

Understanding Mnangagwa's Political Doctrine

The Big Saturday Read (Alex T Magaisa) by Simukai Tinhu

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For many Zimbabweans, the 14th November 2017 was one of those rare moments in their nation's short post-independent history when everything seemed possible and the future promising. On that day, the military started a political process that culminated in a coup that toppled the nation's long-time authoritarian leader, Robert Mugabe.

However, euphoria quickly turned to disappointment when a wooden figure with zero charisma and a chequered past, was installed by the military. Emmerson Mnangagwa emerged as the army's favourite to lead the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and as head of state and government.

Publicly pretending to have struggled to shine his identity as a democrat under his predecessor, Mnangagwa presented his presidency as extracting and expanding the little democratic credentials that were left of the liberation movement from the rigor mortis of Mugabe's decades of authoritarianism. The way that he was going to expand the space for democratic activities in "The Republic", he announced through speeches and election campaign billboards, was by ensuring freedom of speech and association.

I was not the only Zimbabwean to be baffled by these announcements. Many of my fellow countrymen were aware that the politician making these promises was a man with zero track record in promoting freedom. His personal and political history has been at the intersection of some of the worst forms of democracy muzzling. This includes his chief role in the Gukurahundi genocide that led to the death of more than 20 000 Ndebele children, men and women in the 1980s, and later on a hecatomb [excessive loss of life] that he orchestrated against opposition supporters in 2008, resulting in more than 200 MDC supporters dead.

But, as he was soon to realise, talk of freedom in government that came to power through force is a dangerous contradiction. On the 1st August 2018, and January 2019, Zimbabweans decided to put Mnangagwa's pledges and promise to a proper test. They took to the streets to protest delay in the announcement of presidential elections, and what they saw as unjustified fuel price hikes, respectively. The president's delivery of test results was very fast. Mugabe's former henchman summoned the skills that he had perfected over the last four decades and sent soldiers onto the streets of Harare, the capital city. Unarmed young people and women were shot dead, some in the back as they fled.

The killing of innocent civilians in a relatively unfiltered form, including in front of international news cameras, was enough for many put to the side, the fabled idea of Mnangagwa's claims of "The Second Republic" as a democratic project.

But, realistically Mnangagwa was never going to open and expand the democratic space. This is because freedoms not only meant that he had to deal with investigative journalists who disturbed his redistribution of state resources, or opposition leaders shouting, "you are illegitimate in parliament", but more importantly, they risked knocking away a critical strut to the system that had brought him to, and was going to maintain him in power; his entente with senior military figures and ZANU-PF elites.

With no social base, these two elite political groups are the backbone of his power and remain important elements of his attempts at post-2017 political construction. It is the way these two political tribes – the military and ZANU-PF elites – survive, which is characterised by predatory economic practices that are unsustainable in a democratic country. The predatory economic system cannot withstand questioning by citizens.

But, despite attempts at quick reversals as characterised by the shootings, Zimbabweans have proved to be focused and accented. For now, many have turned to social media, and with the banning of protests and demonstrations under the cover of COVID 19 government prevention measures, innovatively, others such as writer Tsitsi Dangarembga have opted for lone protests. Not to be left out, artists have used the skills to caricatures the government in support of the narrative that Mnangagwa's government is inept and corrupt.

In response to these latest forms of peaceful forms of resistance, again, Mnangagwa has been brutal. Increasingly relying on hit squads, comedians have been abducted, sexually assaulted, beaten, and forced to eat sewage excrement. And, in a trial that has come to symbolise the repressive rule of his governance and seen as symptomatic of his hollowing out of state institutions, the investigative journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono who exposed the president's corrupt activities was arrested under trumped-up charges of inciting violence. The journalist spent four weeks in police custody.

What is even more worrying is that Mnangagwa has indicated that he is not done yet. Indeed, in a classical piece of unhinged dictatorship, his administration has made its preoccupation entering 2023 elections without Nelson Chamisa as the leader of the opposition: literally or politically. In cables provided to local embassies by his enemies in the cabinet and the state, Mnangagwa is rumoured to have lost badly in the July 2018 presidential elections. He lost to the young politician at a time when he thought the nation would vote for him as a thank you for removing Mugabe. This makes a 2023 election against Chamisa, when the economy is likely to be non-existent, a life and death predicament for him.

Instead of a mano a mano [head to head] battle with the youthful politician at the ballot box, the strategy that he has adopted to take down the elusive Chamisa is a scorched earth policy that involves taking apart the state in a manner that we have not seen before. The battleground that he has chosen is the entire justice system. The already corrupt national police force has been further compromised from where Mugabe left it. Rather than maintain law and order, it is now being exclusively used to arrest or harass anyone perceived to be a Chamisa supporter.

On the other hand, the attorney general's office has been turned into a tool used to make trumped-up charges against these supporters. Senior court officers, who over the years, have benefited from the land reform program through a variety of patronage systems such as being handed out vehicles, large state agricultural loans – and even large television screens by the state in 2013, and were already organic allies of the president's office, have been implicitly given one instruction; destroy Chamisa and the MDC. Even taking a personal interest, Mnangagwa created an unconstitutional Anti-Corruption Unit, based in the president's office as a mechanism to destroy enemies in the ruling party, and Chamisa and his party.

Indeed, in a comic move, in March 2020, a high court ruled that Nelson Chamisa was not the legitimate leader of the main opposition party, the MDC – Alliance. Instead, they handed over the party and its members of parliament to the leader of another MDC formation, Thokozani Khupe, who garnered only

45 000 at the 2018 presidential elections – Chamisa was voted 2.2 million against Mnangagwa's 2.4 million. They even handed over party headquarters to Khupe.

Unprecedented, and with many yet to process the meaning of these developments, these attempts mark a turning point in the country's post-independent history in two fundamental ways. First, the party, ZANU-PF that brought independence to Zimbabwe has for the first time, lost interest in ideas. Instead, it has decided to rely upon entirely crude methods to deal with the opposition.

Second, and most importantly, these developments highlight that in debates that characterise Mnangagwa's version of dictatorship, the terms that are used to describe his governance are inadequate. Academics like to use terminologies such as "electoral authoritarianism" or Fareed Zakaria's "illiberal democracy". However, his practice of politics does not fit any of these descriptions. Indeed, whereas authoritarian regimes practice exclusionary politics, Mnangagwa practices destruction of politics as seen by his determination to destroy Chamisa in particular, and the opposition in general even at the costs of his country, party, and the future of his large family.

What is happening in Zimbabwe under Mnangagwa should be read as an instance of state formation that has not been seen in post-independent Africa. Whether he is aware of this or not, Mnangagwa is reconfiguring the Zimbabwean state by combining some of the worst political practices that the continent has witnessed over the decades – Idi Amin's anti-intellectualism, Mobuto Seseseko's hollowing out of state institutions through corruption, and Hosni Mubarak's repressions – irrevocably changing the Southern African state to something that requires a new understanding. All this aimed at the total political control.

But, for a man who has never read a book – his thought process is disturbing making many wonder if he studied for a law degree at all – it is obvious that Mnangagwa does not understand that what he is trying to do has not worked in pretty much all historical contexts that it has been tried, and will certainly not work in Zimbabwe.

In today's world of social media, mass media, mass education, and globalisation, total control of society is only a dream. As David Runciman, University of Cambridge politics professor reminds us, in politics, nothing is harder than attempting to keep power from whom it belongs, the masses. This is because, "human beings" adds another Oxbridge intellectual, Perry Anderson, "cannot cease to strive for a social order in which they are not subject to inhuman necessities..."

In other words, this new strategy governance will only intensify the already raging battle between ZANU-PF and the people making the fragile equilibrium that he is trying to establish impossible for long. Eventually, he will need more bloodshed to maintain power. Therefore, Zimbabweans should brace themselves for more bloodshed under Mnangagwa's rulership.

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<https://www.bigsr.co.uk/single-post/2020/09/30/Understanding-Mnangagwa%E2%80%99s-Political-Doctrine?fbclid=IwAR3qEWz48PDNMNUBxsrziPynsHSiTvLGyvnJ0-6eZsZZ2P1qbPfunX-mKR0>