

Zimbabwe Dared to Be Free, Then the Military Arrived

In the late afternoon of the [21st November 2017](#), Zimbabweans went ecstatic on the streets. The celebrations went global and stretched from the green lawns of the imposing Rainbow Towers in central Harare, through the dusty streets of urban ghettos and snaked through several capitals of the world. [Robert Gabriel Mugabe](#), three months shy of his 93rd birthday, had handed in his resignation to the Speaker of Parliament in a joint session of the House of Assembly and the Senate. Outside the joint seating that was considering an impeachment motion, citizens draped in the Zimbabwe flag danced, played drums and whistled. Cars blasted their horns and one longtime activist, Vimbai Musvaburi, shed tears in an [interview](#) with the BBC, saying, “It felt like a prison had been opened”. The 37-year rule of one of Africa’s authoritarian leaders was folded into history with military tanks, soldiers and army vehicles stationed across the country. It was no mean feat.

What has emerged since that “military-assisted transition” is a Zimbabwe that is now policed by the military. Democratic-constitutional institutions have been subverted and the rule of law has been shredded. The dominant political class has become a network of very powerful military elites, or what can be referred to as military-nationalists.

In the early 1980s, when he was Prime Minister, Mugabe had attempted to build a socialist one-party state. In the late 1980s, he brutalised the opposition and swallowed it through the Unity Agreement of 1989. Zimbabwe became a de jure one-party state. In the 1990s, the labour movement protested against increasing levels of taxation. When civil society mobilised for constitutional reform, Mugabe simply subverted the process. In the 2000s, the major opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was subjected to heinous brutality, with Mugabe boasting that “we have degrees in violence”. The elections were brazenly rigged and this culminated in the Government of National Unity (GNU) from 2008 till 2013. In that fateful month of November 2017, the “Ides of March” finally knocked on the Blue Mansion of the ageing president and the system finally burst

open and turned its brutal fangs on its “Godfather”.

Exit Robert Gabriel Mugabe, enter the military-nationalists

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In post-colonial independent Zimbabwe, the military-nationalists operated behind the political throne under a shadowy state-security structure called the Joint Operation Command (JOC) comprising the military, intelligence services, police and the prison services. In the 2000s, especially since the violent election of 2008, the military assumed a much more political role. This came to a head when they marched onto the streets and forced Mugabe out. With the threads of state power in their hands, the military-nationalists have become the final arbiters of political and electoral contests. In that matrix of state and national political power, the general election of 2018 was just a fig leaf over a very patent fact – the new sheriff in Harare is a military junta with swanky imported suits.

New rhetoric and old Mugabe-like tactics

The new president has fanned out his strategies, jumping onto Facebook and Twitter, giving more interviews and also paying lobbyists in Washington DC to do the regime’s bidding. After his first inauguration, President Emmerson Mnangagwa wrote in the [*New York Times*](#), that:

I am working toward building a new Zimbabwe: a country with a thriving and open economy, jobs for its youth, opportunities for investors, and democracy and equal rights for all... There are voices both at home and abroad who have sought to convince the world that nothing has changed in Zimbabwe. I refute those unfair and unfounded claims and commit that we are bringing about a new era of transparency, openness and commitment to the rule of law.

Many months later, in another opinion article in [The Guardian](#), Mnangagwa stated that “the role of opposition leader is critical to democracy’s function” and that “the incoming administration will be weaker if not held to the checks and balances that parliament provides”.

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However, as Zimbabwe’s political economy continues its downward descent, the narrative has shifted back to the Mugabe years type of blame-shifting and brinkmanship. The “new rulers” have been very quick to jump into a worldwide public relations exercise that has come at a heavy price to the truth and to the public purse. The propaganda has also been Pan-African in its reach; the government has dispatched envoys to the African Union (AU), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), and strategic countries like Kenya, South Africa and Botswana, arguing that Zimbabwe’s economic crisis has been as a result of sanctions, especially those imposed by the US.



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was a nationwide ruthless military crackdown. The army was accused of rape, opposition activists were abducted and rights groups, such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), recorded 17 deaths from gunshot wounds. The Internet was shut down and, in a leaked document, the government blamed “hostile intelligence services”, “regime change agents”, and “unfriendly civil society organisations”. The ruling class has simply re-dusted the old script of seeing local and international enemies all around.

The president boasted at a political rally in the local language, Shona, saying, “*tirikuvazvambura*” and “*vari kuzvamburika*”, meaning “we are beating them up brutally” and they “cannot resist that brutality”. Not less than five opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) have been arraigned before the courts for “subversion”, “inciting violence” and “treason”. To sum up the type of military-state/party machinery that the ruling strata is building, we have to turn to that theoretician and practitioner of the African revolution, Frantz Fanon, in his seminal book, [*The Wretched of The Earth*](#), where he put it more succinctly:

There exists inside the new regime, however, an inequality in the acquisition of wealth and in monopolization. Some have a double source of income and demonstrate that they are specialized in opportunism. Privileges multiply and corruption triumphs, while morality declines. Today the vultures are too numerous and too voracious in proportion to the lean spoils of the national wealth. (1963:171).

Taken together then, this deliberate rhetoric of a “new dispensation”, “open for democracy”, “second republic”, on the one hand, and a deliberate crackdown on the opposition, restricting the democratic space and subverting the institutions established by the Constitution of 2013, on the other, are designed to keep the military-nationalists in charge of the party and the state machinery, and by implication, to maintain their hold on Zimbabwe’s national treasury and natural resources.

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Zimbabwe's melting political economy: The ambers underneath

To get a sense of how Zimbabwe has fallen from glory, one has to look at the historic Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita figures over time compared to Kenya. At the end of 1970s, Kenya's GDP was estimated at US\$2.9 billion, with a population of about 14 million and Zimbabwe's GDP was US\$3.5 billion with a population of 7 million. Fast forward to 2017 and Kenya's GDP now stands at almost US\$75 billion and Zimbabwe's GDP stands at a mere US\$17 billion. In Harare, one can contrast sewage flowing openly in the ghettos and the sprawling green lawns and well-paved streets in North Harare, which is full of Beverley Hills-type mansions. Over the past 40 years, Zimbabwe's export industries have been decimated, infrastructure has decayed, agricultural production has collapsed and there have not been any major capital projects to revive the economy. State-owned companies, in railways, transport like airlines, agriculture, mining and the list goes on, have been systematically looted. The political economy collapse has resulted in mass emigration of both skilled and unskilled labour and a severe social crisis of poverty

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inflicted.

Austerity for citizens and a Thatcherite largesse for the elites

The Minister of Finance, in the latest budget statement, proposed what he called “*Austerity for Prosperity*”. He argued that Zimbabwe “needs pain” before the economy becomes productive, just like a patient who needs surgery. The Treasury chief has introduced a 2 per cent tax, has increased fuel prices by almost 150 per cent, is trying to liberalise the foreign currency market, has introduced a local “virtual” currency called RTGS dollars, has hiked custom excise duty and has demanded that all car imports be paid for in foreign currency. The dramatic effect has been to feed inflation upwards, erode income for workers, and scare away investors. The prices of basic commodities have spiraled out of control and all major trade unions have already engaged in some strike action or are in the process of organising one. Here are the words of the Treasury chief:

The only way to a stronger economy is to restructure, rebuild and reform. This plan involves some painful measures to get our national budget under control. These measures will be felt by all of us, but are unavoidable if we want to get our economy back on track. These measures are those of a doctor performing a life-saving operation. They cause pain, but the pain is the only thing that will lead to a recovery. As Margret Thatcher once said, “Yes, the medicine is harsh, but the patient requires it in order to live. (Speech by Professor Mthuli Ncube)

The 2 per cent tax has been bringing in over \$100 million a month. Stretched to a year, that is a whopping \$1.2billion extracted from financial transactions with no relationship to the productive capacity of the economy. The political economy meltdown has been compounded by a drought that has led the United Nations to issue a special food appeal:

Nearly 5.3 million people in Zimbabwe are estimated to be in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection during the 2018/2019 lean season (October - April) and beyond. ...In addition, 1.5 million people in urban areas, including major towns and secondary cities, are estimated to be facing severe food insecurity, while people in multiple locations across the country are faced with acute shortages of essential medicines. ([UN Office for the Coordination](#)

[of Humanitarian Affairs](#), February, 2019)

This is against loud sloganeering statements that Zimbabwe's "command agriculture" system run by a former air marshall has been a success. The Minister of Finance had to admit that Zimbabwe's chaotic land reform programme resulted in land becoming a "dead asset" and this is despite the government setting up a National Land Commission that has remained largely moribund as a matter of design because the military-nationalists continue parceling to each other, for free, the country's most productive land.

We need to understand the character of the political economy emerging in the post-Mugabe era in order to grasp how the state machinery is being fashioned. Firstly, the military-nationalists are now in charge of the ruling party machinery. There is a preponderance of retired army personnel in the running of the party, including the electoral campaign of July 2018, which was run by the retired Major-General Engelbert Rugeje.

Crony capitalism, the military class and state authoritarianism

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Secondly, the cabinet is dominated by ex-military generals who executed the coup of November 2017, including the Vice-President (General Chiwenga), the Minister of Agriculture (Air Marshall Perence Shiri), and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (General Sibusiso Moyo). The president announced the retirement of four generals who played a critical role in the coup but they were immediately deployed to diplomatic postings.

Thirdly, the military elites have been deployed to the criminal justice system, including no less than 100 "special prosecutors", which the Supreme Court declared as unconstitutional.

Fourthly, the military elites have also become discreet silent partners in enterprises that do business with the state. They have entered into agreements with foreign corporates and have access to mining concessions, thus effectively becoming a state-backed surrogate business class of the buccaneer type.

The business interests of the military class stretch back to the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a UN investigation unearthed the plundering of natural resources. In the report, *“The Expert Panel Reports on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth in the Democratic Republic of Congo”*, the findings of the investigation were presented. This report was presented to the UN Security Council. Here is an excerpt:

The key strategist for the Zimbabwean branch of the elite network is the Speaker of the Parliament and former National Security Minister, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa. Mr Mnangagwa has won strong support from senior military and intelligence officers for an aggressive policy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo...Other prominent Zimbabwean members of the network include Brigadier General Sibusiso Busi Moyo, who is Director General of COSLEG. Brigadier Moyo advised both Tremalt and Oryx Natural Resources, which represented covert Zimbabwean military financial interests in negotiations with State mining companies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Air Commodore Mike Tichafa Karakadzai is Deputy Secretary of COSLEG, directing policy and procurement. He played a key role in arranging the Tremalt cobalt and copper deal. Colonel Simpson Sikhulile Nyathi is Director of defence policy for COSLEG. The Minister of Defence and former Security Minister, Sidney Sekeramayi, coordinates with the military leadership and is a shareholder in COSLEG. (United Nations, S/2002/1146)

Having learnt these tactics and with the war in the DRC cooling off, the same military network turned its eyes to Zimbabwe’s economy. The military, police, intelligence and political players muscled into lucrative farming land, rich diamond fields and gold concessions. (Chinese companies often have military representatives on their boards.) Jabusile Shumba summed up how Zimbabwe’s military class has spread its tentacles in the country’s political economy in his book, *Zimbabwe’s Predatory State: Party, Military and Business* (UKZN Press, 2018).

The business interests of this predatory class are highly speculative and very non-

industrial, meaning that the structure of the post-colonial economy has continued to rely on raw exports (like tobacco) and on exploiting natural resources (like minerals). Effectively, there is no skill development or technological transfer.

Secondly, this form of crony-capitalism is ecologically destructive. In Zimbabwe there have been heated debates as Chinese mining companies have been eyeing vast swathes of land, including nature reserves. In some cases, they use ecologically-destructive mining methods and zero land rehabilitation after mining is done.

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Thirdly, Chinese state-related corporates are entering into agreements that are loading the public with huge debt, especially in energy and other infrastructure projects. The loan collateral, interest payment and conditions are always shrouded in secrecy and the return on investment is dubious, if not extortionist. And as a matter of common practice, these deals are not open to public scrutiny and accountability.

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Constitutionalism and the Pan-African liberation promise

Looked at broadly, Zimbabwe’s recurring crisis can be viewed as the collapse of the Pan-African project of national liberation. At the core of that crisis is the non-fulfilment of Africa’s very agonising de-colonisation project in which state power and its institutions were supposed to be fashioned to serve the goal of social and economic emancipation and not the accumulation projects of a limited elite.

Military-nationalists in Zimbabwe, authoritarian leaders and politico-dynasties (in Kenya, for example) are making peaceful electoral political change almost impossible. This is dangerous because Africa’s population is growing younger and their exclusion from the political economy is breeding an explosive concoction of youthful disenchantment. The rise of Julius Malema in South Africa, Bobby Wine

in Uganda and the popularity of Nelson Chamisa in Zimbabwe point to this disconnect between those with political and economic power, who are usually older, and the younger citizens who feel excluded, almost like non-citizens.

The Kenyan political analyst Nanjala Nyabola has brilliantly exposed this disconnect in a book called *Digital Democracy: Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya*. Her analysis can be generally extended to the rest of Africa, including Zimbabwe. We Africans need to be brutally honest with ourselves. As the de-colonisation leader Amilcar Cabral said, "Claim no easy victories and tell no lies." In the wake of the military crackdown, Fadzai Mahere, a young advocate, activist and political [contestant summed it up well](#):

The wounds afflicting injured survivors may one day heal. But our politics will remain toxic as long as the military is at the centre of it. Any dialogue about the future must involve concerted, concrete plans to demilitarize Zimbabwean politics. Only then can the promise of a new Zimbabwe truly blossom. (The Guardian, 26.01.2019).

The post-colonial trajectory of coercion, corruption and a development impasse can only begin to be settled, not only through the implementation of the Constitution of 2013 and respect for democratic institutions, but most importantly through a genuine process of national peace-building and de-polarising of state-social relations. This means a return to the Pan-African liberation project of transformation based on building political economies that place people at the centre and disciplines state power when it becomes recalcitrant and captured by a few.