

Overcoming a Dark Past, Is Zimbabwe Ready for a Brighter Future?

by Giuliano Maciocchi

On 30 July 2018, Zimbabwe will hold crucial general elections, the first since the country's dictatorial leader, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, was deposed in a bloodless coup in late 2017.

The importance of the election cannot be overstated: Zimbabweans, patient as they have been during Mugabe's 37 years in power, are today looking to build a better future for themselves, their children and their nation.

An aura of excitement can be felt throughout Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, a city that has experienced much hardship over the past decades, and certainly since I first moved there in 1991. Today, the city is looking to this electoral appointment with a mixture of trepidation and hope, and the whole nation is holding its breath as the vote fast approaches.

Mugabe's misdeeds are well known. What is less known, thanks to a

complacent media and a historically appeasing Great Britain,¹ is that since becoming prime minister in 1980, Mugabe never won another democratic election. Yet, he has remained in power ever since, becoming president of Zimbabwe in 1987 while ruthlessly governing the country for close to four decades. Sure, Mugabe has called and campaigned in many elections since the 1980s, yet his "victories" were all but secured through a systematic suppression of the media and widespread intimidation and killings.²

¹ During a 2002 debate in the UK House of Commons on the topic of sanctions on Zimbabwe, Conservative MP Julian Lewis compared the UK Government's treatment of Mugabe, which he described as the leader of a "racist and fascistic regime", with Britain's appeasement of Hitler during the 1930s. See, "UK Backs Zimbabwe Sanctions", in *CNN World*, 23 January 2002, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/africa/01/23/zimbabwe.press/index.html>.

² Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Zimbabwe. Events of 2008", in *World Report 2009*, January 2009, p. 141-147, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2009/country-chapters/zimbabwe>.

Giuliano Maciocchi has worked as Manager and Head of Corporate Support Services for private and international organizations, including the UN, in many countries. He now divides his time between Rome, Italy and Harare, Zimbabwe.

Mugabe's initial approach was cautious. He moved to moderate his Marxist rhetoric and worked to expand the healthcare and education sectors while labouring for a sort of détente with the West to keep international aid flowing.

Eventually, by late 1999, widespread corruption led international actors, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to suspend all financial support to the country.³ With his finances under strain, Mugabe called a referendum on a draft constitution that would have given him sweeping powers, including the right to confiscate white-owned land in the country without compensation. Held on 12-13 February 2000, the proposals were rejected by a 54.7 per cent majority, forcing Mugabe to accept defeat.⁴

The vote became a watershed moment in the history of Zimbabwe, leading to some of the worst abuses of the Mugabe regime. Fearful and humiliated, Mugabe began to realize that his grip on power was slipping away. He thus resolved to protect himself.

To keep the army and his inner circle loyal, Mugabe resorted to all kinds of schemes.⁵ Some examples included sending the army into the Democratic Republic of Congo to loot under the

pretence of helping its president, Joseph Kabila, during the Second Congo War, or encouraging "war veterans" (mostly unemployed youth) to carry out land invasions and the violent seizure of "white" (second and third generation Zimbabweans) owned farms.⁶

Destroying the agriculture sector, the country's backbone,⁷ marked the beginning of the end.⁸ Inflation skyrocketed; basic foodstuff became unavailable, living standards collapsed and the rate of unemployed or underemployed people rose to more than 80 per cent by 2005.⁹

The 2008 elections, rigged as they were, resulted in a loss for Mugabe's

³ Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), *Impact of Sanctions Against Zimbabwe*, October 2007, http://www.rbz.co.zw/assets/im_san.pdf.

⁴ "Mugabe Accepts Referendum Defeat", in *BBC News*, 15 February 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/644168.stm>.

⁵ Steve Grove interview with Samantha Power, "Life in Mugabe-ville", in *The Atlantic*, December 2003, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/12/life-in-mugabe-ville/303106>.

⁶ See for instance, Samantha Power, "How to Kill a Country", in *The Atlantic*, December 2003, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/12/how-to-kill-a-country/302845>; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Zimbabwe: Statement on Forced Evictions*, 23 June 2005, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/115>.

⁷ In addition to agriculture, Zimbabwe is rich in precious metals and stones. It is also the only country in Africa with deposits of lithium ("Investors' Verve for Lithium Know No Abounds", in *Africa Mining Intelligence*, No. 419, 10 July 2018), the basic component of batteries, technology's stumbling block. However, the country lacks fossil fuels but new discoveries by Eni offshore Mozambique coast might bring relief. See: Borges Nhamire and Paul Burkhardt, "Eni Finalizes \$7 Billion Mozambique Gas Project Investment", in *Bloomberg*, 2 June 2017, <http://www.worldoil.com/news/2017/6/2/eni-finalizes-7-billion-mozambique-gas-project-investment>.

⁸ "From Bread-Basket to Basket Case: Zimbabwe's Economy in Shambles as Mugabe Era Draws to an End", in *The Straits Times*, 16 November 2017, <http://str.sg/4vMB>.

⁹ See "Zimbabwe", in *CIA World Factbook*, last updated 20 June 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/zi.html>.

party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). However, neither Mugabe nor Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of MDC, received more than 50 per cent of the vote. A run off was scheduled but the violence and killings unleashed by Mugabe on MDC members was such that Tsvangirai withdrew in protest.¹⁰ Eventually, international pressure forced a power-sharing agreement whereby Mugabe remained President and Tsvangirai became Prime Minister, both with an equal share of cabinet positions.

Having learnt his lesson in 2008, Mugabe made sure the next elections, held in 2013, would come down in his favour. With the opposition virtually absent, the results were 61 per cent for Mugabe's ZANU-PF.¹¹

By 2017, Mugabe, 93 years old and ill, began to lose control of the political process. His second wife Grace Mugabe (known as "Gucci Grace" for her frequent shopping sprees abroad)¹² saw

her chance and began laying out plans to succeed her husband.

For this, Grace proceeded to build a support group called Generation 40 (G40), made up of ZANU-PF politicians who support her candidacy against that of Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, Mugabe's former Minister of Defence (2009–13) and Vice President. To prepare her campaign, Grace convinced Mugabe to sack his designated successor Mnangagwa, who maintains excellent links with the army. She further forced the University of Zimbabwe to grant her a PhD¹³ and made herself head of the party's women wing.

During her rallies, Grace made reoccurring threats against Mnangagwa (known commonly as "Ed"): "His head must be crushed", she exclaimed during one speech,¹⁴ just days following Ed's forced resignation as Vice President. Fearing for his life, Mnangagwa fled the country for South Africa on 7 November 2017.

On 14 November 2017, the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, led by Constantino Chiwenga (who had returned from China only days before) entered Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, and occupied

¹⁰ "Zimbabwe: Morgan Tsvangirai Withdraws from Poll, Citing Robert Mugabe's Reign of Terror", in *The Telegraph*, 22 June 2008, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/zimbabwe/2175377/Zimbabwe-Morgan-Tsvangirai-withdraws-from-poll-citing-Robert-Mugabes-reign-of-terror.html>.

¹¹ See International Crisis Group (ICG), "Zimbabwe's Elections. Mugabe's Last Stand", in *ICG Africa Briefings*, No. 95 (29 July 2013), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/900>; Blessing-Miles Tendi, "Why Robert Mugabe Scored a Landslide Victory in Zimbabwe's Elections", in *The Guardian*, 5 August 2013, <https://gu.com/p/3hz5f>.

¹² See Guy Martin, "Zimbabwe's Grace Mugabe: How Her Addiction to Luxury Caused Her Fall from Power", in *Forbes*, 18 November 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/guymartin/2017/11/18/>

[zimbabwes-grace-mugabe-how-her-addiction-to-luxury-caused-her-fall-from-power](https://www.forbes.com/sites/guymartin/2017/11/18/zimbabwes-grace-mugabe-how-her-addiction-to-luxury-caused-her-fall-from-power).

¹³ "Grace Mugabe PhD: Arrest Made Over Corruption Allegations", in *BBC News*, 17 February 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43099361>.

¹⁴ Ismail Akwei, "Grace Mugabe's Final Showdown Cost Zimbabwe's Vice President His Job", in *Africanews*, 6 November 2017, <http://www.africanews.com/2017/11/06/grace-mugabe-s-final-showdown-cost-zimbabwe-s-vice-president-his-job>.

the national television station, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and other key infrastructure. From the outset, the military declared their goal was to quash those who wanted to take advantage of Mugabe's old age (an obvious reference to his wife's machinations and ambitions).

Loyal to Mnangagwa, Chiwenga did not move to make himself president, handing power back to Ed, who promptly rewarded him the Vice Presidency. A few tank shells could be heard during the night, but the following day, only a tank and a few soldiers were patrolling the corner between parliament and Second Street. Meanwhile, people were going about their business and an eerie calm descended on the city.

Apart for the members of the G40, who were arrested soon after the military takeover, there was no significant opposition to the army's action. On Saturday 18 November, thousands took to the streets of Harare and other cities, in a joyful, exuberant and peaceful demonstration to celebrate the end of Mugabe's repressive regime.

Mugabe was treated with white gloves by the army but forced to resign on 21 November or face impeachment. Following his resignation, Ed returned to Zimbabwe and was sworn in as President on 24 November, promising democratic general elections as soon as possible: "I encourage all of us to remain peaceful even as preparations for political contestations for next year's harmonized free and fair elections gather momentum. The voice of the people is the voice of God", he said.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Zimbabwe Court: Military Takeover Was

Twenty-three candidates are running for president, with the incumbent Mnangagwa billed as the favourite. The main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change is led by Nelson Chamisa, but has suffered from the recent death of its charismatic leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, and the fractious party politics that ensued since.

Ed is a smart and pragmatic politician, who will hopefully seek to erase his past association with the worst actions of the Mugabe regime through good leadership. He has already invited 46 countries, 15 organizations and two eminent persons to observe the upcoming elections.¹⁶

Free and fair elections are an indispensable requisite for the world to start trusting Zimbabwe again and invest in the country. After so many years of decline, people's expectations are high: jobs, liquidity,¹⁷ fighting corruption, fixing crumbling infrastructure are among the primary demands. Both parties are aware of

Not A Coup", in *VOA News*, 25 November 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/zimbabwe-judge-military-action-legal/4136259.html>.

¹⁶ "Zimbabwe Invites West to Observe Vote for First Time Since 2002", in *Reuters*, 10 April 2018, <https://reut.rs/2qksgRe>.

¹⁷ To compensate for the scarcity of US dollars, Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank introduced, in November 2016, "Bond Notes". In theory, these hold the same value of the dollar, but in practice have given birth to a flourishing black market while triggering inflation. Banks only allow the release of the equivalent of 50 US dollars per person per day (now reduced to 30). Queues form in front of banks daily. See, "Zimbabwe's New 'Bond Notes' Area Failing Fast", in *The Economist*, 18 February 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/02/18/zimbabwes-new-bond-notes-are-falling-fast>.

these challenges. Yet, the electoral campaign has thus far focussed on quick fixes and vague solutions.

Zimbabwe is in a "Catch 22" situation: it needs to liberalize the economy to attract investments but needs investments to liberalize the economy. Therefore, international aid, grants, and loans will represent a key factor to kick-start the economy. That is why it is indispensable for Zimbabwe to be as transparent and democratic as possible.

Earlier this year, Ed delivered his pitch ("Zimbabwe is open for business") at the World Economic Forum in Davos.¹⁸ Various international institutions are ready to chip in to help breathe new life into Zimbabwe and Britain is considering readmitting the country in the Commonwealth.¹⁹

A revived Zimbabwe might bolster the whole region, especially now that South Africa is experiencing mounting internal challenges that have increased uncertainty while reducing the country's regional clout. Recent talk of indigenization of the economy and ethnic cleansing are hardly the best way to create a favourable investment environment in South Africa. Many foreign investors, including South Africans themselves, will be looking north with renewed interest. Zimbabwe

would do well not to miss this opportunity.

After 37 years of oppression, errors and neglect, Zimbabweans deserve a chance to trace their own future. While fraught with challenges, the upcoming general election may just signal a new beginning for the landlocked African country.

13 July 2018

¹⁸ Richard Quest and Sheena McKenzie, "President Mnangagwa: 'Zimbabwe Is Open for Business'", in *CNN World*, 24 January 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/24/africa/zimbabwe-president-emmeron-mnangagwa-davos-intl/index.html>.

¹⁹ William James, "Britain Wants Zimbabwe Back in the Commonwealth, But Eyes July Election", in *Reuters*, 20 April 2018, <https://reut.rs/2JXbpNn>.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, IAI does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two book series (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

- 18 | 41 Giuliano Macioci, *Overcoming a Dark Past, Is Zimbabwe Ready for a Brighter Future?*
- 18 | 40 Paola Sartori, *Brexit and European Defence: What to Expect from a "No-Deal" Outcome?*
- 18 | 39 Cono Giardullo, *Fly High Or Die Trying: Drones in the Service of Human Rights*
- 18 | 38 Giorgia Perletta, *Street Protests and Socio-Economic Challenges in Iran: The Case of Khuzestan Province*
- 18 | 37 Gianni Bonvicini, *Beyond the European Council: Domestic Politics Drives the Migration "Crisis" in Italy and Germany*
- 18 | 36 Jean-Pierre Darnis, *The New Space Economy, An Opportunity for Italy?*
- 18 | 35 Adriano Iaria, *E-Emblems: Protective Emblems and the Legal Challenges of Cyber Warfare*
- 18 | 34 Nicola Bilotta, *Elections, Land Reform and the Promise of Peace in Colombia*
- 18 | 33 Alessandro Marrone, *The Conte Government: Radical Change or Pragmatic Continuity in Italian Foreign and Defence Policy?*
- 18 | 32 Sinan Ekim, *Erdoğan's Snap Election Gamble: Too Little, Too Late?*