

International Community and the Change of Power in Zimbabwe: An AppraisalEze Raphael C* (Ph.D)¹, James E. Agena, (Ph.D)²¹Department of Political Science Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria²Department of Political Science Ebonyi State University, Abakiliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria***Corresponding author**

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Abstract: The thirty seven (37) years old rule of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe was brought to an abrupt end when on the 14th of November, 2017, the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) seized the State Radio and announced a temporal seizure of power which ultimately resulted in the resignation of Mugabe and the installation of his erstwhile impeached deputy (Emmerson Mnangagwa) as the President of Zimbabwe. This paper interrogates the objectives of the Defense Forces of Zimbabwe in disrupting democracy in the country and the international response. Using the Conspiracy theory as an explanatory framework, the paper questioned the positive approval of the international community to this undemocratic change of power. The paper reveals that even the African Union that vowed to resist any undemocratic change of government in the continent is silent and this may not be unconnected with their questionable loyalty to Western powers. The implication is that should the African Union (AU) and international community legitimize the current situation in Zimbabwe, it will breed a new wave and method of changing democratic governments in the continent. Necessary panacea was also proffered.

Keywords: International Community, Change of power, Democratic Government, Zimbabwe, Mugabe.

INTRODUCTION

The stability in Zimbabwe political system was truncated when on the 14th of November, 2017, some mutinous members of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) took over the state radio and announced that the military was going after members of the ruling government of President Robert Mugabe who are corrupt and have inflicted untold hardship on the citizens of Zimbabwe. While the entire populace was still wondering over this unexpected military coup in Zimbabwe, the spokesman of the ZDF, Major General S.B Moyo in a broadcast defended the action of the military and allays any fear from the citizens and members of the international community. In the broadcast, the army spokesman stated thus:

Firstly, we wish to assure the nation that his Excellency, the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe and Commander-in-Chief of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces and his family are safe and sound and their security is guaranteed. We are only targeting criminals around him who are committing crimes that are causing social and economic suffering in the country in order to bring them to justice. To both our people and the world beyond our borders, we wish to make it abundantly clear that this is not a military takeover of government. What the Zimbabwe Defense Forces is doing is to pacify a degenerating political, social and economic

situation in our country which if not addressed may result in violent conflict [1].

Notwithstanding the excuse of the military that their intervention in the political scene of Zimbabwe was not a military takeover but targeting the criminals around President Mugabe, the eventual resignation of President Mugabe from his most cherished exalted office renders the argument of the military futile. It can be said that power succession in Zimbabwe may have driven the military to act in that manner.

While, it could be said that President Mugabe has in many instances successfully fought many battles in the area of power succession culminating in his hold-on-to power for twenty-seven (27) years, he was blindfolded to the events of 14th November, 2017 because of the trust and confidence he had on the Zimbabwe military. In an interview with *New Africa magazine* of May 2007, Mugabe dismissed the possibility of a military coup in his country thus:

Oh come on, we are talking of a country with an army that has established its name, and not only have we fought against the Rhodesians here, we've gone to secure the Mozambican issue you remember, we've also been to various other places, to DR Congo and so on, and two of our commanders were chosen by the UN to command its forces in Angola. It is a solid and well

trained army, they are professional. Talking about a coup is just trying to suggest that they should think of a coup but they will dismiss it as nonsense and completely unbecoming [2].

Be that as it may, President Mugabe's misjudgment of what the military was up to especially with the sacking of his deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa and the military subsequently warning that an intervention is imminent with the continued sacking of members of President Mugabe cabinet with liberation background. The ZDF commander, General Constantino Chiwenga while addressing the press stated *inter alia*:

It is pertinent to restate that the Zimbabwe Defense Forces remain the major stakeholder in respect to the gains of the liberation struggle and when these are threatened we are obliged to take corrective measures. It is saddening to see the revolution being hijacked by agents of our erstwhile enemies who are now on the brink of returning our country to foreign domination against which so many of our people perished. But what is significant to us and the generality of Zimbabweans is to remember that all these rebellions were defused by the military, but at no point did the military usurp power. 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 [3].

Mugabe ignored the concern of the military to his peril as the military eventually intervened in the Zimbabwean political scene that eventually led to his resignation and the subsequent swearing-in of his former deputy as the new President of Zimbabwe. However, the scenario that played out in Zimbabwe came with the attitude of the African Union (AU) and members of the International Community who had always acted quickly whenever there was an undemocratic change of power. The African Union in its constitutive Act included a provision of to decertify governments that came to power through unconstitutional means and mandated its Peace and Security (PSC) to use sanctions and suspension to police unconstitutional changes of government. However, it is obvious the African Union could not apply her instruments in the unconstitutional change of power in Zimbabwe. This sets a bad precedence for the AU in her resolve for democratic consolidation in the continent. Roessler [4] was not pleased with the inaction of the AU in the Zimbabwe situation. In his words:

A sounder approach would have been for the AU's Peace and Security Council to condemn the de facto coup – as it would be a de jure coup-and threaten to suspend Zimbabwe from the African Union until the military released Mugabe from house arrest, handed

over power to a transitional post-Mugabe government, and returned to the barracks.

Despite the sound and interesting suggestion about the best way the African Union would have approached the situation in Zimbabwe, he was further to point out the dilemma of the AU in the recent event in Zimbabwe thus:

As events played out in Zimbabwe, the African Union faced a conundrum: condemn the coup and the ZDF's de facto seizure of power but be seen (once again) to be shielding Mugabe from his political reckoning; or accept ZDF military intervention to absolve Zimbabwe and the African Union of Mugabe's dictatorial reign, though at the risk of legitimizing the use of force in politics [4].

The African Union was not alone in the obvious inaction in the coup in Zimbabwe, the United States, Britain and other big players in the International Community who are champions of democracy in the world never rose to condemn the unconstitutional change of power in Zimbabwe. What the United States, Britain and the rest did was to issue security alerts to her citizens in Zimbabwe. The question that is therefore central to this paper is the reason why the Zimbabwe's constitutional change of power is treated in isolation of similar situations.

Theoretical framework

The mutinous act of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces specifically on the 14th of November, 2017 that ended the over three decades of leadership of President Robert Mugabe presented a new approach in the unconstitutional change of power in the African continent. While Africa has been a safe haven for military interventions in the political process especially in the 1980s and 1990s, the continent in the turn of the 21st century is experiencing robust democratic tenets, a development which has seen almost the entire continent practice democratic government. Be that as it may, the recent activities of the Zimbabwe military that saw to the resignation of President Mugabe from his cherished office and the subsequent swearing-in of his erstwhile deputy that Mugabe sacked in a power play struggle as the substantive President presents a new paradigm in power succession.

An in-depth analysis and understanding of the entire scenario in Zimbabwe especially with the obvious inaction of the African Union and the International Community clearly depicts conspiracy hence the utilization of the conspiracy theory for a better analysis of the situation in Zimbabwe.

The conspiracy theory boldly explains events as being the result of an alleged plot by a covert group or organization or, more, broadly, the idea that important political, social or economic events are the

products of secret plots that are largely unknown to the general public. To Adewale [5].

Conspiracy theory is frequently used by scholars and in popular political culture to identify secret military, banking, or political actions aimed at stealing power, money or freedom from the people. The theory is based on the notion that complex plots are put into motion by powerful sudden forces.

Several scholars have written extensively on the concept. For Bakun [6] Conspiracy Theory is a belief which explains an event as the result of a secret plot by exceptionally powerful and cunning conspirators to achieve a malevolent end. He went further to assert that the appeal of conspiracism is threefold. First, Conspiracy Theory claim to explain what institutional analysis cannot as they appear to make sense out of a world that is otherwise confusing. Second, they do so in an appealing simple way, by dividing the world sharply between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. They trace all evil back to single sources, the conspirators and their agents. Third, Conspiracy Theories are often presented as special secret knowledge unknown or unappreciated by others. For Conspiracy Theorists, “the masses are brainwashed into believing the actions undertaken by the conspirators, while the conspirators congratulate themselves on penetrating the people through by deception” [7].

Jesse [8] identified five kinds of conspiracy theories and they include:

- The ‘Enemy Outside’ which refers to theories based on figures alleged to be scheming against a community from without.
- The ‘Enemy Within’ which finds the conspirators lurking inside the nation, indistinguishable from ordinary citizens.
- The ‘Enemy Above’ which involves powerful people manipulating events for their own gain.
- The ‘Enemy Below’ featuring the lower classes working to overturn the social order.
- The ‘Benevolent Conspiracies’ the angelic forces that work behind the scenes to improve the world and help people.

Taking Jesse’s classification of Conspiracy Theory being the handiwork of enemy within; enemy above; enemy outside and enemy below in showing the relevance of the Conspiracy Theory to the new style of military incursion into democratic governance especially as it relates to the scenario that played out in the undemocratic removal of long-time ruler of Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe from power, one cannot but agree with Jesse’s classification. It could be said that both the enemy above, enemy outside, enemy within and enemy below played very significant role in the ouster of Robert Mugabe. This is against the

backdrop of the realities that Mugabe’s regime is not only hated by members of the Western international community but even his most trusted military, his cabinet ministers and the legislature with the hungry masses praying for the day divine realities will see Mugabe out of power. The inaction of the African Union and the international community that abhors undemocratic change of power, the action of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces in making Mugabe to officially resign under duress, the threat from the legislative arm of government in Zimbabwe to impeach President Mugabe if he declines the offer of resigning his presidency and the unprecedented wide celebration of the citizenry over the fall of Mugabe is indicative of the conspiracy therein. This therefore shows that the various groups (outside and within) are involved in the unconstitutional removal of Mugabe from office with the military firing the first salvo.

Mugabe and the government of zimbabwe

From the status of a classroom teacher to that of a revolutionary that led a bitter struggle for the independence of Zimbabwe from British colonialism, Mugabe is viewed differently locally and internationally. He has been severally praised as a revolutionary hero of the African liberation struggle who helped to free his country from colonial rule. Conversely, he has equally been accused of being a dictator responsible for economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, racial discrimination, and human rights abuses, suppression of political opponents and critics and above all crimes against humanity.

Taking the above as a point of departure, it is intrinsic that a brief foray into the man “Mugabe” in the area of politics, economy (especially even distribution of land between the white minority and black majority in Zimbabwe) socio-cultural and foreign relation will suffice in this study.

There is no gain saying the obvious that Robert Mugabe was the champion of Zimbabwean politics having been instrumental to the struggle and eventual gaining of independence for his country. He was later to rule his country on gaining independence in 1980 and progressively ruled Zimbabwe till 2017 when he was unceremoniously ousted by the same military that have been protecting his authoritarian rule in the country. Mugabe’s political escapades are a subject of continued academic scholarship as there exist divergent views over the leadership of Mugabe in Zimbabwe for over three decades.

Reviewing the administration of Mugabe in Zimbabwe, Simmons [17] captured the interested period when Robert Mugabe as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe earned the praise of members of the international community when he stated thus:

As Prime Minister between 1980 and 1987, Mugabe called for national unity and preached racial reconciliation but his focus became the betterment of the country's poor and downtrodden black majority. He introduced free education and healthcare, built new roads and opened the doors to black citizens in areas of business that were formerly reserved for whites. Such policies won him praise as a father and a respected statesman, and he became a darling on the international stage.

Equally his 1980 victory speech when he won election as the Prime minister of Zimbabwe stands him out as a leader who not only was interested in genuine reconciliation with the colonial masters but was also a peaceful man. In his words quoted *inter-alia*:

The wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten. If ever we look to the past, let us do so for the lessons the past has taught us, namely that oppression and racism are inequalities that must never find scope in our political and social system. It could never be a correct justification that just because the whites oppressed us yesterday when they had power, the blacks must oppress them today because they have same power. An evil remains an evil whether practiced by whites against blacks or blacks against whites [9].

This reconciliatory speech endeared him more to members of the international community. He however did not stop there as in 1989, Mugabe rolled out a five-year development plan to boost the economy of Zimbabwe. According to Holland [10]:

In 1989, Mugabe set out to implement a five year plan, which slackened price restrictions for farmers, allowing them to designate their own prices. By 1994, at the end of the five-year period, the economy had seen some growth in the farming, mining and manufacturing industries. Mugabe additionally managed to build clinics and schools for the black population.

While the praises and encomium by the international community and even the local population lasted, Mugabe was to further embark on a controversial land reform leading to the redistribution of fertile lands to the black population from the whites. This policy of government got a backlash from the Anglo-America-led Western international community leading to sanctions against Zimbabwe. Writing on the fallout from the land redistribution in Zimbabwe, Alumadi [11] hailed the policy when he stated as follows:

What Mugabe and ZANU-PF achieved can't be undone-after defeating Ian Smith's apartheid regime together with Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU-returning land to the descendants of people from whom the land was stolen during British colonial rule. Even the New York Times, the establishment neo-orthodox economics

papers of records conceded that the doom and gloom predicted when the commercial farms were returned to Africans did not materialize and many Africans were as productive as or even more productive than the white farmers before them. Imagine if they had access to adequate capital.

Also writing on the major achievements of Robert Mugabe as President of Zimbabwe, Neyo [12] went down to comprehensively bring to the fore the major accomplishments of Robert Mugabe thus:

- Educating the people and instilling the value of education in the Zimbabwean culture. This may well be his greatest accomplishment. Compare Zimbabwe with South Africa. South Africa has a lot of employment opportunities and educational facilities, but the majority of South Africans don't value education. The school dropout rate is at 60%. They complain about lack of opportunities, but immigrants from Zimbabwe are getting all types of jobs because they are educated.
- Taking land from white colonizers and giving it back to its original owners, the formerly disadvantaged black people.
- Cracking down on crime. In Zimbabwe, you won't survive as a criminal because policing and gun control is very tight. The crime rates are low compared to South Africa which happens to be one of the top crime zones in the world.
- He is the brain behind the formation of SADC,
- Like Fidel Castro, he has stood up to Western powers. Western propaganda (including sanctions) has failed to achieve its objectives of destabilizing the country under his rule.
- Putting an end to white racism and reversing the economic fortunes of white colonizers in Zimbabwe. They no longer have that attitude of superiority towards their black countrymen. They have been humbled, unlike in South Africa where white people still look down on black people, and where racism is still rampant.

International reaction to the ouster of Robert Mugabe

Robert Mugabe's radical stance saw to the end of white colonial rule in Zimbabwe. He was hailed as the hero of Zimbabwean liberation and was subsequently rewarded with the Presidency of his country, a position he occupied as Prime Minister (1980 – 1987) and as President (1987 – 2017).

Within the period under review, Robert Mugabe fought many political battles within and outside Zimbabwe and this got to an apogee in 2008 when he (allegedly) lost presidential election to the opposition leader, Late Morgan Tsangarai, but was however pressured to form a government of national unity to avert further crisis in his country. However, the political intrigues and horse-trading that followed this

unholy union between Mugabe and the opposition brought nothing positive to the government and the union could not last beyond one term thereby making political succession in Zimbabwe a herculean task.

Be that as it may, there is no gainsaying the fact that political succession is an inevitable part of human existence and no matter the duration, it must come to pass. Jinadu [13] lends credence to this when he posits that:

The concern with political succession is not unrelated to the inevitability of change, ageing, and death as manifestations of a basic human predicament, scarcity. Therefore, no matter for how long political power is monopolized by a single, 'messianic' leader, who patronizingly or paternalistically harps on his or her indispensability, the reality is that, sooner or later the ineluctable dynamics of the process of economic and socio-political change, and the manifestations of human frailty, like ageing and death, will unfold themselves to complicate the leader's political succession calculations, and show that he/she is fighting against time: political succession is merely delayed, and will remain a constant item on the political agenda.

The political succession war in Zimbabwe took a more serious dimension in 2008 when the ZANU-PF Party that have been controlling the machinery of government since independence in 1980 lost election to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The popular expectation at the time was that ageing Mugabe's time was up and therefore the urgent need for a younger and more vibrant successor but this was not to be as Mugabe continued to rage on. This electoral loss led to the formation of the government of national unity with the opposition. The unworkability of the unity government saw Mugabe calling for another round of election in 2012, while the opposition was of the opinion that all the items contained in the Global Political Agreement (GPA) that gave birth to the inclusive government should be implemented before any other election and as Welshman [14] remarked, Zimbabwe faced a choice between premature election and the fulfillment of the GPA.

Despite the position of the opposition party, Mugabe was favourably disposed to election in 2012, judging from the realities that the unity government is not working. In a speech to ZANU-PF faithful, Mugabe states that:

We are saying that we just have to have elections in 2012. The unity government has overstayed its welcome. Our country does not have an elected government. I am President to a political arrangement which is makeshift, undemocratic and illegitimate [15].

Notwithstanding the outcry of the opposition, the election went on and Mugabe had a resounding

victory that brought an end to the government of national unity giving Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party sole control of the machinery of government. This development brought to the fore the position of Zindoga [16] when he states that Mugabe's MDC rivals hoped that he (Mugabe) would be 88 years in 2012 and old age shall remove him from the electoral field. But they might have longer time to wait. However, the intra-party succession battle that followed this present term of Mugabe in the Presidency of Zimbabwe was unprecedented. This battle pitched the vice-president, Mnangagwa and the first lady, Grace Mugabe with the casualty being the Vice-President who was summarily dismissed by President Robert Mugabe.

The dismissal of the Vice-president was to further exacerbate the deepening political crisis in Zimbabwe paving way for the Zimbabwean Defense Forces (ZDF) to intervene by way of a bloodless coup that saw to the eventual resignation of Robert Mugabe from the Presidency and the recall and eventual swearing – in of erstwhile dismissed Vice-president (Emmerson Mnangagwa) as the President of Zimbabwe.

Democracy unarguably is the best system of government and the need to protect and defend democratic ideal the world over cannot be over – emphasized. To that extent, any undemocratic removal of democratically elected President ought to be vehemently opposed by the international community no matter the leader involved. However, the reactions that trailed the forceful removal of Mugabe from office leave much to be desired.

In his reaction to the removal of Mugabe, British foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson states thus:

While Britain must do its part to support peace, the transition represented potentially a moment of hope. Authoritarian rule, whether in Zimbabwe or anywhere else, should have no place in Africa... Elections are due to be held in the first half of next year. We will do all we can with our international partners to ensure this provides a genuine opportunity for all Zimbabweans to decide their future [17].

Also along the same line, a top official of United States department of state Donald Yamamoto opines that "it is a transition to a new era for Zimbabwe and that is really what the US is hoping for" (www.zambianobserver.com of Nov. 17, 2017)

China is said to be the biggest foreign partner with Zimbabwe. However, the government in Beijing had neither supported nor condemned the undemocratic change of power in Zimbabwe. This development is making rife the speculations that China indeed had a foreknowledge of the coup in Zimbabwe especially taking cognizance of the fact that the military chief,

General Chinwenga was in China few days to the coup. Tisdall [18] corroborated this view when he states as follows:

A visit to Beijing last Friday by Zimbabwe's military chief, General Constantino Chinwenga has fuelled suspicion that China may have given the green light to this week's army takeover in Harare. If so, the world may just have witnessed the first example of a covert coup d'état of the kind once favoured by the CIA and Britain's M16, but conceived and executed with the tacit support of the 21st century new global superpower.

In their reactions, the United Nations, the European Union and even Germany called for caution among the political gladiators in Zimbabwe as a way of resolving the political impasse amicably and in line with constitutional order. A German foreign ministry spokesman states that "All sides to the crisis in Zimbabwe should show restraint, we see developments there with concern. The situation there is confusing and unclear" [19]. Consequently, Catherine Ray, European Commission spokeswoman cautioned both sides to the conflict thus:

The recent development in Zimbabwe is a matter of concern to the European Union; we call on all the relevant players to move from confrontation to dialogue with the aim to a peaceful crisis resolution. However, the fundamental rights of citizens and the country's constitutional order and democratic governance needed to be upheld [20].

African leaders were not left out of reacting to the ouster of Robert Mugabe. The regional body, African Union (AU) in her reaction through the chairperson of the AU commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat opines that the organization was following closely developments in Zimbabwe and stressed that the impasse should be resolved "in a manner that promotes democracy and human rights, as well as socio-economic development of Zimbabwe". He further expressed "the commitment of the African Union to working closely with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the leaders of the region, and to support their efforts at resolving the crisis" [21].

Most African leaders spoke softly over the change of power in Zimbabwe judging from the realities that like Mugabe, they too have stuck to power for too long a period with the resultant growing agitation for them to quit the political stage. It was only the Botswana President Ian Khama who courageously called openly for Robert Mugabe to step down. He stated that "Mugabe should go and allow for an opportunity to put Zimbabwe on the path of peace and prosperity" [22].

In his comment on the coup in Zimbabwe, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, a longtime leader

like Mugabe vehemently condemned the *de facto* seizure of power by the Zimbabwe Defense Forces and sees Mugabe as a strong factor in Pan African Movement. He avers that Mugabe is one person who couldn't care what the West thought and that he spoke out for Africans' rights and Pan Africanism [23]. Notwithstanding his comment, Museveni announced policies to forestall such occurrence in his country. According to Catherine [24] Museveni immediately approved the raising of salaries of soldiers, public servants, health workers and the teachers as well as dealing with institutional housing.

Other African leaders reacted by taking certain measures especially against the opposition. Thus, "in Cameroun, Biya scrapped term limits and crackdown on the opposition. In Congo, Nguesso jailed opposition leader in the year 2017 for protesting against removal of term limits and Congo's Kabila has repeatedly postponed elections after refusing to step down and had cracked down on the opposition deadly protests" [25].

CONCLUSION

The reign of Robert Mugabe, a pan Africanist and Zimbabwe independence hero came to an abrupt end through a military conspiracy in 2017. Being a nationalist and one of the oldest and longest serving African leaders, Mugabe is noted for his hard stance actions against Western imperialism. Having amongst others encouraged education and affordable health care, he opted for the redistribution of wealth by seizing white owned lands and giving them to their original black owners thereby attracting strangulating politico-economic sanctions from the West under the smokescreen of promoting democracy and human rights that is hardly extended to the undemocratic pro-West authoritarian regimes elsewhere (such as monarchical oriented regimes in Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia that is recently promising the world, in this 21st century, to allow females to even drive car amidst other human rights abuses). The covert and overt Western engineered escalating economic and political internal crises in Zimbabwe and the attendant deteriorating and frustrating living condition of the populace created the Western required 'climate' for abrupt military intervention against Mugabe's regime.

Unfortunately, the reactions of members of the international community leave much to be desired. After the military compelled Mugabe to resign through a palace coup, almost all African Heads of State and their international organizations (such as African Union) at the standpoint of Western dependency syndrome cum neo-colonialism, kept mute in order not to bite the fingers (i.e Western aid donors) that feed them. On the other hand, the West instead of standing for their professed democratic mode of change of government, were rather happy for, at least, a regime-change against their age-long 'recalcitrant', non-puppet, courageous, nationalistic, pan-Africanist and anti-

imperialistic Mugabe. This is pure hypocrisy of the professed ideals of democracy and constitutionalism. Be that as it may, we recommend that:

- To obviate the opportunity for foreign imperialistic subversion under the ‘camouflage’ of ‘exporting’ democracy, human rights and the likes, nationalistic African leaders, rather than engage in office sit-tightism (like Mugabe) should groom and mobilize younger progressive elements for succession via regular free and fair elections; and
- African leaders should ensure prudent utilization of available resources and enthrone self-reliant economy upon which they can effectively (devoid of dependency syndrome) carry out independent national interest-oriented domestic and foreign policies and co-operate among themselves (especially via AU) against undemocratic direct and indirect external interest-oriented subversive activities in the continent.

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