

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4791 | DECEMBER 1, 2017

The U.S. Should Not Support the New Zimbabwean Government Until It Proves Itself

Joshua Meservey

The Zimbabwe National Army recently ended the reign of one of Africa's worst rulers when it forced Robert Mugabe from the presidency. Mugabe's ouster roiled the system that has dominated the country since independence, and at least temporarily deepened the fractures within the ruling party, ZANU-PF. However, the man the military installed as the new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, is ruthless and corrupt, and the U.S. should not offer his government any support until it definitively proves, by democratically contesting its promised elections next year, its commitment to breaking from Mugabe's ruinous style of rule.

A Welcome End

The reign of Robert Mugabe, the ruler of the southern African country of Zimbabwe since 1980, ended on November 21, 2017. Mugabe's resignation came after the Zimbabwean military placed him, his wife Grace, and a number of leaders of the political faction associated with Grace under house arrest.

Mugabe's fall was the culmination of a years-long struggle within ZANU-PF over who would succeed the increasingly frail 93-year-old.¹ Mugabe appeared to favor his wife, Grace, whose path to power seemed clear after Mugabe fired the vice president and suc-

cession candidate, Emmerson Mnangagwa, in early November. This came after Grace led a defamation campaign against a previous vice president and challenger for the throne, Joice Mujuru, who Mugabe fired in December 2014.

The military was traditionally a source of support for Robert Mugabe, but Mnangagwa's firing broke a deteriorating relationship. The military distrusted Grace and the faction she led, Generation 40 (G40).² Mujuru and Mnangagwa were also independence war icons—an important source of legitimacy with the military. One of the military's first moves when it took power was to arrest several G40 leaders, claiming it was protecting Mugabe from "criminals around him."³

A Pox on All Their Houses

Mugabe and his wife's ouster sparked widespread joy in Zimbabwe. His reign was disastrous, plunging what was the breadbasket of southern Africa into economic ruin and oppression. His apparent preference for Grace to succeed him was part of his misrule. She was one of Mugabe's most avid supporters, and a ruthless operator in the byzantine struggle to succeed him.

The departure of such unfit rulers is cause for celebration. Yet the new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, is ruthless and corrupt, a key player in Mugabe's repression of his people. Mnangagwa oversaw the Gukurahundi massacre, during which Mugabe's North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade murdered or starved more than 20,000 Zimbabweans from 1983 to 1987. Mnangagwa also allegedly organized the bloody crackdown on the political opposition during the 2008 elections. In 2002, the U.N. named him as part of a network that looted \$5 billion

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4791>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

from state-owned mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴ The U.S. also sanctioned him in 2003 and reaffirmed the sanctions in 2005 for “undermining democratic processes or institutions.”⁵

The military’s seizure of power clearly reaffirmed the dominance of the system that enabled Mugabe’s rule. Mnangagwa is a long-time ZANU-PF stalwart, and now head of the party. Many of the corrupt ZANU-PF elites still hold senior government posts. The military, which has looted Zimbabwe for decades and committed serious human rights violations, proved its capacity and willingness to play kingmaker, and still controls significant parts of the Zimbabwean economy.⁶

The Uncertain Way Ahead

Nevertheless, Mnangagwa’s hold on power is not assured. He has the support of the military and the influential war veterans association, but the battle to replace Mugabe deepened the divides within ZANU-PF. Mujuru’s expulsion likely shrunk the party’s base as well, as some ZANU-PF supporters likely remain loyal to her. It is also unclear how the Mugabes’ constituencies will respond to the man who displaced them. Moreover, Mnangagwa is still infamous for his role in the Gukurahundi and other ZANU-PF atrocities.

Mnangagwa’s history suggests he will do anything to retain power. He will likely try to consolidate ZANU-PF support and reward the military’s and war

veterans’ faith in him, which will require reinvigorating the patronage networks that sustained Mugabe’s control. He will also probably bid for popular support by trying to resuscitate the devastated economy and granting some increased freedoms. The litmus test for the sincerity of Mnangagwa’s newfound enthusiasm for democracy is whether he chooses to prevail by democratic means at the election he has promised for next year, or to return to the old ZANU-PF tactics of rigging and repression to win.

A Historic Opportunity

To help the people of Zimbabwe take advantage of a historic opportunity, the U.S. should:

- **Refuse to provide support for the government, or lift any sanctions, until it makes concrete reforms.** Most of the major players in Zimbabwe’s succession drama, and many ZANU-PF leaders, are under U.S. sanctions.⁷ The U.S. should only lift them on a case-by-case basis if the government makes substantive reforms. The U.S. should also withhold diplomatic and financial support to the government, and should encourage other countries to do the same, until the Zimbabwean government proves it is charting a different course from the Mugabe era. Reforms could include setting and meeting a series of benchmarks for achieving free and fair elections; releasing politi-

1. Joshua Meservey, “An Approaching Transition in Zimbabwe Requires a U.S. Game Plan,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4606, September 1, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/africa/report/approaching-transition-zimbabwe-requires-us-game-plan>.

2. The Generation 40 is so named because it is comprised of a younger generation (around 40 years of age) than the traditional old guard of Zimbabwean politics. Much of the military’s distrust of G40 likely stems from the fact that G40 members are generally too young to have participated in the liberation struggle.

3. MacDonald Dzirutwe, “Zimbabwe Latest: Military Seizes Power to Stop ‘Criminals’ Taking Over as Robert Mugabe Held ‘for Own Safety,’” *Independent*, November 15, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/zimbabwe-latest-today-military-seize-power-robert-mugabe-held-criminals-corruption-coup-harare-a8055441.html> (accessed November 30, 2017).

4. U.N. Security Council, “Plundering of DR Congo Natural Resources: Final Report of the Panel of Experts,” S/2002/1146, October 15, 2002, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/plundering-dr-congo-natural-resources-final-report-panel-experts-s20021146> (accessed November 30, 2017).

5. In 2008, he escaped U.N. sanctions when China and Russia vetoed the proposed sanctions at the U.N. Security Council. For U.S. sanctions, see President George W. Bush, “Executive Order 13391—Blocking Property of Additional Persons Undermining Democratic Processes or Institutions in Zimbabwe,” November 25, 2005, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/13391.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2017). For proposed U.N. sanctions, see news release, “Security Council Fails to Adopt Sanctions Against Zimbabwe Leadership as Two Permanent Members Cast Negative Votes,” U.N. Security Council, July 11, 2008, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/sc9396.doc.htm> (accessed November 30, 2017).

6. Takudzwa Munyaka, “Zim Army Gets Down to Business,” *Mail & Guardian*, July 5, 2013, <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-07-05-00-army-gets-down-to-business> (accessed November 30, 2017); Global Witness, *An Inside Job: Zimbabwe: the State, the Security Forces, and a Decade of Disappearing Diamonds*, September 2017, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-diamonds/zimbabwe/inside-job/> (accessed November 30, 2017).

7. That includes Emmerson Mnangagwa and Constantino Chiwenga, the general who led the coup. See President Bush, “Executive Order 13391.”

cal prisoners; appointing, with real powers, opposition members to Mnangagwa's cabinet; and launching an effective anti-corruption campaign.

- **Support implementation of free and fair elections.** The international community sometimes too eagerly pushes for elections in the hopes they will solve deep political dysfunction, but elections free of ZANU-PF intimidation and brutality would be an important step in healing Zimbabwe. However, the U.S. must ensure that any support it lends to staging the elections does not benefit the government of Zimbabwe.
- **Encourage and assist countries harboring Mugabe's stolen wealth to return it to Zimbabweans.** It is unclear how much money Mugabe stole from Zimbabwe, but he owns properties worth tens of millions of dollars in Zimbabwe, Hong Kong, and England, and his family is notorious for its lavish spending.⁸ That money rightly belongs to Zimbabweans, and seizing it could also serve as a warning to other rulers plundering their country.

Difficult but Doable

Despite the challenges, Mugabe's fall is an important opportunity for freedom and reform. It introduced an element of uncertainty into the repressive system that controls Zimbabwe, and may empower the many Zimbabweans who for decades have struggled to free Zimbabwe. It may also serve to unify the frequently divided opposition that now has an unprecedented opportunity to assert itself. Zimbabwe has natural resource wealth, a well-educated population, and a feisty civil society that Mugabe was never able to crush. If Zimbabweans can take back control of their country, it may thrive again. The U.S. should do all it can to ensure that happens.

—*Joshua Meservey is the Senior Policy Analyst for Africa and the Middle East in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign and National Security Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

8. Antonio Cascais, "Zimbabwe Ex-President Robert Mugabe's Stolen Fortune," *Deutsche Welle*, November 23, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/zimbabwe-ex-president-robert-mugabes-stolen-fortune/a-41504122> (accessed November 30, 2017).