



## Zimbabwe's Very Peculiar Coup

*Zimbabwe's military has detained the country's 93-year-old President Robert Mugabe and his wife, Grace Mugabe, and taken control of the streets of the capital and the main television station. The next step – apparently, a legitimate-looking transfer of power to someone of the army's choosing – may prove less easy.*

### **The Zimbabwe Defense Forces have taken control of the country. What exactly happened?**

The crisis burst into the open on 6 November when President Mugabe fired Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa and expelled him from the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. Mnangagwa has been aligned with the military and Zimbabwe's National Liberation War Veterans Association, and had been in a fierce struggle for power in the race to succeed the country's 93-year-old leader. His principal opponent was Grace Mugabe, the president's wife, who heads a rival faction of ZANU-PF veterans known as the G40, leads the women's wing and is popular among young party activists.

The army then unambiguously stepped in. A statement on 13 November by the commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, General Constantino Chiwenga, called for an end to the unfolding purge of party elements that took part in Zimbabwe's fifteen-year war of liberation from white rule, and warned that the army would intervene against any threat to the integrity of the revolution that led to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. Almost 24 hours later,

the party's spokesperson, Ambassador SK Moyo, accused Chiwenga of treasonous utterances and overstepping his mandate. Then, in the early November, troops took control of the government's media headquarters and other important buildings.

The military urged the sixteen million Zimbabweans to "limit unnecessary movement" and have called for calm among key components of the state, the judiciary, parliamentarians, the security sector, churches, youth formations, traditional leaders and other political actors. Military vehicles were parked on the streets, but on the morning of 15 November this did not discourage Zimbabweans from going about their lives almost as normal. Incidents of violence appear to have been minimal, with few reports of gunfire and some of beatings. There is no evidence of overt division within the security sector.

An effective news blackout from the state media has however made people reliant on international and social media, and speculation is rife. A great variety of sentiments are being expressed, from relief and excitement that Mugabe's long reign may be finally over, to a profound nervousness that what follows could be even worse.

### **Does the military action spell the end of Robert Mugabe's 37 years in power?**

Mugabe appears to have lost power, but not his position as president, at least in the first two days after the military move. At 01:26 in the early hours of Wednesday 15 November, an army spokesman delivered a written statement on national television and radio claiming the

military had taken action, “targeting criminals around [President Mugabe] who are committing crimes and are causing social and economic suffering in the country to bring them to justice”. The statement said the president and his family were safe and that “as soon as we have accomplished our mission, we expect the country to return to normalcy”.

South African President Jacob Zuma confirmed Mugabe is “confined to his home”, as is apparently his wife, Grace. But Mugabe’s personal position remains unclear on many fronts.

### **Does the military’s action constitute a coup d’état?**

This is a very peculiar kind of coup. Effectively there has been a military takeover, but the army has not declared martial law, the suspension of the constitution, or the deposition of the country’s head of state. The military and those such as War Veterans who supported a robust pushback following Vice President Mnangagwa’s dismissal have been at pains to argue that they are not pushing for a coup. Outside powers are also at pains not to use the word “coup” in relation to current events.

Yet General Chiwenga’s statement on 13 November had the hallmarks of threatening to seize power. He said that unless Mugabe took appropriate steps there would be a military intervention, albeit to address an apparent security threat perceived in both the ruling party and the country at large. The situation, he argued, warranted action and was in line with the military’s previous interventions in internal ZANU-PF disputes, enacted to ensure the ruling party and its revolutionary objectives were not hijacked. It would appear that Mugabe was either unable or refused to take the steps being demanded, setting in motion Chiwenga’s promised action.

The military’s televised broadcast maintained that “we wish to make it abundantly clear that this is not a military takeover of government. What the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) is doing is to pacify a degenerating political, social and economic situation in our country which if not addressed may result in violent conflict”. The statement urged important arms of government and social constituencies to remain focused and calm.

There may well be sympathy for the military’s intervention from several domestic and regional quarters, but it sets dangerous anti-democratic precedent with major implications for Zimbabwe and beyond. How much longer can this overt military intervention avoid being labelled a coup d’état? While the army’s intentions may be couched in constitutional language, the democratic credentials of those pursuing this course of action are also in doubt. Just as importantly, will the military, in conjunction with ZANU-PF and the government, be able to cobble together a plausible veneer of legality around this intervention? Will the opposition and civil society take a clear stance on this? Will President Mugabe, whose controversial election in 2013 was widely accepted, be willing and able to put his imprimatur on any new suggested plan of action?

### **What has been the regional reaction?**

The African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) rightly condemn unconstitutional takeovers of power as a red line not to be crossed. At the time of going to press, neither the AU nor SADC have expressly condemned the Zimbabwe military’s intervention or described it as a coup. There have been growing frustrations with how Mugabe has been mishandling internal factional dynamics, the economy and the unresolved

*“There may well be sympathy for the military’s intervention from several domestic and regional quarters, but it sets dangerous anti-democratic precedent with major implications for Zimbabwe and beyond.”*

issues of his own succession, exacerbated by the destabilising antics of the first lady.

The SADC chairman, Jacob Zuma, despatched two special envoys to Zimbabwe's capital Harare, his defence minister, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, and the new and little experienced state security minister, Advocate Bongani Bongo. From there, the envoys are expected to travel to Angola to brief President João Lourenço who is chairperson of SADC's Organ for Politics, Defence and Security. Zuma confirmed he had been in touch with Mugabe and with the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, which are well-regarded in the region. Zuma called for "calm and restraint" and for the ZDF "to ensure peace and stability are not undermined". He made no mention of a coup d'état.

Speaking on Tuesday, South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) Secretary General Gwede Mantashe made it clear that the ANC doesn't want to get involved in the rift. "ZANU-PF must deal with the issue because Zimbabwe is not our colony. It's not our province, it's our neighbour. If things go wrong there, of course, we'll be concerned because it'll impact on us, but we have no authority over them, that's the point we're making".

### **Where are Zimbabwe's domestic politics heading? What kind of transitional government might be possible?**

When Mugabe fired Vice President Mnangagwa on 6 November, it was thought that Grace Mugabe had prevailed in the eventual struggle to succeed her husband. But the army's reaction appears to have ended the chances of her taking over.

The army has now detained senior members of Grace Mugabe's G40 faction of party veterans, including Party Commissar Saviour Kasukuwere, Finance Minister Ignatius Chombo, and Patrick Zhuwao, Mugabe's nephew and minister of public services, labour and social welfare. Some social media is reporting Higher Education Minister Jonathan Moyo has also been arrested; others claim he also

*"The most likely person to benefit from recent events is Mnangagwa."*

sought refuge with Mugabe. Others reportedly taken in include the ZANU-PF youth league chairperson, Kudzai Chipanga; images of his beaten visage have been circulating on social media. Unconfirmed reports claim the commissioner of police, Augustine Chihuri has also been detained. It remains to be seen who else constitutes the alleged "criminals and counter-revolutionaries" referred to by the military and whether they will now be subjected to due process, criminal investigation and prosecution.

36 hours after the announcement on state media, there had still been no public statement from the government or from any key political players. A statement from opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, who is on his way back to Harare this evening, is keenly awaited.

The most likely person to benefit from recent events is Mnangagwa. Some ZANU-PF party structures have already reversed their former support for Mnangagwa's expulsion. He was in the past held out by many as the best hope within ZANU-PF for piloting a pragmatic economic recovery predicated on re-engagement with international creditors and a package of reform that would instil a measure of much needed confidence. He now has a chance to show that he can deliver on this promise.

If Mugabe steps down from office, Mnangagwa could be sworn in as interim leader. Tsvangirai has not indicated what line he will take, but he has made political deals before. It may be we are in for a staggered transitional process that features a staged public show of Mugabe «overseeing» the process, which would allow the new powers in the land to introduce credibly some kind of interim government. Some wish to bring forward parliamentary elections currently scheduled for mid-2018, but with guarantees that the political space will be opened up. Others are pushing for a longer

transition, even up to two to three years, in the hope that this period can be used to level the political playing field and to build some foundation for economic recovery.

But even if Mnangagwa wins formal control of ZANU-PF at the scheduled ZANU-PF Extraordinary Congress in December, it is unclear whether he can cobble together a transitional unity government that can turn around the moribund economy and end the political crisis. Mnangagwa may explore options for an executive that incorporates opposition elements and those more recently estranged from

ZANU-PF, such as Joice Mujuru. This would probably mean postponing the 2018 elections, which many believe would in any case be unable to provide a legitimising platform for reform and recovery in the current political context. Such a proposition would require broad based buy-in, not only from opposition elements, but civil society more broadly. Their endorsement and participation in charting a new national vision is essential, if this interregnum is to generate a credible set of options designed to enhance and rebuild Zimbabwe's democratic credibility.