



Standoff in Zimbabwe as Struggle to Succeed Mugabe Deepens

President Robert Mugabe plunged Zimbabwe into political crisis by firing his long-time ally and enforcer Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa on 6 November 2017. In this Q&A prior to an apparent army coup in Mnangagwa's favour on 14-15 November, Crisis Group's Senior Southern Africa Consultant Piers Pigou gives the background to the struggle to succeed the 93-year-old president.

This Q&A on the background to Zimbabwe's political crisis of November 2017 was published just before an apparent army coup on the night of 14-15 November.

What's behind the new political crisis in Zimbabwe?

The crisis began on 6 November when President Mugabe fired Emmerson Mnangagwa and expelled him from the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. This was not unexpected. The powerful vice president had become a serious rival and threat to the physically weakened but still astute Mugabe.

Since Vice President Joice Mujuru's unceremonious removal from office in late 2014, there has been a debilitating factional battle within ZANU-PF over who would succeed the aging president. It pitted Mnangagwa and his supporters against a group of powerful senior and vocal party members – dubbed the “G40”. They rallied around First Lady Grace Mugabe and by mid-2016 it was evident Mugabe tacitly favoured his wife's associates, who dominated ZANU-PF's Youth and Women's Leagues.

During this period, veterans of the liberation war, a key pillar of Mugabe's support, broke ranks and fell behind Mnangagwa. However, Mnangagwa was unable to embrace them, fearful this would be used against him as further evidence of disloyalty. Instead, he distanced himself from those who supported and promoted him, which made him look weak and indecisive.

His eventual fall played out in awkward slow motion, with the pendulum of his political fortunes swinging back and forth as analysts feverishly speculated whether or not his ambitions to succeed the president would be thwarted. Some expected Mnangagwa's removal to play out at the party's extraordinary congress in December. There is speculation that Mugabe acted ahead of this out of fear that his health might rapidly deteriorate.

Where does the army and security sector stand on Mnangagwa's firing?

Mnangagwa's support within the security sector, which is crucial to ZANU-PF's continued rule, supposedly made him too big to fall. Evidently, this was not the case. But his removal has lifted the lid on growing discontent.

A public statement on 13 November by the commander of the defence forces, General Constantine Chiwenga, sent an unambiguous warning that internal dynamics in ZANU-PF, including counter-revolutionary infiltration into the party and hostile attitudes toward the security sector from certain politicians, was destabilising Zimbabwe and generating

insecurity. Without mentioning Mnangagwa, Chiwenga called for an end to the unfolding purge of party elements with a liberation history, warning that if the integrity of Zimbabwe's revolution was threatened, the army would intervene. Although couched in defence of the Zimbabwe's commander in chief, President Mugabe, Chiwenga implicitly was pointing his finger at him, the first lady and certain G40 elements.

This unprecedented public intervention has sharpened tensions within both ZANU-PF and the security forces. How Mugabe responds to this will be critical if further tensions are to be avoided. He has allowed senior officers to make political statements before, but generally when these were about the opposition. On several occasions in the last two years, he publicly has expressed displeasure at their intervention in internal party affairs. Chiwenga's statement goes beyond previous interventions, and Mugabe will have to employ all his guile if he intends to ensure continued accommodation with the armed forces

What does Mnangagwa's dismissal mean for Zimbabwe's mutating political landscape?

Mnangagwa's networks within the party and state administration insulated him to some extent from Mugabe's machinations and the clear intent of the first lady to bring him down. By mid-2017, it was clear that the G40 was in fact Mugabe's own project (albeit one he may not have full control over), employed along with his wife as a foil to contain Mnangagwa's ambitions. As the noose tightened, the crude choreography of accusations against him crescendoed into a series of public humiliations, during which he was accused of disloyalty, deceit and tribalism. It all pointed to his inevitable removal. Yet, inexplicably, he hung on, seemingly without a coherent plan and unable to convincingly push back.

G40 acolytes in the provinces have drawn up a list of Mnangagwa allies they want purged. This includes long-time State Security Minister

Kembo Mohadi and recently fired Finance Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who has been the public face of re-engagement with international financial institutions. Some may be expelled from the ZANU-PF, but most will be enmeshed in internal disciplinary processes that will significantly frustrate any possible organised pushback from within ZANU-PF's provincial structures. A purge of senior civil servants perceived as aligned to Mnangagwa also is expected.

President Mugabe turns 94 in February and remains the party's presidential candidate for the 2018 election. What kind of succession is he planning and will he support the elevation of his wife, Grace Mugabe, to the vice presidency?

Having removed his major rival, Mugabe can now stage-manage his own succession, which likely will occur only after he dies in office. ZANU-PF's extraordinary congress, scheduled 12 to 17 December, will see a reconfiguration and possible expansion of ZANU-PF's presidium to include three vice presidents (also known as 2nd secretary), most likely the incumbent, Vice President Phelekezela Mphoko, Grace Mugabe and Defence Minister Sydney Sekeremayi. The latter has been enthusiastically promoted over the last few months by Grace and the G40 as the man Mugabe trusts most. But, like everyone else, Sekeremayi is a mere appointee and serves at the president's pleasure. He does not have his own power base, and in late 2014 he had to be rescued by Mugabe after being caught in the cross-hairs of the anti-Mujuru purge.

ZANU-PF's Women and Youth Leagues, now supported by Vice President Mphoko, have called on Mugabe to appoint Grace as vice president. She is undoubtedly ambitious and may well have her sights on the top job. Mugabe, the final arbiter, has supported his wife's controversial foray into the political battlefield, where she has been effectively promoting his political interests. But he is aware that she is not popular and that such a blatant dynastic move may

well galvanise the fragmented opposition, as well as disgruntled elements within ZANU-PF. Her elevation to first vice president would also not guarantee that she take over once Mugabe dies. Indeed, her political cachet is likely to be significantly diminished when her husband is no longer in office.

Can Mnangagwa stage a comeback?

When the axe fell last week, Mnangagwa fled to Mozambique, fearing for his own safety. This was an irony not lost on those who welcome the downfall of a man nicknamed the Crocodile, with a reputation for brutality and once regarded as untouchable. His first public push-back, a statement from an unknown location, attacked the first family for treating ZANU-PF as their personal property and promising he would be back to take control of the situation within a matter of weeks.

Mnangagwa's options are certainly now more constrained. It is unclear whether he will attempt to undermine ZANU-PF's election preparations or if he has the capacity to do so. There is also the question of how he should relate to the opposition and especially its principal leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, who heads the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T), with whom he has been accused of secretly conspiring. To join the opposition would be used as further "evidence" of his alleged complicity, and may well further divide the opposition, many of whom want nothing to do with a man accused of an array of gross human rights violations and of having sought to disrupt the opposition. But to strike out on his own (as Mujuru did when she formed her National People's Party) likely would have him heading only a small and marginal party in a fragmented political landscape.

What does this development mean in terms of improving Zimbabwe's prospects for re-engagement with international creditors, reform and recovery?

There is widespread uncertainty regarding what will happen next. Tsvangirai, whose own

health problems have fed speculation that he may not be able to lead the major opposition coalition, the MDC Alliance, in national elections expected in April 2018, has rightly warned that the political environment is dangerously unstable.

Economic conditions have visibly deteriorated over the last two months. The volume of physical money circulating in both the formal and informal economy has contracted sharply. Inflationary pressures exacerbated by this liquidity crisis have driven up the cost of living, leading to a crash in the purchasing power of salaries paid into bank accounts. At the same time, the government is continuing along a dangerous path of deficit financing, with the new Finance Minister Ignatius Chombo announcing the budget deficit will climb to \$1.82 billion this year (the total budget is \$5.6 billion). The government has no plan beyond the limited option of domestic borrowing, which has skyrocketed since 2013. Zimbabwe is once again heading back into hyperinflationary territory.

Mnangagwa was held out by many as the best hope within ZANU-PF for piloting an economic recovery predicated on re-engagement with international creditors and a package of reform that would instil a measure of much needed confidence. Yet evidence that he would or could deliver on this front is not persuasive.

Those now in the ascendancy within ZANU-PF in any event are unlikely to explore these options, especially before the elections. They have demonstrated no intention of doing so. In theory, Mnangagwa could lay out the re-engagement, reform and recovery plan that he apparently was unable to deliver because he was constrained by internal ZANU-PF factionalism. That said, if he does not come up with a coherent strategy that moves beyond efforts to clawback power within ZANU-PF, few will be convinced that he has the vision to pilot such a comeback, let alone confront the bigger challenge of a national recovery plan.