

Military stage coup in Zimbabwe

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President Robert Mugabe is under house arrest after the military took control of Zimbabwe in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

Zimbabwe's army staged the coup in response to President Robert Mugabe's November 6 sacking of his former vice president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, to pave the way for his wife Grace Mugabe to succeed him.

Mnangagwa, who has spent much of his life as Mugabe's enforcer, was involved in the independence struggle and is close to the military—still the most powerful faction of Zimbabwe's ruling elite. Grace Mugabe has sought to cultivate the support of a younger generation of capitalists around an undeclared faction known as G40, after a constitutional principle allowing anyone over the age of 40 to stand for president.

Most of the leaders of G40, apart from Grace Mugabe who is reportedly in Namibia, have been arrested, including higher education minister Jonathan Moyo, local government minister Saviour Kasukuwere and, most influential, finance minister Ignatius Chombo.

After earlier reports of sporadic gunfire in the wealthier suburbs of the capital, Harare, the military took control of the state television channel. Major General SB Moyo issued a statement that the army would “target criminals” around Mugabe involved in sacking Mnangagwa.

The coup is an attempt to decisively resolve the faction fighting within the ruling ZANU-PF, which has seen Mugabe demote numerous figures close to the military before he moved against Mnangagwa, his former chief of security, which finally crystalised the coup plot.

The military takeover comes two days after the head of the army, General Constantino Chiwenga, told a news conference, “The current purging which is clearly targeting members of the party with a liberation background must stop forthwith... We must remind those behind the current treacherous shenanigans that when it comes to matters of protecting our revolution, the military will not hesitate to step in.”

Unnamed spokesmen for the opposition parties, led by the pro-Western Movement for Democratic Change

(MDC), were quoted in the *Guardian* stating that the army was “reaching out to discuss the formation of a transitional government after Mugabe steps down. Negotiations had been ongoing for several months with ‘certain people within the army’, a second senior opposition official said.”

The plan reportedly involves Mugabe resigning to be replaced by Mnangagwa, with opposition leaders taking positions as vice president and prime minister. This could likely take place only after a period of “transition,” involving Mugabe's cooperation in return for securing his own future and that of his family.

The scale of pre-planning domestically is confirmed by the reaction of other key political forces to the coup.

Chris Mutsvangwa, the leader of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association, which has been in declared opposition to Mugabe since 2016, issued a statement praising the military for its “bloodless correction of gross abuse of power” that would return Zimbabwe to “genuine democracy”.

Nelson Chamisa, deputy head of the MDC, called for “peace, constitutionalism, democratisation, the rule of law and the sanctity of human life,” while Tendai Biti, Zimbabwe's former minister of finance called for the creation of “a traditional authority” that was “inclusive with the opposition and the ruling party” and also involved the African Union and the United Nations.

The internal constellation of forces reflects the backing of key international players in Zimbabwe.

The major imperialist powers, led by the United States and the former colonial ruler, Britain, have been working for Mugabe's downfall for years—since he was forced to take a stand against IMF-dictated structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s that had threatened the economy with collapse.

With breathtaking cynicism, UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson told parliament, “We cannot tell how developments in Zimbabwe will play out in the days ahead,” but “We will never forget the strong ties of history and friendship with that beautiful country;

accurately described as the jewel of Africa.”

In reality, after bloody colonial rule and then sponsorship of the racist regime in Rhodesia, post-independence in 1980 the UK returned to the offensive throughout the 2000s by supporting crippling sanctions against Zimbabwe. By 2008, they had led to the second most severe episode of hyperinflation in recorded history, peaking at 500,000,000,000 percent.

The national currency was scrapped and replaced, while the dollar became the unofficial currency. More businesses failed and workers were driven back to the land recently compulsorily seized by Mugabe.

Support for Mugabe from the African National Congress government in South Africa was key to his survival. But the sanctions, including those placed on the sale of “blood diamonds”, also had the unintended consequence of leaving Zimbabwe wide open to Chinese investment and influence. China became Zimbabwe’s largest investor and trading partner, including taking over diamond mining from the military to bypass sanctions.

The plans for the coup were therefore formulated in direct cooperation with Pretoria and Beijing.

South African President Jacob Zuma issued a statement explaining that he had spoken to Mugabe, who was “fine” and called for a peaceful transition. More significantly, Mnangagwa fled to South Africa after Mugabe moved against him and flew back from there without difficulty yesterday.

Zuma issued a statement that he was sending “the minister of defence and military veterans, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula and the minister of state security, Adv Bongani Bongo, to Zimbabwe to meet Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwean Defence Force.”

The last thing Zuma wants is turmoil in a neighbouring state, focusing on accusations of an unaccountable leadership betraying an independence struggle, at a time when bitter conflicts threaten to rend apart the ANC and the Tripartite Alliance. Moreover, there is a danger of radicalising an estimated 1-3 million Zimbabwean economic refugees in South Africa desperately seeking work.

As for China, Mugabe had recently taken steps that impacted negatively on its investors. Last year, his government decided to end all contracts involving Chinese companies in lucrative diamond fields. Legal challenges were taken out and China said it was reconsidering plans to fund multi-billion-dollar energy and infrastructure deals signed in 2014 and 2015. Mugabe stated that private companies had “robbed” Zimbabwe of

its diamond wealth and he would nationalise mining. Zimbabwe was the eighth largest diamond producer in the world with 4.7 million carats in 2014, according to Kimberly Process.

Last week army head General Chiwenga made a visit to China, where he met Defence Minister Chang Wanquan on Friday to discuss renewed relations between the two countries. He was accompanied by other officers who met their counterparts at the People’s Liberation Army headquarters. The topic of discussion will have been this week’s coup.

Reports suggest some popular sympathy for the coup, fuelled in large measure by the desperate economic straits of the bulk of the population amid the naked self-enrichment in ruling circles that became synonymous with “Gucci Grace,” her extravagant shopping trips and the playboy lifestyles of her sons in South Africa.

Almost three quarters of the population lives beneath the poverty line on less than US\$1.50 a day. Unemployment stands at 90 percent and inflation is around 350 percent. Basic commodities cannot be found, let alone bought, and the electric supply could be cut by South Africa if the state-run power company Eskom does not honour its growing debt.

The military is also exploiting the prestige of the anti-imperialist struggle. But the reality of its economic and political orientation will inevitably pit it against the working class and rural poor.

War Veterans leader Mutsvangwa made clear the pro-imperialist, anti-working class economic agenda behind the coup when he urged South Africa, southern Africa and the West to reengage with Zimbabwe because rule by the military would usher in a “better business environment.” What the army will do to create such an environment will be to brutally suppress social and political opposition.



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