the Mugabe regime, were maintained.

The notion that the political environment had changed in a profound way was further supported by the role of the security forces. In many areas the police, who were removed from the streets during the coup—much to the joy of ordinary Zimbabweans, who see them as corrupt and ineffective—adopted a much lower profile. The fact that the police road blocks that had multiplied by the end of the Mugabe era disappeared created a greater sense

of freedom of movement, because in addition to taking bribes they were widely assumed to have been carrying out surveillance on behalf of the ruling party.

The electoral framework also appeared to have improved. The Zimbabwean Electoral Commission (ZEC) presided over a new electoral roll generated through the use of biometric technology and—in stark contrast to previous elections¹³—pledged to release it in electronic form to both opposition parties and observer groups ahead of the polls. This promised to remove the ‘ghost voters’ that had undermined the credibility of the 2013 polls. Perhaps most significantly, Mnangagwa allowed the elections to be monitored by credible international bodies: by polling day, representatives of many of the most robust international observation missions were in the country including the European Union, the Carter Centre, and a joint delegation from the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute (IRI) of the United States.¹⁴ Regional monitors from the African Union and the Southern African Development Community were also present.

However, like any effective competitive-authoritarian government, ZANU-PF was careful not to make any changes that would risk losing control of the political agenda. Thus, social media was not censored, but the regime maintained tight control of radio—the dominant source of information and news in rural areas. And while state newspapers were careful to fulfil their legal requirement to cover the campaigns of all candidates, this was done in a way that sustained the government’s hegemony. On the one hand, there was no commitment to actually providing equal coverage.¹⁵ On the other hand, by dividing coverage of the opposition between the 23 presidential candidates, editors could deny Mnangagwa’s most significant opponent media exposure.

Similarly, while the biometric voter registration process generated a more robust electoral roll—with an estimated 2.1 million individuals (45 percent of those registered) who had appeared on the previous roll disappearing¹⁶—serious questions remained.¹⁷ Most notably, while domestic monitors such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network found

13 Jocelyn Alexander and Blessing-Miles Tendi, ‘A tale of two elections: Zimbabwe at the polls in 2008’, *Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, Winter 2008, <<http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/acasbulletin80.pdf>> (12 January 2019).

14 *Africa Confidential*, ‘The great observer gamble’, 9 August 2018, <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/12397/The_great_observer_gamble> (9 January 2019).

15 MISA, ‘2018 post election brief’, August 2018, <<http://kubatana.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MISA-2018-Post-Election-Brief.pdf>> (10 January 2019).

16 This suggests that ghost voting played a central role in the manipulation of the 2013 elections.

17 Blessed Mhlanga, ‘“2 million voters removed from voters” roll’, *NewsDay Zimbabwe*, 20 July 2018, <<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/07/2-million-voters-removed-from-voters-roll/>> (12 January 2019).

relatively few anomalies, a group of anonymous researchers known as Team Pachedu identified over 120,000 suspect records that they argued required further investigation. A second domestic observation body, the Election Resource Centre acknowledged that being able to audit the voters roll was an improvement on previous elections, but also complained that it had been released too late for problems to be rectified and raised concerns that the roll that was shared with them might not be the one used on polling day.

These concerns were rooted in the fact that despite its nominal independence, ZEC remained under tight government control. This was clear legally, as the Justice Ministry retained the power to review and veto policies. But more importantly it was evident from the decisions that ZEC made in the last weeks of the campaign. The more egregious of these related to the design of the ballot paper, which according to the electoral regulations should feature the names of the candidates in the presidential election in a single column ordered alphabetically. This disadvantaged President Mnangagwa, whose name should have come in the middle of the list: political scientists believe that being first can increase the number of votes that a candidate receives by a very small, but not insignificant, amount.¹⁸ In response, ZEC produced a ballot that violated both the rules and common sense by employing two columns of unequal length so that instead of appearing in the middle of a long column, Mnangagwa's name would appear first in the second of two columns.

ZEC made other decisions that also undermined its credibility. Most obviously, with just ten days to go before the election it was revealed that ZEC had changed the handbook used to train electoral officials—and established election practice—by turning around the position of the polling booths so that voters would cast their ballots in full view of party agents. This was justified on the basis that it would stop voters from taking pictures of their vote on their phones—an electoral offence—and hence reduce the risk of vote buying. However, in a context in which past elections have seen widespread violence and intimidation it was immediately interpreted as a last minute effort to ensure a Mnangagwa victory. Although ZEC ultimately relented, reverting to the previous system that protected the secrecy of the ballot, the incident further undermined its reputation in opposition circles. The furore over the positioning of the polling booths also diverted attention away from a more serious discussion of other shortcomings in areas such as the counting and transmission of the results.

18 Jonathan G.S. Koppell and Jennifer A. Steen, 'The effects of ballot position on election outcomes', *Journal of Politics* 66, 1 (1004), pp. 267–281; Marc Meredith and Yuval Salant, 'On the causes and consequences of ballot order effects', *Political Behavior* 35, 1 (2013), pp. 175–197.

One reason that the idea of allowing voters to be overseen by party agents generated such a strong outcry was that the campaign, though freer than the last, saw a continuation of low-level intimidation, especially in rural areas. In focus groups carried out by the NDI, citizens complained of what they called ‘subtle violence’. What they meant by this was that while there was limited physical violence, they were being coerced into supporting the ruling party through other, less visible, means. This had two main components. First, the ruling party collects a vast amount of data on individuals, forcing people to provide private information in return for food aid and basic services. During the election, figures aligned to ZANU-PF also spread rumours that the biometric registration process would empower them to track people and tell how they voted. Second, in some areas traditional leaders, ZANU-PF candidates and their supporters quietly reminded the electorate that the government had responded to the strong vote for the opposition in 2008 with a wave of intense violence. This is known locally as ‘shaking the matchbox’. Once you have burned down someone’s house, you don’t need to do it again; just showing them a matchbox is enough.

Taken together, these two processes created the sense that citizens were constantly under surveillance and would be punished for voting the ‘wrong way’, undermining the confidence of many citizens in the openness of the polls. A survey conducted by the independent Afrobarometer group in May 2018 found that 31 percent of citizens worried that their ballot was not secret, 41 percent believed that the security forces would not accept an adverse result, and 40 percent feared that there would be violence after the election.¹⁹ President Mnangagwa’s supporters argued that he was not to blame for this intimidation and that it simply represented the ‘muscle memory’ of the old regime—which he was doing his best to fix. It is difficult to evaluate this claim without access to ZANU-PF’s internal records, but such an interpretation is called into question by the government’s disregard for both civil liberties and electoral rules during the campaign. For example, teachers and students were forced to attend Mnangagwa rallies and this continued despite fierce criticism from both teacher and student unions and a High Court ruling that sought to prohibit the practice. Whoever was responsible, it is clear that ‘subtle violence’ conferred a considerable advantage on the ruling party.

Having instituted some positive electoral reforms, the ruling party thus attempted a careful balancing act, exerting just enough control to ensure a favourable outcome, while ceding just enough ground to make the polls

19 Michael Bratton and Eldred Masunungure, ‘AD223: Zimbabwe’s Presidential Race Tightens One Month Ahead of July 30 Voting’, *Afrobarometer*, 20 July 2018, <<http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad223-zimbabwes-presidential-race-tightens-one-month-ahead-july-30-voting>> (11 January 2019).

appear to be a real improvement. In this way, the administration achieved—if only for a short time—the ‘sweet spot’ of electoral authoritarianism.

The campaign: external competition and internal disunity

President Mnangagwa’s campaign began in grand fashion, with massive billboards that repeated his campaign promises to bring about universal healthcare and decent jobs and deliver ‘free, fair and credible elections’. However, although it was estimated early on that he was outspending his rivals by 50:1, the president’s efforts appeared to lack the energy of his opponents. In particular, his lack of charisma and flat speech delivery were often criticized, and on 7 July, a video emerged showing soldiers beating Zimbabweans for leaving a ZANU-PF rally in Bindura while Mnangagwa was still speaking.²⁰

Deep divisions within the ruling party and the security sector did not help. A grenade attack on 24 June at a ZANU-PF rally in Bulawayo was officially said to have been an assassination attempt on the president from a dissident group, but was widely interpreted on the ground to have been the result of fractures within the government, and may have been a warning to the new president not to threaten the economic and political privileges of the military figures who put him in power. Divisive party primaries made things worse. Former provincial minister, Webster Shamu, advised those who attended a rally in Mashonaland West to vote for ZANU-PF at parliamentary level, but vote with their conscience in the presidential polls.²¹ This strategy—dubbed *bhora musango*—was used effectively by dissident ruling party officials in 2008.²²

The MDC Alliance, the main opposition group, was also far from united. The seven parties to the Alliance were the Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T)—the largest component—the Movement for Democratic Change-Ncube (MDC-N) headed by Welshman Ncube, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) led by Tendai Biti, and smaller parties Transform Zimbabwe (TZ), Zimbabwe People First (ZPF), Zimbabwe African National Union-Ndonga (ZANU-N), and the Multi-Racial Christian Democrats (MCD).²³ The coalition reunited fractious

20 Obey Manayiti and Simbarashe Sithole, ‘Mnangagwa rally ends in mayhem’, *The Standard*, 8 July 2018, <<https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2018/07/08/mnangagwa-rally-ends-mayhem/>> (11 January 2019).

21 Blessed Mhlanga, ‘Shamu preaches “bhora musango”’, *NewsDay Zimbabwe*, 18 July 2018, <<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/07/shamu-preaches-bhora-musango/>> (11 January 2019).

22 Blessing-Miles Tendi, ‘Robert Mugabe’s 2013 presidential election campaign’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 4 (2013), pp. 963–970.

23 MacDonald Dzirutwe, ‘Zimbabwe opposition reunites to challenge Mugabe’, *Reuters*, 5 August 2017, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-politics-idUSKBN1AL0IZ.>> (11 January 2019).

former colleagues who had split from the main MDC-T in 2005 and 2014 in the wake of allegations of intra-party violence, intolerance of dissent and ethnic tensions.²⁴ Despite having agreed to form a coalition, tensions remained in the relationships between the principals to the alliance and these manifested in occasional public spats over strategy and the absence of key leaders from rallies.

The Alliance had been formed by the long-standing nemesis of President Robert Mugabe, the former trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai. But Tsvangirai's death from colon cancer in Johannesburg in February 2018 left the coalition on shaky ground. Tensions emerged within the Alliance's largest party when 40-year old lawyer Nelson Chamisa seized control,²⁵ outmanoeuvring the party's Vice President Thokozani Khupe. In turn, Chamisa's power grab led to another split within the MDC-T, with Khupe—who suffered misogynistic abuse and narrowly avoided being burned alive by Chamisa supporters—successfully suing for the right to use the party's name and logo.

However, despite its financial and internal challenges, MDC Alliance rallies were well attended and dynamic. A recently ordained pastor, Chamisa frequently made use of religious symbolism on the campaign trail. He dubbed his last rally in Masvingo as 'The Last Supper', as it would be the final meeting ahead of the looming polls and, at his final rally in Harare, likened himself to Joshua who would deliver Zimbabwe to 'Canaan'—echoing the words of Raila Odinga during the Kenyan election of 2017.²⁶

With more than half of the population under 25 and 43.5 percent of registered voters under 35, Chamisa, who is one of the youngest party leaders in the country, also played on his youth and energy. During demonstrations in Harare, he led the crowds through the streets and stopped midway to do several push-ups, in a barely-veiled jab at the advanced age of his opponent.²⁷ The MDC-A leader was also supported by a youth activist movement dubbed #GenerationalConsensus. Significantly, while many government figures and middle-class critics laughed at his

24 Brian Raftopoulos, 'Reflections on opposition politics in Zimbabwe: The politics of the Movement for Democratic Change', in Karen Alexander and Brian Raftopoulos (eds), *Reflections on democratic politics in Zimbabwe* (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, 2006); *BBC News*, 'Zimbabwe's Tsvangirai "expels" rival', 29 April 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27212025>> (11 January 2019).

25 Blessed Mhlanga, 'Zimbabwe: Khupe, Chamisa feud turns nasty', *Zimbabwe Standard (Harare)*, 18 March 2018, <<https://allafrica.com/stories/201803180022.html>> (10 January 2019); Richard Chidza, 'Khupe slams door on Chamisa', *NewsDay Zimbabwe*, 3 May 2018, <<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/05/khupe-slams-door-on-chamisa/>> (10 January 2019).

26 Tatenda Chitagu, 'Rains: Harbinger of good things for MDC Alliance?', *NewsDay Zimbabwe*, 27 July 2018, <<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/07/rains-harbinger-of-good-things-for-mdc-alliance/>> (11 January 2019).

27 *Nehanda TV*, 'WATCH: Nelson Chamisa doing push ups', 6 June 2018, <<http://nehandatv.com/2018/06/06/watch-nelson-chamisa-doing-push-ups/>> (11 January 2019).

outlandish promises, such as a bullet train that would transport citizens between the country's two largest cities within 35 minutes, requiring speeds upwards of 900 km/hour,²⁸ they proved popular with younger voters. This, together with the more open campaign environment, meant that Zimbabweans were increasingly willing to give him their support. In a January 2017 Afrobarometer survey, just 16 percent of those surveyed said that they would vote MDC, but a poll conducted just before the 2018 elections revealed that the party's support had recovered to 39 percent, within touching distance of the 42 percent received by ZANU-PF.²⁹

The final weeks of the campaign were complicated by the role played by Robert Mugabe and the National Patriotic Front (NPF), a new party formed by former members of the G40 who had been expelled from the party following his removal. Throughout the campaign, there were rumours that Chamisa was in talks with NPF leaders to form an 'anti-Mnangagwa' coalition. This alarmed many opposition supporters, because it became clear that the NPF had close ties with Mugabe himself, and so any deal threatened to undermine the MDC's credibility. Ultimately, it appears that the idea of a formal coalition was abandoned after Chamisa refused to agree to demands that Grace Mugabe be appointed his Vice President. Despite this, the two groups agreed to cooperate, with some NPF leaders endorsing Chamisa and the two groups discussed where to run (and not run) candidates to maximize their chances of defeating ZANU-PF. Most surprising of all, Mugabe himself endorsed Chamisa's candidacy on the eve of the election in a rambling hour-long missive.³⁰ ZANU-PF's response was to suggest that a vote for the MDC Alliance on 30 July would be a vote for the old regime. 'The choice is clear, you either vote for Mugabe under the guise of Chamisa or you vote for a new Zimbabwe under my leadership and ZANU-PF', Mnangagwa claimed in a Facebook video.

28 Xolisani Ncube, 'Chamisa grilled on BBC's HardTalk', *NewsDay Zimbabwe*, 12 May 2018, <<https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/05/chamisa-grilled-on-bbcs-hardtalk/>> (10 January 2019); Retlaw Matatu Matorwa, 'Of bullet trains and Chamisa's 35-minute ride to Bulawayo', *The Herald*, 9 March 2018, <<https://www.herald.co.zw/of-bullet-trains-and-chamisas-35-minute-ride-to-bulawayo/>> (10 January 2019); Shingai Nyoka, 'The crusader taking on Zimbabwe's "crocodile"', *BBC News*, 17 July 2018, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-44741062>> (11 January 2019).

29 Bratton and Masunungure, 'AD223: Zimbabwe's Presidential Race Tightens One Month Ahead of July 30 Voting'.

30 MacDonald Dzirutwe, 'Zimbabwe's Mugabe backs opposition on eve of election', *Reuters*, 29 July 2018, <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-zimbabwe-election-mugabe/zimbabwes-mugabe-backs-opposition-on-eve-of-election-idUKKBN1KJ0DS>> (11 January 2019).

The results: an election with no winners?

Voting day came and went and was seen—at the national level—to have been relatively orderly and peaceful. But as the collating and reporting got underway, political tensions began to rise. The Electoral Commission tried to manage expectations by announcing parliamentary seats first. ZANU-PF won 144 while the MDC-A managed just 64, giving the ruling party a two-thirds majority in parliament. The delay to the presidential declaration heightened fears of rigging and led to accusations that the electoral commission had deliberately paused to make sure that Mnangagwa would win in the first round. Thus, while the announcement in the early hours of 3 August that the president had defeated Chamisa by 50.8 percent of the vote to 44.3 percent disappointed many, it did not come as a massive surprise.³¹ The other 21 candidates shared just 240,000 votes (4.9 percent), in an election that featured a record turnout of 4.8 million voters, 85 percent of those registered.

Mnangagwa's support had come from Zimbabwe's rural Mashonaland, Midlands and Masvingo provinces, while Chamisa's was mainly concentrated in the urban Harare and Bulawayo provinces. Significantly, both men won more votes than their predecessors, despite the cleaning of the electoral roll: Mnangagwa added 350,000 votes to Mugabe's 2013 total, while Chamisa doubled Tsvangirai's previous tally.³² But despite this, Mnangagwa's performance left him vulnerable. While Mugabe won with a commanding 61.09 percent of the vote in 2013, his successor only just avoided the need for a second round run off. Moreover, Mnangagwa received fewer votes as president than his party received for parliament, suggesting that his candidacy hurt ZANU-PF in some areas.

For its part, the MDC Alliance could take comfort in the fact that it won a majority of the vote in 4 of the country's 10 provinces—Manicaland, Matabeleland North, Harare, and Bulawayo. However, the party performed significantly worse in the parliamentary polls, in part because of the failure of the opposition to run a common set of candidates. In twelve constituencies, the opposition collectively garnered more than ZANU-PF, but they split the vote, in part due to confusion over multiple 'MDC' candidates on the ballot. Had this not happened, the MDC Alliance would have claimed 36 percent of the seats to ZANU-PF's 63 percent, denying the ruling party the majority necessary to unilaterally change the constitution.

31 This figure was later revised down by ZEC to 50.67 percent during the court case that followed the polls.

32 Brian Raftopolos, 'Zimbabwe: The 2018 elections and their aftermath', *Solidarity Peace Trust*, 1 October 2018, <<http://solidaritypeacetrust.org/download/Zimbabwe-2018-elections-SPT-report-Oct1st-2018.pdf>> (5 October 2018).

But were the results reliable? A ‘sample based observation’ (for historical reasons the term Parallel Vote Tabulation is not used) was carried out by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network in conjunction with the National Democratic Institute. The projected results based on this sample were that Mnangagwa won with 50.7 percent of the vote, with Chamisa on 45.8 percent, lending credibility to the official outcome. Moreover, although the MDC Alliance alleged that the results had been manipulated during the counting and tallying process, it struggled to prove this in its electoral petition and the related court hearings, failing to produce sufficient documentation of discrepancies to back up its claims.

However, the election was problematic in a number of other respects. A civil society call centre that received thousands of messages from across the country reported a remarkably high number of cases in which voters were ordered to ask for assistance to vote from a known ZANU-PF member or supporter.³³ While assisted voting provisions are designed to help illiterate or blind voters, they can be manipulated to undermine the secrecy of the ballot and ensure that votes are cast for the ruling party, as appeared to be the case in 2013.³⁴ Significantly, many of those affected had received threats in the days before the polls, reflecting the continued use of subtle violence. Other problems were also identified. In opposition-sympathetic urban areas, there were reports of long, snaking queues and slow electoral agents. In Mbare, a high-density suburb outside Harare, some stations were only processing 10 voters per hour, leading to opposition complaints that this was a deliberate strategy to reduce turnout in Chamisa’s heartlands.

As a result, while the African Union and Southern African Development Community observer missions released positive statements, the European Union Election Observation Mission and International Republican Institute/National Democratic Institute were much more critical. Though they noted an ‘improved political climate’ and the peaceful and generally orderly process observed on election day, they denounced the use of state resources, coercion, intimidation, media bias, partisan behaviour of traditional leaders and vote-buying.³⁵ The observer missions also commented

33 We the People of Zimbabwe, ‘Violence around election day: Reports from the We the People of Zimbabwe call centre, July 28–August 3, 2018’, *We the People of Zimbabwe*, 3 August 2018, <<http://kubatana.net/2018/08/03/violence-around-election-day-reports-people-zimbabwe-call-centre-july-28-august-3-2018/>> (11 January 2019).

34 Research and Advocacy Unit, ‘Syncopated Numbers: Arithmetic discord and Zimbabwe’s 2013 “harmonised” election’, *Research and Advocacy Unit*, March 2014, <<http://researchandadvocacyunit.org/system/files/Syncopated%20Numbers%20-%20Arithmetic%20Discord%20and%20Zimbabwe%E2%80%99s%202013%20%E2%80%9CHarmonised%E2%80%9D%20Election.pdf>> (15 March 2017).

35 ZIEOM, ‘Preliminary statement’ (Joint IRI and NDI Observer Mission, Harare, 1 August 2018); European Union Election Observation Mission to Zimbabwe, ‘Preliminary statement’ (European Union Election Observation Mission, Harare, 1 August 2018).

on the problem of assisted voters but could not discuss the total number votes cast in this way because, although it records this information, ZEC has so far failed to release it. Given these limitations, and the fact that Mnangagwa only secured an absolute majority by just 38,780 votes,³⁶ it seems clear that the election would have gone to a second round, had the political playing field been level.

The aftermath: political violence and economic decline

Perceptions of the election—and its legacy for Zimbabwe—were changed irrevocably on 1 August, when a protest by MDC supporters against alleged electoral manipulation was violently repressed by the military, with seven people killed and dozens beaten. In the days that followed, the suburbs surrounding Harare saw a covert crackdown with reports of soldiers beating civilians, demanding to know the names and addresses of opposition polling-agents, voters and activists.³⁷ Meanwhile, prominent MDC leader Tendai Biti unsuccessfully sought sanctuary in Zambia in a bid to escape arrest on trumped up charges of inciting violence.³⁸ The human rights violations led to critical media coverage and international condemnation around the world, summed up by the first line of an *Economist* article on the elections: ‘So much for a fresh start’.³⁹

Just a few months later, in January 2019, the government reprised this hardline stance by launching a fresh spate of repression in response to further public protests.⁴⁰ In this instance, the unrest followed a state-sanctioned increase in the price of fuel of more than 150 percent, which encouraged residents of Harare and Bulawayo to back trade union calls for a three day ‘national shutdown’ from 14 January. Some protesters resorted to roadblocks and intimidation in high-density areas in Harare and Bulawayo to reinforce the strike.

The violence deployed by the administration in response to the protests and roadblocks was considerably more widespread and severe than in August and extended to the beating and detention of a wide range of civil society and opposition figures including many who were not responsible

36 This was revised down to 30,873 votes, during the court process.

37 Dozens of reports surfaced of MDC polling agents being tracked down, beaten and tortured and forced to sign new V11s (polling results declaration forms).

38 *BBC News*, ‘Tendai Biti: Zambia denies Zimbabwe politician asylum’, 8 August 2018, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45112953>> (11 January 2019).

39 *The Economist*, ‘Zimbabwe’s elections turn violent’, 2 August 2018, <<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/02/zimbabwes-elections-turn-violent>> (11 January 2019).

40 Jason Burke, ‘Zimbabwe activists on run as protests crackdown raises spectre of Mugabe’, *The Guardian*, 18 January 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/18/zimbabwe-activists-protests-crackdown-spectre-of-mugabe-era>> (19 January 2019).

for the attempted shutdown.⁴¹ Over the course of more than two weeks, at least seventeen people were killed by security forces, hundreds were beaten and nearly a thousand more were arrested—including opposition MPs, activists and trade union and civic leaders.⁴² In an unprecedented move, the Internet was shut down for most of the three days of protest, apparently to undermine efforts by organizers to coordinate protests and to prevent images of these atrocities from seeping out.⁴³ Despite this, these events triggered a wave of international condemnation and led the UK's minister for Africa Harriet Baldwin to express 'deep concern' at Zimbabwe's 'disproportionate response to the protests'.⁴⁴

The fact that the August and January crackdowns were at odds with Mnangagwa's previous statements has generated two very different interpretations about their implications. The first is that the president was never sincere and as soon as it was clear that his legitimacy would not be boosted by an overwhelming victory he reverted to his authoritarian instincts. The second is that Mnangagwa does not have full control of the state and its security apparatus, and that the growing militarization of his regime that was facilitated by the central role that Chiwenga played in his rise to power has enabled hardliners to take control over key aspects of government policy.

These rival interpretations have very different implications for the future of Zimbabwe, but neither of them leads to an optimistic conclusion. If Mnangagwa was playing a game all along, his continued efforts to talk the language of human rights is a cynical ploy to evade international condemnation. On this account, Mnangagwa's appearances at events like Davos—while the security forces brutalize protestors in the streets—are little more than a diversionary tactic. Should this be true, Zimbabwe has simply replaced one wily autocrat with another.

The prospects for reform look little better if Mnangagwa is not in full control of the state. This would imply that Zimbabwe risks losing its civilian status, and is effectively becoming a military regime in disguise. The strongest evidence in favour of this argument is the number of divisions

41 Brian Raftopolos, 'Resurgent authoritarianism: The politics of the January 2019 violence in Zimbabwe', Solidarity Peace Trust, 20 February 2019, <<http://solidaritypeacetrust.org/download/report-files/Resurgent-Authoritarianism-The-Politics-of-the-January-2019-Violence-in-Zimbabwe.pdf>> (2 March 2019).

42 *The Guardian*, 'Zimbabwe: Activist pastor arrested for "inciting violence" video', 16 January 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2019/jan/16/zimbabwe-activist-pastor-evan-mawarire-arrested-for-inciting-violence-video>> (19 January 2019).

43 *Amnesty International*, "'Open for business", closed for dissent: Crackdown in Zimbabwe during the national stay-away 14–16 January 2019', 8 February 2019, <<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR4698242019ENGLISH.pdf>> (2 March 2019).

44 *The New York Times*, 'Britain deeply concerned at Zimbabwe unrest: summons ambassador', 18 January 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/01/17/world/africa/17reuters-zimbabwe-politics-britain.html>> (19 January 2019).

that exist at the heart of the government. The tension between Mnangagwa and Chiwenga is said to be rooted in the fact that the Vice President disapproves of Mnangagwa's courting of Western states, and is keen to take over the presidency sooner rather than later—raising the question of whether Mnangagwa is under pressure to stand down after one term in office. This reflects a broader tension between civilian and military figures, both within ZANU-PF and within the state itself. If Chiwenga is really the one calling the shots, the big story of the last year is not the 'military-assisted transition' against Mugabe, but the much slower and ongoing extension of military power behind the scenes. However, it is important to note that the security services also appear to be deeply internally divided, with factional divides existing within and between units of the police, intelligence services and military, and thus do not operate with a common objective in mind. In turn, this makes their behaviour hard to predict.

At the time of going to press, it is looking increasingly likely that there is actually an element of truth to both narratives—i.e. that Mnangagwa is playing 'good cop/bad cop' *and* lacks full control over the government. On the one hand, while the army has at times operated independently from civilian authorities, Mnangagwa has a complex relationship with the institution that allows him considerable leverage. It is now clear, for example, that despite initial rumours to the contrary, it was the president himself who ordered soldiers on to the streets of Harare in 2018 and not army leaders operating under their own steam.⁴⁵ This suggests that Mnangagwa is more powerful than he is sometimes depicted as being by those who see him as a frustrated reformer trapped in a restrictive system.

On the other hand, there is strong evidence to suggest that the divisions within the state and ruling party mean that the president must contend with a number of powerful veto players when making government policy.⁴⁶ While it is true that Mnangagwa has at times asserted his authority over military leaders, removing some of the vice president's allies from the cabinet, most notably Supa Mandiwanzira and Obert Mpofu, many believe that military pressure forced him to retain the services of former officers such as S.B. Moyo and Perence Shiri. Such persistent factionalism means that internal cohesion is likely to prove elusive, and further ruptures – including a move to depose Mnangagwa himself – cannot be ruled out.

45 *Eye Witness News*, 'Mnangagwa authorised deployment of soldiers, former minister tells inquiry', 28 November 2018, <<https://ewn.co.za/2018/11/28/mnangagwa-authorized-deployment-of-soldiers-former-zim-minister-tells-inquiry>> (19 January 2019).

46 For a discussion of veto players in the Zimbabwean context, see Nic Cheeseman and Miles Tendi, 'Power-sharing in comparative perspective: the dynamics of "unity government" in Kenya and Zimbabwe', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, 2 (2010), pp. 203–229.

Conclusion: the prospects for reform

Whichever interpretation of recent developments proves to be correct, the militarization of Zimbabwean politics is a major cause for concern. Although the creeping influence of the military within both the party and the state is not a new phenomenon,⁴⁷ the period since the 2017 coup appears to have seen the intensification of this process. In addition to increasing the risk of the kind of violent repression witnessed in January 2019, the greater control of military leaders over civilian processes has important implications for the economy. Perhaps most significantly, since his appointment as Vice President, Chiwenga and other military figures have become further enmeshed in key areas of economic activity, having already established a major role in agriculture, extractives and state-owned enterprises.⁴⁸ Military figures are unlikely to be willing to lose these benefits, which in turn undermines the prospect of democratic reforms that would weaken the administration's hold on power, and economic reforms that would introduce a genuinely competitive and open economy. As a result, challenging socio-economic reforms are likely to be a second-order priority, as Mnangagwa prioritizes building a stronger power base in preparation for his campaign for a second term in 2023.

The negative consequences of these constraints are becoming increasingly clear. From the point of view of early 2019, the currency crisis has deepened, businesses are closing, and fuel and commodities are in short supply. The government appears to have no coherent strategy to end the deepening economic decline, while the international community is increasingly unsure of how best to engage, and little investment has been forthcoming. In the absence of effective leadership and a new agenda, there is growing evidence that ZANU-PF is reverting to type. Recent attempts by senior government leaders to delegitimize popular protests as a devious plot devised by foreign powers and carried out by civil society groups recycle old tropes to such an extent that it might even have been humorous if they had not been accompanied by the arrest of prominent figures on trumped up charges of 'trying to topple Mnangagwa's government'.⁴⁹ Thus, despite Mugabe's departure, Zimbabwe's 'new dispensation' looks much like the old.

47 Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor, 'Introduction: Politics, patronage and violence in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 4 (2013), pp. 749–763.

48 Gordon Moyo, 'The curse of military commercialism in state enterprises and parastatals in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, 2 (2016), pp. 351–364.

49 *News24*, 'Zimbabwean activist Rashid Mahiya charged for trying to topple Mnangagwa's govt', 26 February 2019, <<https://www.news24.com/Africa/Zimbabwe/zimbabwean-activist-rashid-mahiya-charged-for-trying-to-topple-mnangagwas-govt-20190226>> (28 February 2019).