

## How Mnangagwa is plotting to take over opposition in Zim

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President Emmerson Mnangagwa

### **“We are everything”**

“We must be respected. We are the majority. We are the people. We are the government. We are the army. We are the air force. We are the police. We are everything you can think of. We determine who can do mining in Zimbabwe. We determine who can construct a railway line in Zimbabwe. We determine who can build a road in Zimbabwe. No other party can do so!”

This was Zimbabwe’s leader Emmerson Mnangagwa a few years ago. He was speaking at a political gathering. At the time, he was deputising Robert Mugabe. In one sense, the words were a description of the totality of control that Zanu PF held over the state and its institutions. Since 1980, there has been a conflation of party and state, which has left the latter completely emasculated.

In another sense, the words represented Mnangagwa’s vision of his kind of state; a typically totalitarian state in which the ruling party controls virtually everything and the opposition plays a meaningless role.

For Mnangagwa, the opposition is no more than a nuisance. If it is to be allowed, it is merely for purposes of appearances — a gimmick to hoodwink the rest of the world. If it cannot be obliterated, it must be controlled. This is a state in which critique of the government is not permitted. Citizens must toe the line. It is a system where patronage dominates, ahead of merit. There is a very small caste of elites which is engaged in a process of grand accumulation of personal wealth on the back of public resources. The type of state Mnangagwa is establishing is called a kleptocracy.

### **The dictators’ playbook**

In the three years since he usurped power from Mugabe, Mnangagwa has demonstrated an unrelenting willingness and zeal to achieve his vision of a controlled and pliable opposition. This much is evident in how he has shut down democratic space by using the military to kill protestors in cold blood and detaining political opponents and activists on spurious charges.

The detention of political activists is now commonplace. By denying them bail and keeping them in filthy prison cells, the Mnangagwa regime is applying a strategy of detention without trial, commonly found in dictatorial regimes. These political activists are literally serving sentences before and without trial.

When they are finally released on bail, they are kept on remand for long periods.

During this time, their political freedoms are tightly restricted by severe bail conditions. Eventually the courts let them go because the case would have gone cold. The reality is that the state never had a credible case in the first place. It's a strategy of lawfare, whereby the law is weaponised against political opponents and critics. It also includes selective application of the law, whereby rules are applied differently depending on the political totem of the individuals. Those carrying the opposition totem are pursued relentlessly by the authorities, while members of Zanu PF are spared or treated with kid gloves. In this strategy of lawfare, Mnangagwa has roped in the police, the army, the prosecution and the judiciary, lending the systematic abuse a false coat of legality.

Basic political rights, such as freedom of expression or the right to demonstrate exist only on paper. In practice, they have been severely restricted. Human rights abuses by state agents including torture and abduction are not investigated. Instead, protestors against these abuses are detained. This is why Takudzwa Ngadziore, president of the Zimbabwe National Students' Union is in jail, while the abductors and torturers of Tawanda Muchehiwa, whose cause he was championing, are walking free.

In another case, the state is going hard against Joana Mamombe, a victim of abduction and torture who is suffering from anxiety and depression as a result. Yet it has no appetite to investigate cases of abduction and torture. When he appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the post-election violence in 2018, and the commission recommended the investigation and prosecution of offenders, Mnangagwa simply ignored it. No one has been prosecuted for the cold-blooded murders of six civilians.

Furthermore, using the dictators' playbook, Mnangagwa has embarked on a mission to change the constitution in order to consolidate power in his office. This is what the continent's first generation of dictators did soon after independence. They amended the constitutions to centralise power in the office of the president. If successful, the proposed changes will be a major reversal of the gains of the constitution-making process that produced the current constitution in 2013.

## **Annihilation**

However, Mnangagwa's dictatorial streak has been most evident in his tireless scheming to annihilate and take control of the main opposition political party, the MDC Alliance. Dictators prefer to rule without opposition. If there is any opposition, they would like to control it. For Mnangagwa, the strategic goal is very simple: to weaken the MDC Alliance by taking control of it through his surrogates.

To be honest, he did not create the fault-lines in the opposition. But their existence presented an opportunity which he has fully exploited in his strategy to gain control of the opposition. In them, he found an instrument to accentuate the divisions and go after the major threat to power represented by the MDC Alliance led by Nelson Chamisa. The endgame is clear: to weaken the MDC Alliance so much that Zanu PF will be left without any serious political competition.

Mnangagwa's strategic goal is not just a threat to the MDC Alliance as an institution, but to the very idea of political pluralism and serious opposition politics in Zimbabwe. It examines how Mnangagwa is using the apparatus of the state and surrogates in the opposition to systematically and methodically destroy the idea of political pluralism in Zimbabwe, leaving him and Zanu PF with untrammelled power.

### **What happened at the elections?**

To understand Mnangagwa's strategy to control the opposition, it is useful to present the position after the 2018 general elections. The main opposition contested the election as the MDC Alliance, originally a coalition of seven political parties. When the then leader and presidential candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai died in February 2018, he was succeeded by Nelson Chamisa. The succession was not without controversy, but Mnangagwa himself duly recognised that Chamisa was his opponent and the MDC Alliance was a political party.

That the MDC Alliance was a political party under the electoral law was never in doubt. Zimbabwe's Electoral Law recognises political parties and independents.

Political parties might form a coalition, but the law does not recognise coalitions. It only recognises political parties. Therefore, the MDC Alliance presented itself before the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) as a political party and it was recognised as such. Candidates were nominated as candidates of the MDC Alliance.

The formula for calculating proportional representation seats recognised the MDC Alliance as a political party. When Chamisa challenged results of the election, even the Constitutional Court recognised the MDC Alliance as a political party. I make extensive reference to this recognition to highlight the absurdity of the claims in recent months that seek to delegitimise the status of the MDC Alliance as a political party. It's nothing more than political gamesmanship designed to exclude and dismember the main opposition from the political community.

**\*This an abridged version of Alex Magaisa's latest posting on his blog The Big Saturday Read**

<https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2020/09/27/how-mnangagwa-is-plotting-to-take-over-opposition-in-zim/>

To read the full article:

<https://www.bigsr.co.uk/single-post/2020/09/26/Big-Saturday-Read-How-Mnangagwa-is-plotting-to-takeover-the-opposition>

Dr. Alex Magaisa is a prominent Zimbabwean lawyer and constitutional expert currently teaching law at the University of Kent Law School in England. Between 2012 and 2013, he was chief of staff and principal advisor to Morgan Tsvangirai, then Zimbabwe's prime minister in a coalition government and leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, the country's main opposition party. In 2011–2012, Dr. Magaisa served as a key advisor to COPAC, the parliamentary committee that wrote Zimbabwe's new Constitution, which was approved at a referendum and signed into law in 2013. He is the author of a widely acclaimed blog offering in-depth analyses of law and politics in Zimbabwe. During his fellowship, Dr. Magaisa wrote a handbook on citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms under the new constitution, a project aimed at enhancing a culture of constitutionalism and democratic citizenship in Zimbabwe.