



Members of parliament celebrate 21 November 2017 after President Robert Mugabe's resignation in Harare, Zimbabwe. Mugabe was swept from power as his thirty-seven-year reign of brutality and autocratic control crumbled within days of a military takeover. The bombshell news was delivered by the parliament speaker to a special joint session of the assembly that had convened to impeach Mugabe, who had dominated every aspect of Zimbabwean public life since the country's independence in 1980. (Photo by Jekesai Njikizana, Agence France-Presse)

# Zimbabwe's Coup

## Net Gain or No Gain?

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Retired  
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**T**he scene in downtown Harare, Zimbabwe, on 21 November 2017 was extraordinary. Thousands walked through the streets, cheering, waving Zimbabwean flags, greeting soldiers

as heroes, and taking selfies with military personnel in armored vehicles. Exuberance, not fear, ruled the streets of Harare. Members of parliament, including those from the ruling party, Zimbabwe African

National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), ululated and danced in the aisles.

Robert Mugabe's resignation had just been announced by the speaker of parliament, ending a week of fear and uncertainty.<sup>1</sup> Zimbabwe exploded in jubilation in the belief that the long national nightmare of poor governance, corruption, and economic mismanagement was finally ending. Three days later, the coup (and it was a coup) was sanctified when the High Court of Zimbabwe ruled that the military's actions were "constitutionally permissible and lawful."<sup>2</sup>

In the background, almost drowned out by the cheering of most Zimbabweans, were words of caution. Former minister of education and human rights lawyer David Coltart warned, "In all of our euphoria we must never become so intoxicated as to forget that it was the same generals who allowed Mugabe to come to power in 2008 and 2013."<sup>3</sup> And, "Once any change of power in any nation comes through a means other than the strict fulfillment of the constitution, in letter and spirit, a dangerous precedent is set, which is hard to reverse."<sup>4</sup> Lawyer and political analyst Alex Magaisa wrote that the Zimbabwean Supreme Court's decision on the coup amounted to "effectively legalizing military intervention in the affairs of government."<sup>5</sup>

So, why were most Zimbabweans so pleased to see Robert Mugabe and his wife Grace pushed from power? And why was it not a good thing that Zimbabwe's military forced Mugabe's resignation? Let's look at how Zimbabwe got to November 2017 and what has happened in over a year since then.

## War and Independence

Robert Mugabe dedicated his life to ending racist minority rule in Zimbabwe. He joined the ZANU party in 1960, was imprisoned by the Rhodesian government in 1964 for his political activities, and fled to Mozambique in 1974. By the late-1970s, it was becoming evident that majority rule would eventually come to Rhodesia, but it was not clear whether Mugabe or his rival revolutionary leader, Joshua Nkomo of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), would emerge as the national leader. Ambassador Johnnie Carson, then the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Mozambique, was the first official American to meet with Mugabe. He and the late Congressman Stephen Solarz met Mugabe and two of his chief lieutenants at a deserted airstrip in Quelimane,

Mozambique, in July 1976 and left that meeting convinced that Mugabe would prevail as Zimbabwe's eventual leader. "He was ruthless and surrounded himself with people who would kill for him," Carson said later.<sup>6</sup>

As Rhodesia transformed into Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in 1979, and into independent, majority-ruled Zimbabwe in 1980, Ambassador Carson's prediction proved accurate. Mugabe became prime minister in 1980, then president in 1987. Whatever title he bore, Mugabe was clearly the man in charge.

Mugabe's speech at Zimbabwe's independence in April 1980 focused on peace and reconciliation.<sup>7</sup> It drew sighs of relief from white Zimbabweans and the West. Mugabe was eloquent, highly educated, and seemed eminently reasonable. He was the very model of a modern African leader—a technocrat and the antithesis of corrupt, venal leaders such as Congo's Mobutu Sese Seko. The West swooned.

## Troubled Rule, Economic Disaster

Viewed in hindsight, however, all was not well. Mugabe's control of the media coupled with global attention moving on to other hot spots in the mid-1980s obscured the trouble in Zimbabwe. Ethno-political tension between Mugabe's Shona-dominated ZANU on one side

and Joshua Nkomo's Ndebele-focused ZAPU on the other devolved into a conflict that killed as many as twenty thousand

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“Zimbabwe, once the largest exporter of agricultural products in southern Africa, could no longer meet its own food requirement. ‘From breadbasket to basket case’ became the standard descriptor of the country.”

people in the mid-1980s. Most of the casualties were Ndebele civilians in southwestern Zimbabwe, and most of the violence was at the hands of a brigade of Shona-majority Zimbabwean troops trained by North Korea.

Those who threatened Mugabe’s power, people like ZANU guerilla commander Josiah Tongogara, retired Army Chief of Staff Solomon Mujuru, former Vice President Joice Mujuru, and others found themselves demoted or the victims of suspicious accidents. (Tongogara died in a car accident in 1979, Solomon Mujuru died in a fire in 2011, and Joice Mujuru was dismissed from the vice presidency in 2014.) Carson’s assessment of Mugabe’s ruthlessness and the willingness of his associates to kill on his behalf was accurate.

By the late-1990s, Mugabe’s mismanagement of the economy and his poor relations with international financial institutions (IFIs) and donor nations had significantly weakened Zimbabwe. Declining standards of living and life expectancy (lower in 2000 than in 1980) and growing out-migration of skilled workers were outward signs of Zimbabwe’s decline.<sup>8</sup> As the formal economy and the living conditions of the middle and working classes declined, Mugabe built a system of political patronage and tolerated corruption and rent-seeking activities among

his supporters. In 1998, Mugabe sent the military to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to support the government of Laurent Kabila. This exercise cost Zimbabwean taxpayers about \$1 million per day, but

made rich men of the politically connected senior Zimbabwean military officers who were given contracts and concessions for mining, agriculture, and transportation.<sup>9</sup> In 2000, angered that white commercial farmers were providing funding to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party, Mugabe unleashed his supporters against the farmers and gave significant land to military, judges, government ministers, and other political supporters. His so-called “fast-track” land reform program amounted to payoffs to political supporters and a return to subsistence agriculture for the working class. Zimbabwe, once the largest exporter of agricultural products in

southern Africa, could no longer meet its own food requirement. “From breadbasket to basket case” became the standard descriptor of the country.<sup>10</sup>

## The Military Develops Corporate and Political Power

In 1997, Mugabe revived a Rhodesian-era institution, the Joint Operations Command (JOC). The JOC was nominally created to manage overall national



Joice Mujuru speaks 9 December 2012 at the Horasis Global Arab Business Meeting in Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates. Mujuru was the vice president of Zimbabwe from 2004 to 2014. (Photo by Richter Frank-Jurgen via Wikimedia Commons)



Then president of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe and his wife, Grace Mugabe, on 4 August 2013. (Photo by DandjkRoberts via Wikimedia Commons)

security and included the defense minister; the chiefs of the army and air force, national police, and prisons; and the director of national intelligence. Created to ensure coordination among the security services, the JOC became the de facto guarantor of Mugabe and ZANU's continued rule. The JOC developed strategies to influence elections in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, and 2013, and it directed the military's work to intimidate voters, produce loyal or "correct" votes, and manage Election Day intelligence and official reporting of results.

The 2008 election was particularly violent. Tens of thousands of people were displaced, and more than two hundred people were killed by political violence. Even with this level of intimidation, and electoral results that were withheld for four weeks, Mugabe failed to capture a majority and was forced into a runoff against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Credible reporting at the time held that Mugabe wanted to concede the election (which Tsvangirai almost certainly won in the first round) but that the JOC, securocrats, and beneficiaries of Mugabe's patronage system refused to allow his concession.

Some observers of Zimbabwe believe these events were a de facto coup, and that by mid-2008, Mugabe

was captive to the corrupt, nondemocratic system he had built over the previous thirty years. The second round of the 2008 elections proceeded with such pro-ruling party violence that the opposition withdrew to prevent a bloodbath. The 2008 elections were so grossly flawed and the results so questionable that South Africa and other countries stepped in to force Mugabe into a nominal power-sharing agreement with the opposition. Although Mugabe and his party retained control of the security services, opposition leader Tsvangirai became prime minister, several ministries went to the opposition, and Zimbabwe enjoyed three years of relative peace and economic progress.

In 2013 and 2018, the JOC coordinated more sophisticated means of fixing elections, including manipulating voter registration and the voters' rolls. These measures were so successful in the 2013 election that people were elected on the ruling party ticket who did



not even know they were running for office. Even die-hard ZANU-PF supporters were stunned by the 61–35 margin of their party’s victory.

In 2008, alluvial diamonds were discovered in eastern Zimbabwe, and the military moved in to “secure” this newly discovered asset.<sup>11</sup> Senior military commanders offered partnerships to Chinese mining companies and enjoyed enormous personal profit. Seven years later, even Mugabe was asking why the nation had not seen any benefits from the diamond mining operations. He needed

only to look at the hotel-sized mansions his generals were building in Harare’s posh neighborhoods to begin to understand where the money had gone.

## Grace Mugabe and the Fracturing Ruling Party

Many of those mansion builders were comrades in arms from Zimbabwe’s war of independence. They, their families, and their business cronies were not eager to give up power or wealth. They were especially





disinclined to share power with those they derisively called “the salad eaters,” younger Zimbabweans who had not been involved in the liberation war and had grown up in the cities eating at fancy restaurants. Younger members of the ruling party—some technocrats and some opportunists—began to challenge the old guard. This group of younger government officials and business people aligned itself with Grace Mugabe and became known as the “Group of 40 Year Olds,” or “G40.”

Grace Mugabe was widely reviled in Zimbabwe for her venality and predilection for extravagant shopping trips. In 2003, when food insecurity brought on by a combination of “land reform” and drought threatened millions of Zimbabweans, Grace was accused of spending \$120,000 on shoes and jewelry in a single shopping trip to Paris. She was also a prime beneficiary of her husband’s “fast-track” land reform program and seized farms, businesses, and real estate for her personal benefit. Zimbabweans began calling her “Gucci Grace” and “Dis-Grace.” The University of Zimbabwe awarded her a doctoral degree three months after she entered the program, an act of such blatant disregard for educational standards that the university’s vice chancellor was later arrested for it.

As Mugabe’s age (ninety-three in 2017) caught up with him and his grip on power and his senses began to decline, the rivalry between the old guard and the Grace Mugabe/G40 faction intensified. In 2014, Grace Mugabe emerged as a serious political player, attacking then Vice President Joice Mujuru in public speeches, using vulgar language and expressions that shocked many Zimbabweans. At the same time, Grace’s role as nurse and caretaker for her increasingly frail husband was growing. Mugabe was becoming more prone to falling asleep in public, mumbling and stumbling, and needing more frequent trips to Singapore and Dubai for medical attention. The old guard’s nightmare scenario was one in which Grace’s power grew in direct proportion to Mugabe’s failing health, as she became the sole gatekeeper and conveyor of his wishes, taking his political legacy and power for her own. The intraparty fissures between the G40 and the old guard intensified and threatened those who thought they had earned the right to rule and profit from Zimbabwe because of their service in the war for independence. Mugabe fired Mujuru in December 2014, accusing her of “factionalism.”



People cheer a passing Zimbabwe Defense Force military vehicle 18 November 2017 during a demonstration demanding the resignation of President Robert Mugabe in Harare. Zimbabwe was set for more political turmoil with protests planned as veterans of the independence war, activists, and ruling party leaders called publicly for Mugabe to be forced from office. (Photo by Belal Khaled/NurPhoto/Sipa USA via AP Images)

Typical of the political balancing act Mugabe had choreographed for years, he then appointed his long-time aide, Emmerson Mnangagwa, to succeed Mujuru as vice president. As long as neither the G40 nor the old guard had too much power and the factions balanced each other out, Mugabe was safe. He was also trapped, though, in the finely balanced, no-clear-successor, political structure he had built.

## Triggering the Coup

In early November 2017, Mugabe hinted that he might name his wife as vice president. This strengthened the G40's hopes of taking power and threatened the old guard and the military. The ruling party's youth league called for Mugabe to dismiss Mnangagwa, and Grace joined in the chorus. Provincial ruling-party committees began to pass resolutions calling for Grace to be made vice president.

On 6 November, Mugabe dismissed Emmerson Mnangagwa as vice president, and Mnangagwa fled to Mozambique fearing for his safety. On 12 November, then commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces Gen. Constantino Chiwenga returned from an official trip to China. The G40, working with Zimbabwe Republic Police commander Augustine Chihuri, planned to arrest Chiwenga upon his arrival at the airport in Harare. Chiwenga, however, was tipped off, and soldiers disguised as baggage handlers overpowered the police and prevented Chiwenga's arrest. On 13 November, Chiwenga released a statement warning that the "purging" of ZANU-PF officials must stop.<sup>12</sup> In

response, a party spokesman accused Chiwenga of "treasonable actions."<sup>13</sup> That was it.

On 14 November, there were reports of unusual movement of military vehicles on the northwestern approaches to Harare. That night, military forces took control of state television and radio and placed Robert and Grace Mugabe under house arrest at their residence. Security forces arrested or pursued a number of G40-aligned government officials. Some gunfire was heard in the city, and a few G40 officials sought refuge or went into hiding.

On 15 November, Maj. Gen. Sibusiso Moyo spoke to the people of Zimbabwe via state television and radio. He denied that there had been a coup and said that the military was "only targeting criminals around [Mugabe] who are committing crimes ... that are causing social and economic suffering in the country." Moyo sought to reassure the country that Mugabe

and his family were "safe and sound." Moyo went on to say, "As soon as we have accomplished our mission, we expect that the situation will return to normalcy."<sup>14</sup>

Over the next six days, Zimbabweans lived in suspense, as negotiations took place among the military, Robert Mugabe, and South African facilitators. On 17 November, Mugabe was allowed out of his home to preside over a graduation ceremony at a local university. On 18 November, thousands of Zimbabweans took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations calling for Mugabe's resignation. On 19 November, ZANU-PF dismissed Mugabe as its leader, but he was



President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa, on 15 January 2019. Mnangagwa assumed the office of president in November 2017 after the resignation of Robert Mugabe. (Photo courtesy of [kremlin.ru](https://www.kremlin.ru) via Wikimedia Commons)

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allowed to deliver a televised speech in which he was expected to announce his resignation as president of Zimbabwe. Much to the obvious consternation of the military officers sitting with him during the speech, he did not resign.<sup>15</sup> On 20 November, the Zimbabwean parliament voted to begin impeachment proceedings against Mugabe on charges of “allowing his wife to usurp constitutional power.”<sup>16</sup> On 21 November, as impeachment proceedings were underway and with the prospect of a Gaddhafi-like demise becoming more real, Mugabe formally resigned. When the speaker of the parliament read Mugabe’s resignation letter to parliament, members of both the opposition and ruling parties began to cheer, ululate, and dance.

Emmerson Mnangagwa returned to Zimbabwe on 22 November and was sworn in as president on 24 November. In his inaugural address and in the months that followed, Mnangagwa proffered a welcome change of rhetoric from his predecessor. He acknowledged the mistakes of previous economic and land reform programs and pledged to correct them. He spoke of his determination to fight corruption, create jobs, and improve relations with the IFIs and the West. Zimbabwean business people believed Mnangagwa was pragmatic about business and investment, and he would make good economic decisions. Civil society and media leaders perceived a greater tolerance for criticism of the government than had been the case under Mugabe. In the first weeks of the “new dispensation,” as Zimbabwean politicians called the Mnangagwa government, things were looking up.

As Mnangagwa assembled his cabinet, there was hope he would reach across the aisle and appoint some members of the opposition. That did not happen. Instead, Mnangagwa’s cabinet was heavy on career military officers who traded in their epaulets for pinstripes, confirming for all that this was nothing less than a coup.

Chiwenga, who on 13 November had warned against purging ZANU-PF officials, became one of Mnangagwa’s two vice presidents and remained head of the Joint Operations Command. Lt. Gen. Moyo, who had taken to

the airwaves on 15 November to reassure Zimbabweans that no coup was underway, became minister of foreign affairs and international trade. Air Marshal Perence Shiri, former commander of the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade, became minister of lands, agriculture and rural resettlement. Lt. Gen. Engelbert Rugeje became the national political commissar for the ruling ZANU-PF party.

Each of these career military officers nominally retired before assuming their new civilian positions, but their presence in such senior positions gives rise to serious questions about who is really in charge in Zimbabwe. More than once, Chiwenga has appeared to contradict or ignore a statement or policy position from Mnangagwa. Two months before the 2018 election, the deputy minister of finance said what everyone was thinking, that there was no way the military would allow the opposition to win. Terrence Mukupe said to supporters, “How can we say, honestly, the soldiers took the country, practically snatched it from Mugabe, to come and hand it over to [opposition leader] Chamisa?”<sup>17</sup>

Still, the general impression among common Zimbabweans was that Mnangagwa brought improvement, and more importantly, Mugabe was out. The opposition was allowed to campaign in rural areas that had been off limits to them for years. People were less fearful of speaking critically of the government in public places. International media, long denied visas to report from Zimbabwe, were able to operate openly and file stories. Incidents of political violence declined. Mnangagwa invited international observers from Europe and the United States to observe the 2018 elections, and his government appeared interested in seeking to re-join the Commonwealth. Perhaps most important to ordinary Zimbabweans, the predatory actions of the Zimbabwean police—seeking bribes at road checkpoints every few kilometers—stopped.

Inside government, no one spoke of a coup. Rather, the events of November 2017 were called a “military assisted transition.” Outside of government, it was called a coup or, with Zimbabwe’s typically



wry sense of humor, the “coup that wasn’t a coup” or the “not-a-coup coup.” It was, of course, a coup, albeit one that had been informally endorsed by a jubilant public, officially endorsed by Zimbabwe’s High Court, and tacitly endorsed by neighboring states, the Africa Union, and all of the nations that sent election observers to the July 2018 elections, including the United States.

printing of ballots—a sensitive topic in Zimbabwe—was undertaken in secrecy, and the final ballot did not adhere to Zimbabwe’s own standards. While the opposition did have more freedom to campaign than they had in previous elections, their access to state media was limited in violation of Zimbabwe’s electoral law. The military steadfastly declined to state publicly that they would respect the outcome of the election, even if the opposition



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## 2018 Elections Fall Short

What President Mnangagwa and Zimbabwe needed to fully quell the coup/no coup debate, or show that a coup could be a good thing, was a peaceful, transparent, and credible election. Only through such an election—scheduled for 31 July 2018—could Mnangagwa’s government be certified as legitimate. That legitimacy was needed to restore confidence in Zimbabwe; resolve differences with former allies such as the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States; rebuild relations with the IFIs; and attract new investment. While Mnangagwa’s rhetoric on issues such as land reform, human rights, rule of law, improving the business climate, and reducing corruption was all positive, there was little actual action behind the words. Some Zimbabweans argued that Mnangagwa was still beholden to the military leaders who put him in power and could not afford to undertake serious reforms until he had an electoral mandate. So, a credible election was vital not just to Zimbabwe’s relations with the international community but for Mnangagwa’s hold on power as well.

It became clear to most observers in the months leading up to the election that the process was unlikely to deliver the credibility and legitimacy the government needed. Registration of voters appeared skewed to the advantage of traditional ZANU-PF supporters in rural areas and against young urban voters more likely to support the opposition. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) did not appear to be independent of the government and declined to be any more transparent than strictly demanded by the law. Procurement and

won. Given the Zimbabwean military command’s history of saying they would never salute an opposition government, and their role in political violence in previous elections, their refusal to state that they would accept the will of the people had a chilling effect on the process.

July 31, Election Day, was orderly and peaceful. On 1 August, the ZEC released preliminary results indicating that ZANU-PF had won a majority of seats in parliament. Opposition supporters protested what they believed was a rigged outcome and clashed with military forces in downtown Harare. Six protesters were killed in the confrontation. (In November 2018, a government-appointed commission of inquiry completed its investigation of the 1 August conflict and submitted its report to Mnangagwa. As of 5 December, the report had not been made public.) On 3 August, the ZEC declared Emmerson Mnangagwa the winner with 50.8 percent of the vote to opposition leader Nelson Chamisa’s 44.3 percent. These results are in line with public opinion research conducted by Afrobarometer in June and July 2018, so they may well be a legitimate result. Unfortunately, Zimbabwe’s history of rigged and violent electoral processes, the ZEC’s lack of transparency, the government’s inability to follow its own electoral laws, and the military’s unwillingness to pledge support for the people’s will left the 2018 election short of the credibility needed to rehabilitate the government’s legitimacy. The process was an improvement over 2013, and a great improvement over 2008 and 2002, but enough questions remained to undermine confidence in government.



Zimbabweans celebrate 18 November 2017 after President Robert Mugabe resigned in Harare, Zimbabwe. (Photo by Philimon Bulawayo, Reuters)

## The New Dispensation

If Zimbabwe proves true to form, the country will settle into an uneasy political peace as common Zimbabweans struggle to make ends meet in a continually declining economy. Mnangagwa will remain president for at least five years. The ruling party has already announced that Mnangagwa will be their candidate in 2023, so he could be president through 2028, at which point he will be eighty-six years old.

While Mugabe has left the political scene, he and Grace continue to live in peace in Zimbabwe, much as his predecessor Ian Smith did for more than twenty years after majority rule came in 1980. But other than a different president, Zimbabwe has not changed much. As the events January 2019 have shown—the grossly disproportionate use of police and military force to stop protests and looting—Zimbabwe's government/ruling party remains willing to do whatever it takes to remain in power. Credible reporting by independent media and NGOs indicate twelve to eighteen citizens killed, scores wounded, and hundreds arrested in a three-week long government crackdown against protestors and members

of the MDC opposition party. Most disturbingly, there are credible reports of security forces raping women to suppress protests.<sup>18</sup> Tragically, this government/ruling party use of violence against its own citizens looks just like what the Mugabe-led government/ruling party did in the mid-1980s and the early 2000s.

While there has been some new openness in political dialogue and more freedom for dissent, the state still controls radio and television, and it shut down the internet for several days during the January 2019 protests. While the government's talking points on fundamental issues such as rule of law, debt, and international cooperation are more rational, measurable reform is elusive. Shona-speaking political, business, and military elite continue to call the shots and live in luxury while the middle class emigrates and the poor suffer on. The government's economic managers continue to look for short-term responses to systemic problems, print fake money, and extract hard



currency from any place they can find it. The military remains the strongest, most capable institution in the country, and the High Court's blessing of the November 2017 coup keeps the threat of another coup alive. The executive branch of government has subordinated the judiciary and completely overshadows the parliament. Bankable title to agricultural land remains only a promise, so there is no collateral for new investment that could revive commercial agriculture and Zimbabwe's economy. Mining continues to generate some export earnings, but disputes with Chinese and Russian mining companies have hurt those ventures, and Western companies see more secure opportunities in neighboring countries. Much of the popular gratitude for the military's removal of Mugabe evaporated on 1 August 2018 when soldiers shot and killed six protesters.<sup>19</sup> Public support for Mnangagwa and hope for reform is being trampled out of existence by the brutal actions of security forces in January 2019. Hopes that the coup of November 2017 opened a new beginning for Zimbabwe have proven false.

## Are All Coups Bad?

According to data collected by University of Kentucky political scientists Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, there were about 450 coups worldwide between 1950 and 2010.<sup>20</sup> Most, like Zimbabwe's, effected little change in a country's underlying problems of poor governance, corruption, weak rule of law, and bad economic policy. The authors found that "coups promote democratization, particularly among states that are least likely to democratize otherwise."<sup>21</sup> However, looking at a list of current African leaders who have come to power via a coup, it is hard to see much promotion of democracy. That list includes Obiang in Equatorial Guinea, Museveni in Uganda, Guelleh in Djibouti, Sassou Nguesso in the Republic of Congo, Abdel Aziz in Mauritania, Bashir in Sudan, and Deby in Chad. It's not easy to see the democratizing impulse in any of these leaders.

Still, law professor Ozan Varol, author of *The Democratic Coup d'État*, argues that a military coup can sometimes establish a democracy. Varol lays out the following criteria for judging whether a coup is "democratic":

1. the coup is staged against an authoritarian or totalitarian regime,
2. the military responds to persistent popular opposition against that regime,

3. the authoritarian or totalitarian regime refuses to step down in response to the popular uprising,
4. the coup is staged by a military that is highly respected within the nation, ordinarily because of mandatory conscription,
5. the military stages the coup to overthrow the authoritarian or totalitarian regime,
6. the military facilitates free and fair elections within a short span of time, and
7. the coup ends with the transfer of power to democratically elected leaders.<sup>22</sup>

Varol acknowledges that the vast majority of military coups are undemocratic in nature, and evaluated by his criteria, Zimbabwe's November 2017 coup is one of that majority.

Exceptions may illustrate the rule. Portugal's 1974 coup, Turkey's coup in 1960 and, perhaps, Ghana's coup in 1979 each seem to have led to stronger democracies. Ghana's was an incremental process, and Turkey is backsliding today, but Portugal remains an example of a coup that delivered democracy. However, three positive examples out of more than 450 coups or attempted coups is poor evidence of the efficacy of coups in advancing democratic governance.

As in Zimbabwe, coups generally leave the judiciary alone in exchange for some sort of court ruling that legitimizes the military's undemocratic action. And therein lies the greatest problem for coups. Once the courts legitimize a coup—an unconstitutional transfer of power—the bar is set lower and it sets a precedent for future coups. The one thing that coups seem to do consistently is increase the likelihood of subsequent coups.

If Zimbabwe's parliament had acted to impeach Robert Mugabe on their own accord, rather than waiting for the military to act first, Zimbabwe's chances for lasting, fundamental reform would be better than they are today. The immediate result, a Mnangagwa presidency, would likely have been the same. But, the parliament would be seen as a more potent branch of government, the judiciary would be less compromised, and the military could maintain the facade of being apolitical. These factors would have contributed to Zimbabwean and international confidence in the country's commitment to the rule of law and democratic process. The climb back to respectability would have been a little less steep, and the odds of another nondemocratic transfer of power a little less likely.

Zimbabweans remain a remarkable people, capable of finding solutions to problems that would overwhelm

others, and they deserve the chance to overcome their current challenges. Until recent unrest in response to the rise in petroleum prices and high inflation, most Zimbabweans still hoped for reform of the country's governance and economic systems, and some were still willing to give Emmerson Mnangagwa time to show that he is the reformer he has promised to be. However, recent splits within ZANU-PF and clear lack of control of the military by Mnangagwa, who responded to demonstrations with the live-fire killings of at least twelve and injuring of hundreds, including sixty-eight people wounded by gunfire, show

that the marriage of convenience between Mnangagwa and the military is unraveling. Signs that Mnangagwa and his government understood the expectations their citizens have of them were optimistic at best. Early euphoria has translated to high levels of frustration by a disaffected and marginalized youth population affected by high unemployment, shortages of major staples, and scarcity of foreign currency. Hopes that Zimbabwe, through Mnangagwa, would be one of those rare examples of a military coup that restores democracy are slowly and methodically being dashed by a military not willing to allow change. ■

## Notes

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