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UNDERSTANDING THE EVOLUTION AND STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN ZIMBABWE

WHEN A COUP IS NOT CALLED A COUP

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Introduction

Since gaining independence from colonial rule in 1980, democracy has struggled to take root in Zimbabwe. The country provides an excellent example of what Charles Tilly (2017) described as the process of democratization and de-democratization, wherein countries chase democracy without success, sometimes getting better and at other times experiencing erosion, backsliding, and regression. Zimbabwe's current political situation is best described as an illiberal, militarized, electoral authoritarian regime (Masunungure, 2011; Levitsky and Way, 2002; LeBas and Munemo, 2019). On paper, Zimbabwean institutions allow the basic tenets of democracy: regular elections, participation by the opposition, civil society, and a broad bill of rights. Yet elections are a façade covering a deeply entrenched authoritarian system. The opposition has been decimated by violence, intimidation, infiltration, unlawful arrests, co-option, and delegitimization as "stooges" of Western states. Civil society operates with a lot of courage under close state surveillance and instruments such as the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act give the government wide-ranging powers to control and surveil the activities of voluntary organizations (Ntini, 2022). Additionally, the country's security sector has a strong presence in politics and culture (Ruhanya and Gumbo, 2023a; Dorman, 2017; Makumbe, 1998).

Methodologically, this case study mainly relies on original qualitative interviews with key diplomats and politicians involved in external responses to Zimbabwe's 2017 coup, in addition to using primary and secondary materials. The case study assesses the current state of democracy in Zimbabwe and the multiple factors shaping its evolution in the last decade. The data for this paper is drawn from interviews conducted by the authors for this project and past projects, where relevant. In 2013, the various measures of accountability—vertical, horizontal, and diagonal—were stronger than they had been since the early 2000s. Following the violent June 2008 runoff presidential election, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of opposition supporters, a new Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed as a proposed end to the conflict, with the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front's (ZANU PF) Robert Mugabe as President and main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai as Prime Minister (Alexander and Tendi, 2008; Badza, 2008; McGreal, 2008). Between 2009 and 2016, the country seemed to be moving toward political stability as an opening for democracy emerged due to the 2013 adoption of a new constitution, a lack of coups, increased economic stability, and a reduction in political persecution (Mahonye and Mandishara, 2015; Richardson, 2013; Musarurwa, 2016; Dendere, 2019).

However, in 2017, President Mugabe was ousted in a military coup after 37 years in power (Moore, 2018). This, we argue, reversed the strengthening of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability seen in preceding years and set Zimbabwe on a path back toward authoritarianism. Indeed, one of the core reasons for the lack of democratization in Zimbabwe is the political role of the military (and the security sector more broadly), which is aligned with ZANU PF and work to sustain an authoritarian system. Yet the 2017 military coup found initial "acceptance" or "tolerance" by international actors, with ZANU PF being asked to deliver a reasonably credible post-coup election in 2018 as a key step towards legitimate government and the resumption of international economic aid for Zimbabwe (Reuters 2017; Beavers, 2017). However, by emphasizing credible elections, international actors downplayed the urgent need for reform of the politically entrenched military that had staged the coup, and which was the foundation for the country's authoritarian system. Consequently, since the coup and subsequent 2018 election there has been more authoritarian continuity than democratic change in Zimbabwe. We argue that the current government's hold onto power was further strengthened by a long-standing pattern of mass emigration caused by weakening accountability and political persecution and that the government worsened a deep socioeconomic crisis since the coup. Additionally, a weak opposition and repression towards civil society have significantly contributed to ZANU PF's ability to retain power and extend its authoritarian political system since 2017.

Studies of Zimbabwean politics seldom engage, in a serious way, the significant role of democracy-promoting Western actors in sustaining ZANU PF's authoritarian system. Therefore, in this paper, we analyze how Western states reacted to the 2017 military coup

in Zimbabwe that ousted long-time president Mugabe and replaced him with ZANU PF stalwart Emmerson Mnangagwa. We argue that Western states chose not to call the coup a coup for compound reasons. The responses of Western states to the 2017 coup enabled the coup-makers and ZANU PF to evade international condemnation following the coup and stage a problematic election that granted the coup-born government a veneer of legitimacy.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section is a historical overview of Zimbabwean politics since independence, which is useful background for the reader and helps us appreciate the historically rooted nature of ZANU PF's authoritarianism. The second section examines how domestic factors such as a decline in civil society and emigration contribute to ZANU PF's longevity and authoritarianism. The third section concerns the responses of Western actors to Zimbabwe's 2017 coup. The final section reflects on the impact of the 2017 coup and its subsequent regime on the current state of Zimbabwean politics. We now turn to a historical overview of post-independence Zimbabwe's politics.

A brief political history, 1980-present

1980-2008

Immediately following independence, the ruling ZANU PF party, under Robert Mugabe, tried and failed to establish a formalized one-party state (Shaw, 1986). Although this endeavor failed, it was able to effectively consolidate the rule of ZANU PF, resulting in the ruling party mainly functioning as a de facto single-party state for the first two decades of independence. In the early 1980s, for example, ZANU PF used intense violence to force a strong main opposition party called the Zimbabwe People's African Union (ZAPU) to dissolve itself and enter a unity arrangement in which ZANU PF was the controlling party (Reed, 1993). There are conflicting narratives on the number of how many died in Gukurahundi. According to the ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo, violence perpetuated in the 1980s by ZANU-PF against ZAPU and its supporters, known as the Gukurahundi, resulted in an estimated 20,000 civilian deaths (Nkomo, 1984). However, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe estimates that "the figure for the dead and missing is not less than 3000," but it does not discount that "the real figure for the dead could be possibly double 3000, or even higher." (CCJPZ 1997, 87) These discrepancies continue to be weaponized by the government to minimize the impact of the violence. In 1987, ZANU and ZAPU signed a unification deal effectively ended any pretense of pluralism and deeply weakened the multi-party system. By the 1990 elections, ZANU PF single-handedly dominated the political scene (Sachikonye, L 1990).

In the wake of this, however, ZANU PF's authoritarian power consolidation strategy had mixed success. The 1990 formation and political participation of the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) comprised of some former ZANU PF members like Edgar Tekere kept a slight opening for opposition politics. Although ZANU PF won all but three of the 119 seats in the 1990 election, ZUM won 30% of the urban vote (Kriger, 2005). And between 1990 and 1999, trade unions, churches, law societies, and higher education students continued to push back against ZANU PF's authoritarian strategies, setting the scene for the emergence of the Movement of Democratic Change (MDC) as a major opposition party in 1999. Overall, between 2000 and 2013, the MDC made inconsistent but significant strides in capturing parliament and the presidency, notwithstanding the significant challenges of running against a ruling party that often employed political violence during elections, relied on the security sector to conduct other forms of voter repression, and made dexterous use of the benefits of incumbency such as patronage derived from the state.

In 1995, the opposition held only two seats in parliament, but by the 2000 parliamentary elections, the MDC eroded ZANU PF's supermajority and clinched 58 out of the 120 available seats (Ruhanya and Gumbo, 2023b). Indeed, when the MDC first entered the political scene, the conditions appeared ripe for Zimbabwe to pass Samuel Huntington's (1991) two-turnover test and that ZANU PF and Robert Mugabe would lose power for the first time since independence. The newly founded opposition had broad urban support that cut across class,

race, and ethnicity. The MDC was also better funded than past opposition parties like Tekere's ZUM and Ndabaningi Sithole's ZANU Ndonga. Furthermore, the MDC attracted international support, especially from pro-democracy Western actors, while Zimbabwe's involvement in a unpopular and costly late 1990s war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the resultant poor economic performance undermined ZANU PF's standing domestically. By 2002, although the opposition failed to win the presidency, MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai garnered a considerable 42% of the vote (Daimon 2016).

Despite the conditions seeming to favor MDC at the turn of the century, the ruling ZANU PF party had the resources at its disposal to consistently weaken the opposition. After the loss of their supermajority in 2000, ZANU PF ramped up its campaigns to win votes, sometimes employing coercive methods in rural areas (Ndawana and Hove, 2023). Although Zimbabwe's demographics have changed with urbanization, most voters still reside in rural areas (Muzorewa and Nyandoro, 2021). ZANU PF also responded to MDC's success in urban areas by implementing policies like the 2005 Operation Murambatsvina (clean-up), which forced roughly 700,000 urbanites to relocate to rural areas (Potts, 2008). This forced displacement reduced voter turnout for the opposition, especially among poor urbanites. ZANU PF also used its position as the ruling authority to try to delegitimize the opposition. In 2002, ZANU PF used and abused Zimbabwean liberation history, casting itself as the only legitimate political party and painting MDC as puppets of ex-colonial master Britain (CNN 2002).

At the same time as they were weathering this ongoing state retaliation, the MDC experienced its first major split in 2005. In 2005, ZANU PF pushed through the reintroduction of a Senate body—which had been disbanded in 1989—for patronage purposes. The decision to participate in or boycott the Senate election divided the opposition, which was already starting to weaken due to continued violent attacks on its leaders and financial problems. MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai unilaterally decided that the party would boycott the Senate elections, which caused a split within the leadership. The MDC continued to splinter into several more factions over the years. The party was still able to do well in the March 2008 elections, but the effects of subsequent splits in 2013, 2018, and 2023 have negatively impacted the opposition's electoral performance because of vote-splitting, while ZANU PF wasted no time bringing some disgruntled opposition members under their fold. Attempts at reunification or forming a big-tent opposition party in 2018 and 2023 have failed to yield results (Muguti, 2022; Ploch, 2011).

In addition to this fragmentation, every election since 2000 has experienced some level of violence. In the 2008 election, ZANU PF failed to win the presidency outright, resulting in a run-off presidential election and, ultimately, the uneasy formation of a unity government (Morris and Raleigh, 2024). The conflict surrounding the June 2008 run-off made it the bloodiest election in history, and, in the current era, later post-election violence in 2018 saw the military shoot dead six unarmed civilians (Daxecker and Rauschenbach, 2023; Fielding, 2018; Makonye, 2020; Mwonzora and Helliker, 2020; Sithole, 2020). Opposition parties have continued participating in every election, but their performance has suffered in part because voters fear ZANU PF retaliation. The threat of violence has increased apathy among voters who would have otherwise voted, leading to another form of voter exit (Young, 2019).

2008-2017

After the violence of the 2008 election, MDC was seemingly taken into the political fold with the creation of the GNU. As mentioned, this era seemed to usher in a new period of increased stability and the potential for democracy. In 2013, a national referendum saw the adoption of a new constitution with presidential term limits and an expanded Bill of Rights. Between 2009 and 2013, the economy also stabilized somewhat after the collapse of the national currency and hyperinflation from the early 2000s. This economic stabilization was partly brought about by adopting the United States dollar as the primary currency (Mahonye and Mandishara, 2015; Richardson, 2013). And although civil society continued to face challenges, this sector was also able to operate with a bit more freedom and financial support from donors. In 2013, the GNU was disbanded as Mugabe once again won the Presidency. However, the hope for a more democratic future for Zimbabwe con-

tinued—the arrest and release of prominent civil activist Evan Mawarire in 2016 was a testament to the strength of the new Zimbabwean constitution and the resolve of civil and legal societies to uphold human rights. (Musarurwa, 2016; Dendere, 2019). One year later, the military coup of 2017 ousted longtime President Mugabe, replacing him with President Mnangagwa.

POST-2017

Following the 2018 election and capitalizing on fragmentation within MDC, ZANU PF manipulated the courts to favor the minor opposition faction led by Douglas Mwonzora. This forced Nelson Chamisa, who had run as the leading MDC candidate in 2018, to relinquish control of the party and its funds (Ndlovu, 2022). Thus, Chamisa, under a new party banner, headed into the 2023 elections with little money. Elections in Zimbabwe are expensive; therefore, access to state resources is an additional layer of incumbency advantage for ruling parties (Dendere, 2021). Although Chamisa's new party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), performed well under challenging conditions, denying ZANU PF a two-thirds majority win in parliament, their success was short-lived. Soon after the election, another CCC opposition faction emerged, claiming rights to Chamisa's party. Our sense from observing the unfolding of events in this period is that this faction, led by Sengezo Tshabangu, consists of disgruntled long-term opposition leaders unhappy with Chamisa's leadership; the seceding members accuse Chamisa of imposing candidates on voters in Matabeleland. Another theory for the formation of this opposing CCC faction is members taking advantage of ZANU PF's willingness to pay for their loyalty. In fact, the Tshabangu-led faction (suspected to be ZANU-PF-backed) led the recall of CCC members of parliament, mayors, and councilors. In doing so, they helped ZANU PF cement a two-thirds parliamentary majority (Langa 2024a). Since then, current ZANU PF President Mnangagwa's supporters have called for an amendment to the constitution, allowing Mnangagwa to run for a third term (Mavhunga 2025). Even if Mnangagwa is not able to manipulate the constitution for his benefit, as evidenced by the chronology laid out in this section, ZANU PF has successfully weakened the opposition and solidified the quasi-single-party state through population transfers, violence, co-optation (or taking advantage of disarray and opposition fragmentation), and legal disqualifications, among other means.

Essential factors of ZANU PF's survival to date

DECLINE IN CIVIL SOCIETY

The weakened state of opposition to ZANU PF mirrors the weakening of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe. In the 1990s, the country was lauded for its robust civil society (Dorman, 2003). Before the formation of the MDC, CSOs had independently agitated for democracy and equality. However, the formation of the MDC, which emerged from trade unions, resulted in the consolidation of urban trade union elements and many women's groups, churches, youth organizations, and university students into opposition politics. However, this consolidation was not straightforward because of differences among these groups' engagements with ZANU PF. Take, for example, universities. Some academics and students openly aligned with opposition politics, while others overtly backed ZANU PF (Tendi, 2010). Still, most trade unions, church leaders, universities, journalists, and NGOs took a critical stand against ZANU-PF misrule. There was a shared agenda in many ways, as the same leaders who had been very active in CSOs and the trade union became the founding leaders of MDC (Hadebe, 2019). While it made sense for CSOs and the opposition to join forces and share resources, this action resulted in the shrinking of independent CSOs. International funders also demanded that the opposition parties and CSOs work together—again, this was done to maximize limited resources. However, because CSOs working on political rights were naturally aligned with the opposition movement, the government became highly hostile toward civil society, leading to the unjust imprisonment of many political and non-governmental actors. Like MDC, CSOs were labeled stooges or puppets of the West. In the last two decades, ZANU PF has repeatedly jailed journalists, activists, teachers, and medical practitioners—anyone they assumed was siding with the opposition. These arrests

included prominent Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono—who spent 85 days in prison—and former MP Job Sikhala, who spent over five hundred days in prison (Dube, 2022).

MASS CITIZEN EXIT

ZANU PF has, over the years, perfected using violence and legislation to force citizens to exit the political scene. Every election since 1980 has had varying degrees of violence in response to perceived strength and organization of the opposition. Makumbe (2002) wrote that "the regime deployed tactics whose sheer brutality and underhandedness were without precedent." (87) The Human Rights Watch (Kasambala, 2008) reported that the government mantra in 2008 was "Bullets for Each of you," and government-sponsored youth militias severed the limbs of opposition. Indeed, the levels of violence in the June 2008 were unprecedented, and only escalated from that point. Following the 2018 election, the government responded to a peaceful protest by shooting civilians in broad daylight (Human Rights Watch 2018). Even with all its troubles, until that point, Zimbabwe had yet to see armed soldiers shooting at civilians on the street. In the next section, we will discuss the role of military actors in more detail.

An outcome of the government's excessive use of violence combined with a failing economy has been the exodus of millions of Zimbabweans seeking refuge abroad. In 2021, for example, young activist Makomborero Haruzivishe was jailed for trumped-up charges, including kidnapping. He left the country soon after his release after twelve months in jail (Pindula News, 2024). His case is just one example of what has happened to most activists. The government has weaponized the judicial system against the opposition. An estimated one-quarter of the Zimbabwean population has left the country since the start of the troubles in 2000 (Sachikonye, 2011). The millions who have left the country are unable to vote or participate in many aspects of political life that require them to be physically present in Zimbabwe.

The absence of millions of voters has strengthened ZANU PF's survival in numerous ways. The opposition continues to weaken as more people, especially young, educated, and urban voters, leave the country (Dendere, 2018). The middle class plays a crucial role in sustaining democracy; they tend to speak up and vote more often (Cheeseman, 2014). Zimbabwean migrants living abroad have made it clear to researchers that the combined effects of a failing economy and oppressive politics are among the biggest motivators for migration (Manik 2011; Ndoma, 2017). Over the years, the diaspora has served as a vital support base for the opposition. In the early 2000s, diaspora activists raised money for the party back home and used their voices to highlight issues on the international stage (Kuhlmann, 2010; Mutambasere, 2022). While most people in the diaspora still assert their support for the opposition, the financial aspects of that support seem to be diminishing. In conversations following the 2018 and 2023 elections, Nelson Chamisa expressed to first author of this paper, Dendere, his concern about the declining financial support.

Western culpability and the 2017 coup

REGIONAL RESPONSES TO THE 2017 COUP

Western nations' (namely America and the European Union's) engagements with Zimbabwe since its independence consisted of three different phases. First, from 1980 to about 2000, relations were largely cordial, but they began to publicly break down in 2000, when the ZANU PF government launched a program of violent seizures of private land owned by white Zimbabwean commercial farmers (Tendi, 2014). In this second, hostile phase, Western nations also publicly criticized the ZANU PF government for staging violent or rigged elections in 2000, 2002, 2005, June 2008, and 2013 (although these electoral issues had been present through the 1980s and 90s and encountered little Western criticisms (Kriger, 2005; Chan, 1992)). America and the EU applied sanctions on the ZANU PF government, attempting to isolate Zimbabwe by cutting off direct aid (Gallagher, 2017). Relations between the West and the ZANU PF government remained strained, even though the Western sanctions regime was weakening, until the

2017 coup, which ushered in a third phase. Due to a confluence of factors discussed in a later section that set this coup apart, Western states such as EU member countries cautiously regarded it as a potential harbinger of a democratic transition and economic reforms in Zimbabwe and the restoration of cordial relations with the West (Raftopolous et al., 2021). Consequently, Western states did not call the coup a coup and desisted from publicly condemning the military's action. This stance in 2017 was largely inconsistent with Western responses to coups elsewhere (Tendi, 2025); since the end of the Cold war, Western states had become less tolerant of coups in Africa and sought to promote elections and democracy.

China, Russia, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) took different stances than the West. Between 1980 and 2000, ZANU PF had closer diplomatic and economic ties to Western states than it did China and Russia. As relations broke down with the West, the ZANU PF government attempted to forge closer links to Russia and China to secure diplomatic support in platforms such as the U.N. and to attract economic aid and foreign direct investment. China and Russia's approaches to Zimbabwe prioritized state sovereignty. Both states desisted from engaging in domestic political engineering in Zimbabwe, preferring to forge trade and other economic links. When the 2017 coup occurred, Russia and China again abstained from attempting to influence Zimbabwe's political system, for example in the direction of democracy. Our sense is that they prioritized economic relations and stability and were prepared to work with whatever post-coup political arrangement emerged independently in Zimbabwe. Relations with SADC maintained status quo support for ZANU PF. Given their shared colonial history, SADC member states place great value in state sovereignty; hence, no SADC states were willing to censure ZANU PF for political violence and rigged elections in the past (with Botswana under Ian Khama being a notable exception). Angola, South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique, for example, are all governed by former African liberation movements. This was an additional factor that inhibited their criticism of ZANU PF—which was a fellow former African liberation movement. Like Zimbabwe, many of the SADC states do not hold elections that are completely free of rigging (real or alleged), and election violence has also been seen in, for example, Mozambique and Angola. We argue that this lack of universal democratic credentials in SADC also made it difficult for many member states to call out the ZANU PF government.

DISGUISING A COUP AS "NOT A COUP"

Before we proceed, it is important to clarify how we understand the term "coup." There is general consensus among coup scholars that coups are illegal operations staged by the military in isolation or in league with civilian elites to remove an executive authority from power (Luttwak, 2016; McGowan, 2003; Powell and Thyne, 2011). In the case of Zimbabwe in 2017, Mugabe was ousted from power because the military deployed without presidential authority to affect a direct political intervention that targeted the chief executive. But external actors conveniently circumvented the fact that the removal of Mugabe had the traits of a coup as defined above.

When the coup occurred, there was a well-coordinated attempt by the coup makers to present Zimbabwe's 2017 coup as not a coup. The "coup not coup" situation generated considerable debate in Western diplomatic circles. "It was sophisticated. They [Zimbabwean coup makers] took precautions to make sure people did not call it a coup right away. This was the work of people who had been thinking about this for a long time,' reflected a Western ambassador who was interviewed for this research. The "precautions" taken included the coup makers' public declaration, at the outset of the military's intervention, that their operation was "only targeting criminals around… [Mugabe], who are committing crimes that are causing social and economic suffering in the country, in order to bring them to justice." (Tendi, 2020) The coup makers also made great play of the fact that they did not suspend the judiciary when they staged their direct intervention (Mackintosh, 2017). Additionally, they did not install a military leader (they installed Mnangagwa, a civilian) and abstained from imposing a curfew, leaving freedom of movement and assembly by citizens unencumbered.

However, the aforementioned claims and performances did not adequately disguise that the military's inter-

vention constituted a coup. In line with the generally accepted coup definition outlined above, Zimbabwean coup makers' operation certainly targeted the removal of the head of state. The military's operation also violated Sections 213 (1) and 208 (2) of Zimbabwe's constitution, because it was unauthorized by civilian authority. Why, given the history of anti-coup sentiment and democracy promotion in Zimbabwe by Western states, did the coup makers encounter no public condemnation and punitive measures from the West? There are a number of reasons for this incongruity.

WESTERN RELUCTANCE TO RESPOND

Firstly Britain, by virtue of its standing as the ex-colonial power in Zimbabwe, exercised considerable influence on the inception and maintenance of the isolationist approaches of the EU, as Simon McDonald (15 March 2021), the permanent under-secretary for foreign and commonwealth affairs and head of the diplomatic service (2015–20), substantiated:

> We had really determined EU relations with Zimbabwe for a long time but there was increasing disquiet among our EU partners. There was a feeling [by 2017] that we were behind the game, that by not being present we were diminishing our influence, so there was demand in parts of Europe that Britain lead and be on the ground. So the way Britain reacted [to the 2017 coup] was also pressure from the EU who did not believe in Mnangagwa as such but simply felt that the EU policy we had shaped for a long time was not working. Let us try something different. Engage Mnangagwa and see whether he will be different from Mugabe [after the coup]. Mugabe's fall proved to be an opportunity to try something different.

Approximately two decades of EU targeted sanctions (first imposed in 2002 over a controversial election in the same year) had not not deterred the ZANU PF government from manipulating subsequent elections and engaging in authoritarian practices. As we read earlier, elections in 2002, 2005, 2008, and 2013 were all marred by allegations of rigging by the incumbent ZANU PF party. Outside election periods, democratic space was further constrained, Mugabe appeared unimpeachable, and the forcible seizure of white-owned commercial farms was not reversed. Over time, these outcomes forged a consensus among EU member states that "the EU policy [the UK] had shaped for a long time was not working," as McDonald is cited as observing above.

Additionally, Mugabe and ZANU PF developed a compelling narrative about EU policy on Zimbabwe. They cast the EU sanctions regime as engineered by the former colonial power, Britain, in order to roll back a land reform aimed at redressing colonial, racially biased land distribution in its former colony (Tendi, 2014). Mugabe and ZANU PF adroitly linked the EU sanctions to land seizures presented as righting a colonial wrong, winning them considerable support from African leaders after 2002 (Phimister and Raftopoulos, 2004).

In light of the long-term ineffectiveness of their policy and sanctions and lack of popular support in Zimbabwe, by November 2017, the EU was reluctant to continue with the same tack. "Calling [the military's November 2017 intervention in politics] a coup meant the EU would have to apply the toughest sanctions ever, when the EU had been reducing sanctions in recent years. The EU was reluctant to turn back the clock because it was tired of the standoff with Zimbabwe," an EU diplomat interviewed for this research pointed out. In a sense, therefore, Mugabe was in the end a victim of his own success. Mugabe and ZANU PF successfully frustrated EU policy on Zimbabwe for approximately two decades, to the extent that when Mugabe was removed from power unconstitutionally, the EU had reached a stage in which it was willing to abstain from championing one of its most valued principles—the upholding of constitutional changes of government.

Among British House of Lords members with an interest in Zimbabwe, when the 2017 coup occurred there was a mixture of satisfaction and hope. "Satisfaction because Mugabe was not well liked in Britain, to say the least, and hope because Zimbabwe had been a disaster for many years, so many of us hoped something better would come out of the coup" (Author interview with Lord Robert Hayward 13 November 2020). Lord Peter Hain expressed similar sentiments:

> I always felt until Mugabe went, Zimbabwe could not begin anew. That was the basis of optimism. I felt elated and it was the same right across the board in British politics, although some for the wrong reasons. I was in the anti-Apartheid movement. For people like me, Mugabe was the arch priest of betrayal of the African liberation struggle people like me supported. When Mugabe won the 1980 election, I was absolutely ecstatic. But then he undermined democracy, human rights and unleashed terror on people. That is not liberation. That is where I was coming from, but for the Right Wing of the Tory party and Right Wing of the British press, there was always an element of racism towards Mugabe the black dictator. The devil incarnate. They had only really cared about Mugabe's treatment of white farmers in the land takeovers. The Tories… have colonial mindsets. (author interview with Lord Peter Hain, 25 June 2019).

Others, such as Britain's Africa Minister Rory Stewart reported that the 2017 coup caused significant tension between two groups of ideologies. One side was comprised of figures who knew a lot about Zimbabwe and had worked on it for years and, as a result, were emotionally invested in particular narratives about "change" after Mugabe—for example, Hain's perception that "until Mugabe went, Zimbabwe could not begin anew." On the other side of this were people like Stewart himself who knew very little about Zimbabwe and, based on their related experiences in the Middle East and Asia, were sceptical about the possibility of genuine "change" led by Mnangagwa (Author interview with Rory Steward, 19 March 2021). A prominent believer in "change" after Mugabe was the British ambassador to Zimbabwe (2014-2018), Catriona Laing, who developed tangible links with figures closely associated with Mnangagwa. Ambassador Laing calculated that Mnangagwa was best placed in ZANU PF to succeed Mugabe, that he would implement reforms resulting in economic turnaround, and that he would re-establish cordial diplomatic and trade links with the West (Author interview with Catriona Laing, 2017).

The EU's collective stance was not to endorse or support the coup, but to tolerate its occurrence by not publicly calling it a coup, and to give the coup-born government the benefit of the doubt with regard to delivering a credible post-coup election (implying, notably, an updated and reliable voter register and the presence of international electoral observers). EU member states termed this approach "strategic patience." (Author interview with Harry Thomas, 14 September 2021)

In the United States of America, similar optimism at Mugabe's ousting was observed. The U.S. ambassador to Zimbabwe (2016-2018) Harry Thomas recalled that a household member of staff rolled on the floor of the ambassador's official Harare residence in sheer euphoria and relief upon the news that Mugabe had finally lost power (Author interview with Harry Thomas, 14 September 2021). Witnessing this—along with the multiple scenes of jubilation at Mugabe's loss of power by Zimbabweans in and outside Zimbabwe—had a great effect on Thomas. On 18 November 2017, many Zimbabweans marched in solidarity with the coup, demanding Mugabe resign the presidency (Tendi, 2025). According to Ambassador Thomas, "when Zimbabweans marched past the US embassy [in Harare], our marines took a video of Zimbabweans marching and chanting "USA, USA, USA". They were shocked and when I got that video I cried, because it showed me the people of Zimbabwe understood the USA had supported them and tried to support human rights and democracy in their country." (14 September 2021) The coup was genuinely popular among many Zimbabweans and the emotional paroxysm irresistible, making it difficult for Thomas to seek to undo a coup which appeared to wield potential for political and economic reforms in the country.

As U.S. ambassador, Thomas had considerable influence in determining his government's response to the coup, in large part because the Donald Trump administration (2017-2021) had negligible interest in Zimbabwe. When the coup happened, the Trump administration wanted to deploy American soldiers to Zimbabwe to protect American citizens, in Victoria Falls especially, where many Americans go on holiday (Author interview with Harry Thomas, 14 September 2021). According to Thomas, "I did not think Americans would be attacked so I opposed sending troops. The safety of Americans is all that Washington DC cared for. Washington DC was not concerned about who was getting power and how

they were getting it." (14 September 2021). Amid disinterest from the Trump administration, which reflected its wider disengagement from African affairs, Thomas set the tone for America's response to the coup. If Ambassador Thomas had publicly called the military's intervention a coup that, potentially, would have resulted in the U.S. cutting off aid to NGOs in Zimbabwe, with a waiver from Congress required to resume aid. The largest U.S. aid program going to Zimbabwe in 2017 was the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Thomas was averse to PEPFAR being cut off in Zimbabwe because it was saving the lives of many ordinary Zimbabweans; ceasing PEPFAR would only penalize needy regular citizens, not the well-heeled coup makers (14 September 2021). On the whole, therefore, Thomas took the view that the U.S. government did not have any real, effective, carrots and sticks in its toolbox to undo Zimbabwe's 2017 coup. Hence he actively (and successfully) ensured Washington D.C. did not publicly denounce the intervention as a coup and apply punitive measures. Thomas asserted that "it is not enough to be right. If you are right but cannot persuade people [the coup makers] to do the right thing, so what? So what? So I was hoping the [coup born] government would be better, and they were promising us they would be better." (14 September 2021).

Western approaches towards coups in Africa changed in the 1990s as a result of the Cold War's end. Indeed, some 1960s and 1970s coups in Africa were outcomes of Cold War politics—perhaps most notoriously the coup that brought Colonel Joseph Desiré Mobutu to power in the Congo in 1965. After the Cold War, coups became less acceptable as multi-party elections became regarded as the only legitimate means of changing governments and democracy promotion began in earnest in Africa by Western states. The ways in which Western states were, for various reasons, unwilling to call Zimbabwe's 2017 coup "a coup" and respond appropriately to it, undermined their status as promoters of democracy and constitutionalism in Zimbabwe and, as further elaborated below, further contributed to authoritarianism in Zimbabwe.

The state of politics in Zimbabwe in the post-2017 era

IMPACT ON WOMEN

There are many losers in the story of post-coup Zimbabwean politics. Top among them are women, for whom it will take generations to restore their place in politics. Originally, from independence through the late nineties, women's affairs made significant strides in political participation and property rights. In the 1990s, women's rights to own property, as well as their access to education and healthcare, were expanded (Gaidzanwa, 1994; 2011; Sithole and Chikerema, 2014). Other expansions of women's rights include the 2004 National Gender Policy and the 2008 Maputo Protocol—a set of tools introduced to bolster gender equality in the region, including the right to political participation and reproductive rights (Dziva, 2018). The 2013 constitution passed during the GNU period also promoted gender equality by calling for gender quotas for women in parliament and ensuring full rights for women, including the right to vote and other forms of political participation. Many of the women's rights enshrined in the Constitution will likely continue to be upheld on paper, but the experience might be different across different communities of women. Thought, there was a marginal increase of women in parliament from 9% to 16% from 2018 to 2023 (Bhatasara and Chiweshe, 2021), the challenge in the post-coup era is that male political actors now view women as a political threat. A key consequence of this is social in nature: Women with political ambitions are frowned upon. This has meant that women in politics and other professional settings have been forced to over-perform their femininity and traditional cultural roles in order to fit perceptions of how they should behave.

For example, the rise and fall of Grace Mugabe, wife of Robert Mugabe, in the lead-up to the 2017 coup is one factor that has impacted women's ability to participate in national politics and the perceptions of women's rightful roles in society (Taruona, 2020; Dendere,

2018). The current first lady, Auxilia Mnangagwa, has gone to extreme lengths to distinguish herself from Grace Mugabe, who was thought to have political ambitions, by embracing extreme domesticity and propagating the idea that a woman's place is in the kitchen, not the presidency. Auxilia Mnangagwa was a member of parliament before the 2017 coup occurred. After the coup, Auxilia Mnangagwa resigned from her seat in parliament to focus on being a "respectable" First Lady focused on domestic issues, the need to maintain family values, and upholding Zimbabwe's traditional culture. Umali Saidi (2022) coined the term "umaihood" to juxtapose Grace Mugabe's performance of national motherhood with Auxilia Mnangagwa's "amaihood:" An over performance of motherhood which is supposed to show more contrition and humility. In her first term, Auxilia Mnangagwa was pictured kneeling as she purchased various odd items from street vendors. By contrast, Grace Mugabe, nicknamed Gucci Grace for her designer outfits, was never seen as humble.

Grace Mugabe's fall from grace in the public eye is just one example of deepening negative perceptions of women in politics (Bhastara and Chiweshe 2021). Mawere (2017) called this the "marujatanization" of women in politics—the terms "marujata" and "hure" are used synonymously to refer to loud women who also often portrayed as prostitutes. Male politicians on both sides of the political aisle have weaponized the term "hure" to put women in their place or force them out of political engagement. This term has been used as an attack on women from the independence movement to recent assaults on young, confident, educated political leaders like Fadzai Mahere (Mare, 2023). When infighting within the opposition led to the recall of many opposition parliamentarians and local government officials, the opposition politician Sengezo Tshabangu, who is suspected to have colluded with ZANU PF to advocate for recalls, specifically targeted young women whom he deemed unworthy of government positions, for example, the recalled 25-year-old mayor of Masvingo (Mirror 2023). The unjustified expulsion of women from local government is especially egregious because women are severely underrepresented in local government, where they make up about 12%[1] of elected officials (UN Women Zimbabwe | Women in local government 2023). The loss of female voices from regional and national politics is detrimental to Zimbabwean politics as a whole.

IMPACT ON CSOs

The post-coup era has seen the consolidation of power around the presidency. In the months immediately following the coup, the Mnangagwa regime appeared to be on a path towards democracy. Under the mantra that "Zimbabwe is open for business," many civil society organizations reported that they could do their work with very little interference (Dendere and Taodzera, 2023). Many believed that the new regime would strengthen the three axes of accountability, especially diagonal accountability, but those hopes were quickly dashed by the introduction of the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) bill aimed at restricting the civil society space. In 2024, the Minister of Public Service, Labor, and Social Welfare reintroduced the bill alongside new punitive measures for any organizations that fail to comply with the draconian laws outlined in the bill (Amnesty International, 2024). Public hearings on the bill have been marred by state-sponsored violence, which has only deepened the climate of fear in the country (ZimRights 2024). Long before the president signed the bill into law in 2025, the effects of its proposal were already being felt around the country. The new bill has many changes that undermine the protection of rights, including that PVOs are now prevented from "supporting or opposing any political party or candidate in a presidential, parliamentary or local government election." The amended Section 21 of the PVO Act grants power to the government to suspend the executive committee of PVOs when there are reasonable grounds for believing that "it is necessary or desirable to do so in the public interest." (Fang, 2025)

Civil society organizations, especially those working on human rights and election-related issues, say that the lack of support and decline in funding from Western partners since the coup has been especially detrimental to their work. In 2018, the U.S., a major donor to Zimbabwean CSOs, cut aid on claims that organizations had been corrupt (Agency Staff 2018). Since then, there have been more general cuts to aid. Even organizations working on welfare provisions have not been spared from the bill's negative impact. Furthermore, the

1 Author calculations from election returns

government has politicized food aid. Zimbabwe is still reeling from the effects of the El Niño-induced drought that has put over two million people at risk of starvation (Moyo, 2024). Although the president promised that every citizen, regardless of political affiliation, would have access to food aid, this has not been the case, with many reports from NGOs indicating that opposition voters have consistently been denied access to food assistance (Duri and Amali, 2019; Langa 2017).

DECREASED TOLERANCE FOR OPPOSITION, UNCONSTITUTIONAL ARRESTS

The coup-born regime has been much more brazen than Mugabe's in arresting activists for trivial matters. Under Mugabe, there was sometimes a sense that the courts, although captured, still offered a chance for recourse, such as the release of activist Pastor Evan Mawarire in 2016, but that belief and trust in the courts is steadily declining. Since 2020, the government has routinely arrested high-profile individuals like author Tsitsi Dangarembga for benign offenses such as holding a placard which read "We Want Better. Reform Our Institutions." (Nyoka and Chothia, 2022) Jameson Timba, another opposition leader, spent five months in prison after his group was arrested for celebrating youth day without police clearance (Aljazeera 2025 Timba's group included a mother and her toddler, who were also imprisoned. Another mother lost her child while incarcerated and was denied leave to attend the burial. Additionally, another activist died in jail from injuries sustained during the arrest (Amnesty International, 2024). In July 2024, yet another group of activists was removed from an outward-bound plane at the Harare International Airport, and their whereabouts remained unknown for three days until they reappeared in jail with evidence of physical abuse. The Ministry of Justice advocated for their ongoing incarceration (Mavhunga 2024). We expect to see more arrests that lead to individuals spending long periods in prison while justice remains unserved. The judicial sectors are now very limited in providing horizontal accountability.

The key question for scholars, policy groups, the opposition, civil society, and citizens in Zimbabwe is: will Mnangagwa step down in 2028? According to the constitution, Mnangagwa is serving his final presidential term. Nevertheless, following the 2023 elections, significant pressure has arisen within ZANU PF for an extended term (Chingono, 2025). Since 2021, Mnangagwa has been appointing allies to various courts. If he chooses to prolong his presidency, he is unlikely to face opposition from the courts. Although Mnangagwa has reiterated his commitment to upholding constitutional term limits, this has not deterred his supporters from urging him to stay in power (Langa 2024b).

What comes next?

Following a long history of domination by the ruling party, militarization of politics, and normalization of coups, the post-2017 coup era seems to have reversed what progress was made during the previous era in terms of increased accountability at the vertical, horizontal, and diagonal levels. The refusal by Western actors to call a coup a coup was one large factor that contributed to Zimbabwe's path back toward authoritarianism. The biggest takeaway for policymakers is that Zimbabwe's political situation is steeply declining, but it is not hopeless and there is some marginal room for accountability. While the military has always played a role in Zimbabwean politics, the 2017 coup deepened the militarization of civilian politics. The coup cannot be undone; however, if Zimbabwe has any chance of recovery, it is essential to recognize that the country is not yet open to business. The consolidation of power in Zimbabwean politics is further complicated and worsened because ZANU PF controls access to patronage: ZANU PF distributes urban and rural land (Zamchiya, 2013). It doles out mining concessions and permits illegal mining by youth in exchange for support (Towriss, 2013). State tenders are allocated to influential politicians to maintain their loyalty. The state treasury is deeply implicated in illegal local forex trading. These and other patronage levers enable ZANU PF to maintain loyalty among young and older members.

In terms of the future of accountability, the best options are deepened investment in civil society and the opposition. However, the two should not be treated as one. Civil society must be strengthened on its own merits and the same should be done for opposition politics. Doing so would ensure that the problems that befall ei-

ther group will not erode progress with the other. The fact that the government is still seeking out support from international partners presents a strong opportunity for diagonal accountability. Any international efforts towards reengagement must continue to be accompanied by a demand for electoral reforms and respect for human rights.

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