

A looter continua: For how long can Emmerson Mnangagwa and his regime cling to power?

Daily Maverick By Siphosami Malunga

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Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa. (Photo: Flickr / UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré)

When Emmerson Mnangagwa ousted Robert Mugabe in November 2017, Zimbabweans were full of hope that finally, their 40 years of repression and corruption had ended. But that hope soon faded, and now the question is — will Mnangagwa survive?

It honestly did not have to come to this. Having suffered under Robert Mugabe's cruel pharaonic rule for the biblical 40 years, Zimbabweans desperately deserved a rescue. This explained their euphoria when in November 2017, army tanks rolled into Harare to remove Mugabe. Mugabe's rule had been cruel, despotic, corrupt and violent.

Mugabe brooked no opposition, accepted no compromise, tolerated no criticism and envisaged no retirement. He presided over a corrupt system that had destroyed the economy and turned a breadbasket into a basket case, leaving millions living in squalor and destitution. He considered the country as his personal possession and anyone who disagreed with him as an enemy. But he did not work alone. He was the figurehead of a brutal system overseen by a small group of political and military elites that governed the country from 1980.

Concerned about the impending inevitable demise of their patron, the elite had started a vicious and violent squabble over his living carcass. It would culminate in attempted poisoning, dismissals, exiles and finally a coup to remove Mugabe. Zimbabweans long stripped of hope and dignity would be swept into the whirlwind of this illusion of change disguised as an operation to restore the legacy of the liberation struggle — when in fact it was simply a shuffling of the deck chairs. They would throng the streets to provide the legitimacy to help disguise the coup as a people's revolution.

Two-and-a-half years later, economically and socially worse off under the "new" rulers, routinely intimidated, beaten, tortured and killed, their vote still stolen, Zimbabweans seem to have finally woken up to the reality that they were duped into accepting an invitation to a faux revolution. They seem to now realise that they need their own "people-power" driven revolution — this time to remove the underlying cause of all their suffering — Zanu-PF.

Promises, promises

After malevolently removing and taking over from Mugabe, Emmerson Mnangagwa promised a cornucopia of changes. He promised political tolerance – long considered an anathema to Zanu-PF's hegemonic one-party state ideology that has seen the party unleash genocide on Zapu opposition supporters in the 1980s and the arrest, beat, torture and murder hundreds of MDC supporters and other critics.

In the beginning, it looked as if the promises would be kept. He visited terminally ill Morgan Tsvangirai at his home, agreed to give him back his state residence (part of his retirement package), denied to him by Mugabe and to assist with his medical bills. He temporarily tolerated opposition rallies, media criticism and discussion about Gukurahundi – the regime's genocide and atrocities of the 1980s in which Mnangagwa is considered a key perpetrator.

Having removed Mugabe through a coup, he realised that he needed political legitimacy so he promised free and fair elections. He promised to revive the economy. Zimbabweans had suffered immensely from the decline, with living standards dropping to the lowest in the world. Indeed, his ally, the former British High Commissioner to Zimbabwe, had touted his economic pragmatism as a selling point to other diplomats in rallying them to support the coup to replace Mugabe with Mnangagwa.

Mnangagwa promised to bring in billions of dollars in foreign investment. He promised to tackle corruption, for decades the primary scourge and source of the country's problem. Understanding that the terrible human rights record under Mugabe was an albatross for Zanu-PF, he promised to respect human rights in the "new dispensation". In an added effort to secure support of Western countries, he even promised to compensate white commercial farmers for the land the government had taken from them in a necessary, long overdue, but violently executed and corruption-laden land redistribution programme. It was one thing to promise so much. Delivering on the promises proved to be quite another.

Give him a chance

Intoxicated by the euphoria of Mugabe's removal and all-of-a-sudden inexplicably oblivious of the role of the coupsters in their misery during the four decades of Mugabe's despotic rule, many Zimbabweans would soak in the promise of change. Between his inauguration in November 2017 and the election in July 2018, Mnangagwa would enjoy a surge of support and good faith from notable individuals, including erstwhile critics of Zanu-PF in the media, renowned scholars, prominent business and civil society leaders, and others inside Zanu-PF.

He would be elevated to the status of new patron in Zanu-PF, just as Mugabe's disdain and bitterness would continue to be played out in public. The "give him a chance" brigade would throw itself at the service of the regime, playing a frontline role in sanitising it and attacking its critics whom it accused of being unpatriotic and partisan.

Many in the "give him a chance" brigade would join the various government institutions, commissions and advisory councils set up by Mnangagwa to create an illusion that change had indeed arrived, even as they watched many of the things that Mugabe did stay exactly the same, especially corruption and the violations of human rights.

But, having suffered so much for so long, many desperate Zimbabweans would also genuinely believe that Mugabe's removal and Mnangagwa's ascension presented a real chance for change. They too would join the "give him a chance" chorus which would rise to a crescendo going into presidential elections in which Mnangagwa represented Zanu-PF. Buoyed by this goodwill, optimism and propping, one would have expected Mnangagwa to maximise the second chance provided to him, Zanu-PF and his coup comrades to redeem themselves, and undo as well as correct the damage collectively wreaked over four decades of misrule and set the country on a path of democracy, recovery and prosperity.

The great betrayal

The election in July 2018 turned out to be anything but free and fair. Mnangagwa maintained the pro-Zanu-PF securocrats in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, effectively denting any hopes of its independence and neutrality in the poll. The voters' roll – a default tool for electoral manipulation – was again kept a closely guarded secret until days before the election, again destroying all hopes in its authenticity.

He monopolised state media to the exclusion of other political parties. In a blatant vote-buying scheme, he used a government agricultural scheme to Zanu-PF's advantage, doling out seed, fertiliser, livestock and other goodies to the desperate, and hungry rural population so that it remembered where its bread was buttered when voting. Alongside the army rural deployment, this worked wonders for Zanu-PF, which swept the rural slate.

He deployed the army to violently put down protests against delays in the release of presidential election results, leaving six people dead and scores injured. He ignored the recommendations of an international commission – led by former South African President, Kgalema Motlanthe that he established – to punish army perpetrators of the shootings, choosing instead to promote the commander of the brigade that committed the atrocities.

When the election results came, there were complaints about manipulation of enumeration, transmission and tallies. The poll ended up in the Constitutional Court which ruled in Mnangagwa's favour, choosing an incorrect test and narrow approach to assessing the credibility of the poll. Worse, the court would take 18 months to give reasons for its decision on such an important national matter, adding fuel to allegations of judiciary capture.

While promising to open up the political space, Mnangagwa did the exact opposite. In the run up to the election, he tolerated opposition campaigns throughout the country, including in hitherto impenetrable rural areas. But he deployed the army to the same rural areas to intimidate the population whose memories of the electoral violence in the 1980s, 2000 and 2008 remain fresh. The electoral campaigning provided a mirage of an open environment for elections while in reality fear remained pervasive, especially among rural folk.

He maintained draconian legislation that stifled political activity by requiring that political parties seek police permission to hold meetings. As a matter of practice, police refused to grant such permission, routinely and violently disrupting political meetings. Using a judiciary that is widely considered as being captured and compromised, he hounded the opposition using questionable court judgments to decimate and disorient the resurgent young opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa.

He used parliament, overseen by a member of Zanu-PF, to recall opposition members of parliament as a strategy to hobble the main MDC-Alliance opposition while maintaining a charade of a national dialogue process (Polad) with a coterie of losing and unpopular presidential election candidates that mustered no more than 5% of the vote against Chamisa's almost 50% in the July 2018 elections.

Mnangagwa continued to maintain and resort to legislation – struck down by the Constitutional Court – that criminalises statements meant to bring the name of the president into disrepute, essentially choking legitimate criticism as part of egregious attacks on constitutional rights to free speech. He unleashed his intelligence and police against citizens who criticised him to instil fear in the population even as he well knew that his actions were unconstitutional.

Faced with peaceful public protests about a range of citizens' grievances, ranging from poor wages for health workers and teachers, poor conditions in hospitals, to insensitive increase in prices of fuel, food, and other basic needs, he deployed the police and army police to break up protests, beat up and arrest thousands of protesters who were subsequently hurriedly tried and jailed in Kafka-esque trials.

Mnangagwa did the exact opposite of fighting corruption, maintaining a system of primitive accumulation in which a small predatory elite of which he is patron, and which benefits from corruptly issued state contracts and tenders. His government used financial-making policy to privilege and advantage his coterie of cronies like Kuda Tagwirei and his Sakunda Fuels with a fuel monopoly and through opaque Central Bank measures that provided arbitrage and money-laundering opportunities, on which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) blew the whistle.

He once again facilitated the grand theft of citizens' bank balances using the reintroduction of the Zimbabwean dollar currency and again when he changed it back via a High Court judgement, but this time to help the government and his cronies avoid paying back debts that had been incurred in US dollars. With every disastrous economic policy and currency decision by his finance minister, inflation would skyrocket to at least 700% (second only to Venezuela) with the USD: \$ZWL exchange rate rising to 1:70 by end of May 2020 even as the government officially pegged it at the absurd USD1:25, three times its real value.

In the face of declining economic and living conditions, he ramped up his regional and international travel, insensitively hiring luxury jets from as far as the United Arab Emirates to take him only 400km away within Zimbabwe. He appointed known corrupt ministers, paying lip service to substantiated complaints about high-level corruption, including the grand looting of over \$300-million of the citizens' pension fund by his minister.

As a meaningless token and smokescreen, he appointed a presidential anti-corruption team that delivered nothing while his reconstituted Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission acquired the "catch and release" moniker. His government failed to account for \$3-billion of the agriculture subsidy, most of which reportedly went to Tagwirei.

He took advantage of the Covid-19 crisis to issue a fiat banning public passenger transport providers to clear the deck for market capture by government and Tagwirei-controlled Zupco via inflated procurement contracts. Reports emerged recently about inflated government contracts awarded to companies to supply personal protective equipment and Covid-19 testing kits worth tens of millions of US dollars. Some of these contracts are linked to a company connected to the president's son, Collins Mnangagwa.

Despite efforts to launder his and Zanu-PF's reputation in the international space, including by paying millions to lobby groups in the US, Mnangagwa's promised billions in foreign investment would not come. Between November 2017 and now, Zimbabweans experienced the sharpest declines in their already terrible living standards in decades. The currency policies – reintroducing the Zimbabwe dollar without making necessary adjustments to earnings, eroded the purchasing power of salaries, leaving people effectively earning a tiny fraction of what they earned before and unable to survive.

When doctors, nurses, teachers and other workers protested against these poor wages and working conditions, he would unleash the police to break up demonstrations and even deploy shadowy thugs to abduct their leaders, who would be tortured and left for dead on the outskirts of Harare. Abductions of government critics or perceived opponents would be commonplace and take sadistic, sexist and cruel forms.

In the latest, government security agents abducted three female opposition activists from a police station in Harare and tortured, and sexually abused them for almost 48 hours before dumping them about 90km from Harare. In January 2019, Mnangagwa deployed the army to quell a citizens' protest against unjustified fuel increases – aimed again at benefiting Tagwirei and his own interests – and later boasting that he had asked the army to “use a whip laced with salt” against protesters even as he was aware that the army had committed atrocities, including killings and rapes, against unarmed citizens in the aftermath of the protests.

Zimbabweans would experience unprecedented power outages first lasting up to 23 hours, then days or even weeks. In addition to rationing, clean running water would disappear from most urban areas. With doctors and nurses constantly on strike for better pay and conditions, no medicines, facilities and equipment, all major hospitals would be turned into death traps and morgues.

In all this and seemingly oblivious and insensitive, Mnangagwa would boast of the best morgue he had once helped build when he was still a member of parliament. During this, the ministry of health would corruptly purchase obsolete equipment from India against the advice and judgement of public health experts. The government would ignore warnings about the impending cyclone Idai, mismanage and politicise the relief efforts leaving thousands stranded.

After the great \$3-billion heist of the command agriculture funds – ostensibly meant to ensure food security – the country would be unprepared for the drought in 2018, which now leaves over seven million people facing starvation. Never to waste an opportunity to loot, the tender for importation of relief maize from Tanzania would be inflated three-fold.

Covid-19 salt to the wound

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Asia, predictions of its arrival in Zimbabwe were especially dire. There was consensus that already devastated by multiple social and economic crises, which included in healthcare, food, economic, education and many other sectors, the impact of Covid-19 on Zimbabwe would be especially devastating on the population.

The health sector, long collapsed, would simply not be able to cope. The predictions turned out to be true. Despite receiving advance warnings and lessons from other countries including China, the government was dismissive of the threat with the defence minister making snide remarks that Covid-19 was punishment against Americans for their position on Zimbabwe. Afraid of upsetting its geopolitical

partner, the government would fail to implement travel bans from China and other high-infection countries until it was almost too late.

Led by an equally incompetent and unqualified health minister, Obadiah Moyo, whom Mnangagwa has inexplicably retained despite multiple epic failures, the country did not have a strategy for Covid-19. It would rely on testing kits donated by Chinese billionaire Jack Ma and would fail to even distribute these in time. Covid-19 would find health workers unprepared and unprotected, health infrastructure for infectious diseases non-existent and treatment facilities and equipment unavailable.

The largest burden of mobilising support for the Covid-19 response would be borne by citizens, coming together to raise funds for personal protective equipment for health workers, sanitisers and refurbishment of isolation facilities. The pandemic would expose and reveal shocking levels of elite self-interest and corruption with reports of preferential treatment for the first reported case, Zororo Makamba, son of former Zanu-PF member of parliament, James Makamba, who later died. This would be followed by reports of the establishment of private Covid-19 treatment facilities for the elite and its families by Tagwirei.

Implemented, oblivious to their local reality of food and other shortages, the globally recommended physical distancing and lockdown protocols would present a challenge for millions of Zimbabweans who had to make the false choice between whether to die from starvation or from Covid-19.

Never to miss an opportunity from a crisis, Mnangagwa would use Covid-19 to entrench his authoritarian rule, passing regulations that stifle free speech, arresting journalists, deploying police and soldiers to violently enforce the lockdown, using the lockdown to decimate the opposition and unleashing state agents to abduct, torture and sexually abuse female opposition activists, including a parliamentarian. Fearing that the combined impact of food shortages, economic crises and political contagion would trigger a public backlash against his government, Mnangagwa would extend the Covid-19 lockdown indefinitely in a decision devoid of any justification and rationality, and without any reference to scientific evidence or advice.

#ZanuMustGo

Two-and-a-half years after the coup, and two years after the election, consensus seems to have emerged on Mnangagwa's failed leadership and his inability to salvage the country from its downward spiral. Internal rivalries inside Zanu-PF are an open secret with new factions that pit Mnangagwa against his deputy, Constantine Chiwenga. The public spats between his close ally and former deputy information minister, Energy Mutodi and his boss Monica Mutsvangwa and Foreign Minister, former army general Sibusiso Moyo – one of the leading actors in the coup – suggest that the fallout is more serious than Zanu-PF is willing to admit.

But, the "give him a chance" brigade long began the process of jumping off what they considered a sinking ship – firing salvos about the inability of the system to change as they did so. In the latest development, one of Mnangagwa's advisers, businessman Shingi Munyeza – who is also a pastor – has used his weekly sermons to castigate corruption, nepotism and cronyism, and called on young people to rise up against what he calls the "occult" and "system" without directly mentioning Mnangagwa.

In view of the internal fractures in Zanu-PF and the enduring elite interests, many remain sceptical about the authenticity of these calls, especially because he remains an adviser to the very system he has

castigated and is cryptically unwilling to be direct about the problematic cog in the wheel and the solution he proposes.

In all this, the real shift appears to be among Zimbabweans, who, having endured 40 years of suffering at the hands of the Mugabe-led Zanu-PF, now realise that they were duped into believing the *faux changement* promise by the same Zanu-PF elite under Mnangagwa. Having endured further and even worse suffering and disappointment – and now at the hands of the same self-entitled and selfish Zanu-PF elite, which continues to govern corruptly, loot public resources, stifle freedoms, abuse, torture and kill citizens – the people’s patience appears to have been tested beyond all limits and has worn razor thin.

This is exacerbated by the constant taunting, testing and excessive doses of arrogance by Zanu-PF leaders and propagandists, which seem to suggest to Zimbabweans: “We will continue to abuse, torture, kill and steal from you unless you stop us.” In this regard, Mnangagwa and Zanu-PF may possibly have stretched their luck too far and Zimbabweans may soon call their bluff.

There is experiential evidence of this possibility: In Malawi, after years of apparent docility, a citizens’ movement emerged to reject the fixed outcome and demand fresh elections after elections were manipulated by President Peter Mutharika. The movement successfully defied violence, killings and intimidation, and endured for over a year, culminating in an independent adjudication of the electoral petition by the courts and a decree to nullify the election, and order a fresh poll.

In Tunisia, in 2010, although living conditions were comparatively better than Zimbabwe’s current ones, a self-immolation by a street vendor, caused by economic hardship, triggered a 28-day public protest and what became the Jasmine Revolution that ousted long-time president Zine El Ben Ali – in power for 24 years.

In Egypt, in 2011, declining living conditions and an oppressive governance system triggered public protests that culminated with demands for President Hosni Mubarak’s resignation.

In Burkina Faso, in 2014, attempts by former President Blaise Compaore to extend his 27-year term in office triggered countrywide protests that culminated in his resignation.

More recently in 2019, an attempt by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to seek a fifth term in office triggered successful public protests to demand his resignation and radical changes in the political system in what came to be known as a Revolution of Smiles.

In Sudan, increases in the price of basic goods, including fuel and bread in December 2018 triggered protests that continued for eight months, culminating in the ouster of President Omar al Bashir, in power for 30 years.

Just a matter of time

No one can say with certainty when a people’s revolution will happen in Zimbabwe, but for a country where the living conditions have declined to unbearable and desperate levels, and the political system is impervious to reform and unashamedly continues to corruptly serve a small elite and impoverish the citizenry, it is surely just a matter of time.

Undoubtedly, the shift by citizens from national consciousness to consensus and then to action is not easy and direct, but the fact that it is no longer a question of whether a revolution will happen in Zimbabwe, but when, suggests that the “revolutionary party” Zanu-PF’s days may be numbered. When the time comes, experience has shown that it will not matter that it has the strong backing of the army. All other revolutions that have successfully taken place elsewhere have been against repressive regimes with far stronger armies. **DM**

Siphosami Malunga is a human rights lawyer and Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (Osisa) director in Johannesburg. He writes in his personal capacity.

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