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A New Twilight in Zimbabwe?

THE MILITARY VS. DEMOCRACY

Charles Mangongera

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Just ahead of Zimbabwe's 2002 presidential election—the first in which a burgeoning opposition movement mounted a real challenge to long-ruling president Robert Mugabe of the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF)—liberation-war hero Vitalis Zvinvashe, then head of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF), proclaimed on national television that:

The security organizations will only stand in support of those political leaders that will pursue Zimbabwean values, traditions and beliefs for which thousands of lives were lost in the pursuit of Zimbabwe's hard-won independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and national interests. To this end, let it be known that the highest office in the land is a straitjacket whose occupant is expected to observe the objectives of the liberation struggle. We will therefore not accept, let alone support or salute, anyone with a different agenda that threatens the very existence of our sovereignty, our country and our people.¹

The next morning, the headline “Army Shoots Down Tsvangirai” appeared on the front page of the *Financial Gazette*, a leading Zimbabwean weekly. Although Zvinvashe had not mentioned Mugabe's rival, Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), there was no prize for guessing that the remarks had been aimed at him.

Opponents of the president, who had been in power since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, condemned the security agencies for meddling in political matters and called on the aging leader to rebuke them. Mugabe simply ignored these appeals. This episode

marked the beginning of the military's open interference in political affairs. As the president's authoritarian grip on the state has been gradually slipping in the face of growing opposition, the military has grown more and more involved in politics. Military elites have gained institutional vetoes and blocked the country's transition to democracy through the militarization of key state institutions and the use of state-sanctioned violence against Mugabe's challengers. In return, those military elites have been rewarded with lucrative government contracts, access to prime land, mining concessions, and other perquisites from the predatory state presided over by the Mugabe regime.²

In this essay, I use the term "military" broadly to refer to the entire state-security apparatus (soldiers, police, intelligence, and prison services) because senior military figures and war veterans have been deployed to head these strategic security institutions.³ The militarization of state institutions now extends beyond just the state-security agencies to other key institutions, including the judiciary, state-owned media, and the electoral commission. Military chiefs also head such state-owned enterprises as the National Oil Company of Zimbabwe, the Grain Marketing Board, the National Railways of Zimbabwe, and the Department of National Parks and Wildlife.⁴ Control of these institutions has presented opportunities for elite amassment of wealth and for voter manipulation: State-controlled oil procurement enables rent seeking; the control of grain is crucial for buying votes; and hunting concessions managed by the parks and wildlife authority have brought in hundreds of millions of dollars. Just as certain state institutions have become militarized, so has the ruling party fused with the state; in other words, "organs of the state—including the military and security services—are closely linked to the party without being officially integrated into it."⁵

Why has Zimbabwe's military taken such a prominent role in the country's politics and economy? To be fair, Zimbabwe is not a military dictatorship in the same mold as Burma or pre-1985 Brazil. Mugabe has betrayed his vulnerability to the security agencies on many occasions. But by granting them access to elite privileges, the president has managed to manipulate them into keeping political opposition at bay. Speculation by some observers that it is actually the military chiefs who are pulling Mugabe's strings is far-fetched, as the president still has objective civilian control of the state-security apparatus. Although the military elite has been allowed to brutalize citizens and plunder resources, it has done so at the behest of the civilian leadership of ZANU-PF, and this relationship is rooted in the history of the liberation struggle.

Years of widespread corruption, human-rights abuses, and bad governance resulted in mass disenchantment with the ruling class, which led

to the emergence in the late 1990s of an active opposition that openly challenged ZANU-PF. Prior to the formation of the MDC in 1999, Zimbabwe had been a de facto one-party state presided over by a strongman, with little prospect for a political alternative.

As growing domestic opposition and international isolation began to threaten the ruling party's hegemony, the president began depicting himself as a victim of a Western "regime-change agenda" meant to punish him for redistributing white-owned land. Likewise, the regime portrayed the West's alleged imposition of "sanctions"⁶ as an intrusion on Zimbabwe's sovereignty, thereby imbuing a siege mentality among some of the military elite. According to ZANU-PF's "end-of-history" mentality, shared by the upper echelons of the military, the party is entitled to stay in power forever due to its liberation credentials. To them, the attainment of independence in 1980 signaled the end of all struggles; any opposition is therefore deemed an attempt to reverse the gains of independence. According to this logic, the use of violence against political opponents—who are branded as "Western stooges"—is justifiable. As one general put it:

As soldiers, we will never be apologetic for supporting ZANU-PF because it is the only political party that has national interests at heart. . . . We cannot be seen supporting a political party that is going against the ideals of a nation, which came by as a result of a liberation struggle, which saw many of the country's sons and daughters losing their lives. As soldiers we must support ideologies that we subscribe to, I for one will not be apologetic for supporting ZANU-PF because I was part of the liberation struggle.⁷

Heightening this siege mentality was the belief by military and political authorities that an invasion of Zimbabwe was in the works. According to Blessing-Miles Tendi, after the abrupt withdrawal in 2002 of the British Military Advisory Team (BMAT) that had been providing technical assistance to the ZDF since 1980, military elites became genuinely afraid that the West was planning to invade Zimbabwe. Tendi cites the interception of a British diplomatic bag that was suspected to have been carrying weapons as evidence of this fear.⁸

Finally, an overwhelming fear of what would come should ZANU-PF lose power to the MDC has also driven military elites to subvert democratic processes. Some military officers were alleged perpetrators of the 1980s massacres in Matabeleland that left more than 20,000 ethnic Ndebeles (and supporters of Mugabe's rival Joshua Nkomo) dead. Zimbabweans suffered additional waves of targeted state-sponsored violence beginning in 2000 and reaching a pinnacle in the aftermath of the bitterly disputed 2008 election, which again pitted Mugabe against Tsvangirai. Military leaders are therefore concerned that without the protection of the ZANU-PF regime, they could be exposed to prosecution for human-rights abuses. The MDC leadership has even hinted

that it would push for the International Criminal Court to try security agents for human-rights violations committed since 2000.

The Plunder of Natural Resources

Zimbabwe's military elites have a well-established reputation for plundering natural resources at home and abroad. In 1998, the country's army began a costly intervention in the civil war that erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC; formerly Zaire) after the ouster of Mobutu Sese Seko in a military coup. Zimbabwe threw its military support behind the country's new president Laurent Kabila to help him consolidate his capture of the state and stave off his erstwhile allies, Rwanda and Uganda.⁹ Before a boy-soldier put a bullet in the former rebel leader's head in 2001, Kabila had built a predatory political empire in which natural resources such as oil, rubber, ivory, diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, and timber were traded for military support and political loyalty.

A clique of Zimbabwean military elites, dodgy businessmen, and senior party officials soon joined in the pillaging of what was perhaps Africa's richest country. ZANU-PF financiers such as Billy Rautenbach and John Bredenkamp, as well as long-serving government minister and presidential aspirant Emmerson Mnangagwa and others, engaged in mineral exploitation in the conflict-riddled country.¹⁰ Meanwhile, in addition to gold, diamond, and farming deals, Zimbabwe's military formed a joint-venture company with the Congolese government called Socebo, which was awarded lucrative logging concessions in the DRC's Katanga region.¹¹

Zimbabwe's own mineral-rich soil has not escaped the military's predatory reach. The massive Marange diamond fields were discovered in Chiadzwa in eastern Zimbabwe in 2006. Since then, the government has granted exclusive diamond-mining concessions to firms linked to military elites, and those firms have entered into joint ventures with Chinese companies. From the outset, however, there were problems with illegal mining, violence, bribery, and corruption. In 2008, when the government sent in soldiers to "clean up" the situation, the army and police unleashed dogs and bullets in an operation known as Chikorokoza Chapera (End of Illegal Mining), killing more than two-hundred miners, and afterward reportedly engaged in smuggling the gems.¹² As a result, Zimbabwe was suspended in 2009 from the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme (KPCS), which certifies diamonds as conflict-free, though KPCS controversially decided to allow Zimbabwe to resume exporting the precious gems just two years later. Human-rights campaigners pushing for the KPCS to prohibit the trade of Zimbabwean diamonds have become targets of harassment by state-security agents.

Revenues from illicit diamond sales have been channeled to strategic institutions such as the intelligence service, military, police, and ZANU-PF in order to prop up the Mugabe regime. The resulting leakages have

been staggering. In the first quarter of 2012, for example, the four main companies operating in Chiadzwa (Anjin, Mbada, Diamond Mining Corporation, and Marange Resources) remitted only US\$35.1 million to the treasury—a tiny fraction of the anticipated \$169 million. Without any real oversight mechanisms, transparency and accountability within the diamond-mining sector have remained elusive. When a 2012 parliamentary-committee report raised concerns about corruption and the lack of accountability in the sector, the committee chairperson was killed in a mysterious car crash a few weeks after the report went public. During the power-sharing period (2009–2013), when the MDC was brought into government alongside ZANU-PF, Tsvangirai, who was prime minister at the time, and other MDC ministers were barred from visiting the diamond fields. Moreover, details about a \$100 million loan from China for the construction of an elite military and intelligence training academy in Harare, to be financed with diamond revenues, remain secret.

The use of violence by the Mugabe regime against its political opponents has deep roots in Zimbabwean political culture. The national-liberation struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, which was filled with violence, intimidation, coercion, and assassinations, gave rise to a postcolonial regime that was equally disposed to violence. This became clear in the early 1980s, as ZANU-PF maneuvered to establish a single-party system. The two main liberation movements—ZANU, headed by Mugabe, and ZAPU, headed by Nkomo—separately contested the country's first postindependence elections in 1980. Although ZANU outperformed ZAPU at the polls, ZAPU nonetheless established a foothold in the Zimbabwean polity, and Mugabe feared that it would give him oppositional headaches. He quietly launched a war of attrition against ZAPU and subjected its leadership to arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and torture. The onslaught soon escalated into full-scale conflict in Matabeleland between 1982 and 1986, when Mugabe deployed the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade to wage the bloody campaign known as *Gukurahundi* (The Rain That Washes the Chaff Away).¹³

The regime has continued do its best to quash political opposition and dissenting voices. In 2000, after voters rejected a draft constitution that would have preserved Mugabe's power, the military waged a large-scale campaign of violence against perceived supporters of the opposition: Thousands were brutally attacked and tens of thousands more were internally displaced. The regime also unleashed violence on white farmers, confiscating their land ostensibly for redistribution to landless blacks. Mugabe also enacted several draconian laws to silence opponents and curtail citizen participation, resulting in the jailing of journalists and activists and the disbandment of opposition gatherings. In March 2007, police brutally suppressed a civil society-organized prayer meeting and severely assaulted opposition leaders, including Tsvangirai.¹⁴ Pictures of his bludgeoned head shocked the world.

Elections have also been marred by violence, as the military has deployed veterans of the liberation struggle and youth militia to coerce citizens to vote for Mugabe. In June 2008, “the military factor in the run-off election was so dominant and visible that to many critical observers, the military had covertly taken over and had become the arbiter of Zimbabwe’s fate.”¹⁵ In the 2013 elections, the military used subtle intimidation to “harvest” the fear of 2008 without having to torture, beat, or murder MDC activists. The party sent traditional leaders to “educate” citizens, who were ordered to “vote wisely,” meaning for Mugabe and ZANU-PF, lest the violence of 2008 return. Soldiers and policemen were also deployed to intimidate voters in rural areas under the pretext of assessing the food-security situation.¹⁶ ZANU-PF adherents also forced some MDC supporters into feigning illiteracy, “meaning ballots could be cast on their behalf by police and election officers.”¹⁷ Forcing citizens to vote against their will because they feared retribution was a form of intimidation. As a result, thousands of voters, including trained professionals such as teachers and nurses, were “assisted” in voting. The strategy paid off—Mugabe and his party swept all the rural districts and claimed a resounding victory in the election.

Usurping the State: Government by “Operations”

The Joint Operations Command (JOC), made up of the heads of the state-security agencies, has become a de facto policy-making body that has usurped the traditional role of the bureaucracy. The JOC has done so by arbitrarily launching so-called operations, such as Operation Chikorokoza Chapera noted above, to deal with purported threats to national security. In reality, these operations have been used to sideline professional bureaucrats, to create opportunities for rent seeking, and to silence regime opponents.

For example, in 2005, amid worsening economic conditions, Mugabe and the military became increasingly fearful of a citizen revolt—a fear that was heightened by the violence that had preceded the March 2005 parliamentary elections, particularly among the urbanites who formed the bedrock of MDC support. Thus the regime launched Operation Murambatsvina (Clean out the Filth) in May 2005, supposedly to raze “illegal structures.” Security agents went on a rampage, destroying homes in and around Harare and brutalizing anyone who resisted. Despite protests by humanitarian groups and the UN, the demolitions spread to other cities. At least 130,000 houses were destroyed, leaving more than half a million people homeless.¹⁸ As the economy continued to decline, the military launched more operations. When the nation faced mass starvation thanks to the chaotic land seizures that began in 2000, the regime launched the disastrous Operation Maguta (Feed the Nation), a Soviet-style agricultural plan in which the military took over farming operations supposedly to

boost productivity. Tons of fertilizer, seed, and chemicals provided by the state, as well as trucks full of prison laborers, were diverted to farms newly acquired by military elites, who had of course grabbed only prime land.

A critical shortage of foreign currency prompted Operation Mari Wakaiwanepi (Where Did You Get the Money?) in 2007. Security agencies seized businesses, homes, and cars, confiscating any foreign currency that they found. Impoverished citizens who were subsisting on remittances from the three-million-odd Zimbabweans who have fled the country lost sums totaling millions of dollars—money that never saw its way to state coffers. Operation Dzikisa Mutengo (Lower the Prices) was launched to curb hyperinflation, which reached 200-million percent at its peak in 2008. Businesses were forced to cut commodity prices in half, and security agencies raided shops to enforce the reductions. Security agents helped themselves to television sets, refrigerators, bread, meat, sugar, and other commodities that were in short supply. Thousands of businesses folded because they were unable to restock.

After Mugabe lost to Morgan Tsvangirai in the first round of the March 2008 presidential election, necessitating a runoff, the military launched Operation Makavhotera Papi (Who Did You Vote For?), a brutal campaign in which war veterans, youth militia, soldiers, state-intelligence operatives, and party activists punished suspected MDC voters. These henchmen murdered more than three-hundred people and assaulted thousands more, subjecting some to the “short-sleeve” treatment (severing the victim’s whole arm) and others to the “long-sleeve” treatment (chopping off the victim’s hands). Tens of thousands of homes were destroyed and hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans were internally displaced. Morgan Tsvangirai pulled out of the runoff, leaving Mugabe to claim that he had won more than 80 percent of the vote.

Undermining Reform

The election-related bloodshed and bedlam spurred the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to broker a power-sharing agreement between ZANU-PF and the MDC known as the Global Political Agreement (GPA). The resulting Government of National Unity (GNU) had the potential to deliver a democratic breakthrough, but it was severely undermined by military elites who feared that a level political playing field would favor Tsvangirai and the MDC. The people of Zimbabwe had high hopes that restrictive laws would be repealed so that they could freely participate in political, social, and economic life. To the disappointment of many, however, military elites used their power to stifle reform. From the beginning, military figures publicly voiced their disdain for the power-sharing government and called for fresh elections. The military’s obstinacy emboldened ZANU-PF officials and senior bureaucrats, who became recalcitrant and refused to cooperate with the

MDC in government. ZANU-PF ministers abstained from meetings that were chaired by Prime Minister Tsvangirai, and senior bureaucrats with links to ZANU-PF refused to implement policies that they considered inimical to their party's political survival. (For more on the GPA and the GNU, see the essay by Adrienne LeBas on pp. 52–66.)

Attempts to weaken the JOC's institutional veto power through a reconstitution of the National Security Council (NSC) were undermined by the generals' refusal to sit with the prime minister, who was a member of the NSC. The JOC continued to meet clandestinely to decide policy issues and continued to report to Mugabe without Tsvangirai's being present, even though under the GPA the two shared executive authority.¹⁹ Calls for security-sector reform were also dismissed as part of the West's "regime-change agenda." At the same time, the MDC abandoned its call for transitional justice, fearing that military elites who were implicated in past human-rights excesses would disrupt the GNU. In the end, a national-healing commission created by the GPA to deal with cases of human-rights violations failed to deliver justice to victims. Many known perpetrators of violence still roamed the villages, while vigilante groups continued to terrorize suburban residents.

Despite ZANU-PF bickering and resistance, a new constitution with an expanded bill of rights was eventually adopted, though it was not implemented before the July 2013 elections. Thus the conditions that had produced disputed electoral outcomes in previous elections remained unchanged. Democracy activists were shocked that the MDC agreed to participate in the elections despite the lack of meaningful reform and with institutions such as the judiciary, the media, and the electoral commission still dominated by figures with military ties.

Diamond mining threw a financial lifeline to a regime that was on the verge of collapse. At the time of the 2008 elections, the Mugabe regime could not financially sustain the election-rigging machinery. Since then, however, ZANU-PF has been able to rebound thanks to diamond revenues. By the time of the July 2013 elections, it had accumulated ten times the MDC's budget. Unconfirmed reports that were never refuted claimed that ZANU-PF had received close to \$100 million from the diamond-mining firms to fund its campaign. Part of that money was allegedly used to "secure" the buy-in of some African heads of state, whose endorsement of the election was desperately needed by the Mugabe regime. The MDC also claimed that Nikuv International Projects, a shadowy Israeli firm, was paid \$13 million to manipulate the voter register in Mugabe's favor.²⁰

Zimbabwe's economy is once again on the brink of collapse. Unemployment, which is already above 80 percent, will increase as more firms close due to problems caused by lack of access to credit. While SADC and the African Union endorsed Mugabe's 2013 "victory" at the polls, the European Union, the United States, and other Western governments refuse to recognize his government. Efforts by the new government to

marshal financial resources from international financial institutions and China have largely drawn blanks.

As the economy continues to crumble, Mugabe will face rising citizen dissatisfaction and restlessness. He is likely to respond with a heavy hand, and democratic space will be closed. The signs are there already. Mugabe has largely ignored the new constitution, implementing only provisions that do not reduce his power. He has packed the newly created institutions mandated by the constitution to provide checks and balances with his yes-men and has completely abandoned the reform agenda. Those who delivered victory to Mugabe are now reaping rewards for their efforts. Undoubtedly, military elites will demand a bigger slice of the national-resource pie.

To a large degree, political dynamics within ZANU-PF will shape the direction that Zimbabwe will take. The president is ninety years old, and there are signs that his health is failing. His departure will permanently alter Zimbabwean politics, but it will not necessarily provide an opportunity for a democratic breakthrough. That will depend on who succeeds him. Currently there are two ZANU-PF factions locked in a battle for control of the party. Ominously, both have their roots firmly in the military. Emmerson Mnangagwa has served as minister of justice, minister of defense, and minister of intelligence, among other positions. As noted above, he has a history of resource plunder according to a UN report on the DRC. Vice-President Joyce Mujuru is a decorated veteran of the liberation struggle who owes her political ascendancy to her late husband, General Solomon Mujuru, the first black postindependence commander of the defense forces. Whoever wins control of ZANU-PF will inherit a party beholden to the military.

But another scenario could still emerge—one in which the opposition bounces back and takes advantage of the economic collapse to defeat Mugabe. This would require a serious realignment of forces under a visionary leadership that could reunite democratic forces and build a strong grassroots movement. At the moment, however, the opposition is in disarray and is at risk of a major implosion. Civil society is weak, divided, and poorly resourced. If the democratic forces are able to regroup and build solid momentum for reform before the 2018 elections, there is a realistic chance that they could defeat Mugabe or his successor. The victor would then have to grapple with the arduous task of untangling the military's tentacles from Zimbabwean society.

NOTES

1. See Norma Kriger, "War Veterans: Continuities Between the Past and the Present," *African Studies Quarterly* 7, nos. 2 and 3 (2003), <http://asq.africa.ufl.edu/v7/v7i2a7.htm>.

2. Michael Bratton and Eldred Masunungure, "Zimbabwe's Long Agony," *Journal of Democracy* 19 (October 2008): 41–55.

3. Jocelyn Alexander, "Militarisation and State Institutions: 'Professionals' and 'Soldiers' Inside the Zimbabwe Prison Service," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, no. 4 (2013): 807–28.

4. Eldred Masunungure, *Defying the Winds of Change: Zimbabwe's 2008 Elections* (Harare: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2009).

5. Masunungure, *Defying the Winds of Change*.

6. In reality, there were no sanctions against Zimbabwe, as the West has imposed only an asset freeze and travel embargo on Mugabe and a handful of his henchmen.

7. Statement made by Major General Martin Chedondo in May 2012; see "Army Part of Politics: Chedondo," *Herald* (Harare), 8 May 2012, www.herald.co.zw/army-part-of-politics-chedondo.

8. Blessing-Miles Tendi, "Ideology, Civilian Authority, and the Zimbabwean Military," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, no. 4 (2013): 829–43.

9. Ingrid Samset, "Conflict of Interests or Interests in Conflict? Diamonds and War in the DRC," *Review of African Political Economy* 29 (September–December 2002): 463–80.

10. See Global Witness, "Same Old Story: A Background Study on the Natural Resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo," June 2004.

11. Justin Pearce, "Mugabe's Costly Congo Venture," *BBC News World Edition*, 25 July 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/611898.stm>; Global Witness, "Same Old Story," 37.

12. Human Rights Watch, "Zimbabwe: End Repression in Marange Diamond Fields," 26 June 2009, www.hrw.org/news/2009/06/26/zimbabwe-end-repression-marange-diamond-fields.

13. See Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and Legal Resources Foundation, "Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980–1988," April 1999, www.sokwanele.com/pdfs/BTS.pdf.

14. Under the Public Order and Security Act, political parties have to get police permission to hold meetings and any gathering of more than twelve people is considered an illegal gathering.

15. Masunungure, *Defying the Winds of Change*.

16. See Human Rights Watch, "The Elephant in the Room: Reforming Zimbabwe's Security Sector Ahead of Election," 5 June 2013, www.hrw.org/reports/2013/06/04/elephant-room.

17. AFP, "MDC Rejects SADC's 'Inaccurate' Report," *News24*, 5 September 2013, www.news24.com/Africa/Zimbabwe/MDC-rejects-SADCs-inaccurate-report-20130905.

18. See David Moore, "Coercion, Consent, Context: Operation Murambatsvina and ZANU(PF)'s Illusory Quest for Hegemony," in Maurice Vambe, ed., *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe* (Harare: Weaver, 2008), 25–39.

19. Derek Matyszak, "Zimbabwe's Security Sector—Who Calls the Shots?," Research and Advocacy Unit, Zimbabwe, October 2013.

20. See Bill Corcoran, "Zanu-PF Spent \$100M to Rig Landslide Election Victory, MDC Dossier Claims," *Irish Times*, 29 October 2013, www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/zanu-pf-spent-100m-to-rig-landslide-election-victory-mdc-dossier-claims-1.1575946.