



Post-Mugabe Elections in Zimbabwe: The Process and Implications

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On August 26, 2018, Emmerson D Mnangagwa assumed office as the new President of Zimbabwe. The moment came after a serious contestation as well as controversial challenge to the results of historic harmonised elections held on July 30, 2018. The event confirmed Mnangagwa as president for the next five years, constitutionally formalising the beginning of the post-Mugabe era. As the event is over, this issue brief attempts to examine the process as well as the result with respect to their domestic and international implications.

Importance of These Elections

The elections were historic in the sense that they were the first without Robert G Mugabe, the long-ruling 93 year old president forced by his military to resign in November 2017. Mugabe ruled Zimbabwe for 37 years since 1980, first as prime minister and subsequently the president. The celebrated anti-colonial fighter in postcolonial Africa and Asia gradually earned infamy for becoming a 'dictator' and bringing destitution and poverty to a once growing country with a promising economy. The poor state of Zimbabwean economy under Mugabe is represented by its national GDP declining from US\$8.784 billion in 1990 to US\$4.416 billion in 2008 which was less than what it had already achieved long back in 1979 (US\$5.177 billion).² The period between 1979 and 2008 saw several phases of growth and decline in GDP, primarily due to political tumults and lack of confidence in government's economic decision-making and management. The currency crisis in Zimbabwe is just one example of gross economic mismanagement in Zimbabwe which led to the fall of Zimbabwean Dollar to unprecedented levels (hyperinflation) till it was discontinued in 2009.

The hyperinflation happened in the context of grim domestic political situation and aggressive anti-white land redistribution implemented by Mugabe government in the late 1990s. Sanctions by United States (US) and European Union (EU) isolated Zimbabwe from the international community leading to deep economic and currency crisis. Foreign developmental funds and investments dried up. On the political front, Mugabe's rule remained in question due to lack of free and fair electoral process.

Although technically Zimbabwe is a multiparty democracy, it has been ruled by a single party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) since 1980.

Mugabe's rule had degenerated into a kleptocracy that justified its actions using anti-colonial/ 'anti-western' rhetoric. He and his family earned a reputation for amassing wealth and consolidating power by illegal means and heavy handedness. Despite old age and poor health, Mugabe stuck to power and also attempted to incubate his wife Grace as the future presidential candidate and the leader of his party, ZANU-PF.

There had been a growing discontent regarding Mugabe's rule and policies. The urban Zimbabwe exposed to the ways of governance in the outer world was more opposed to him and his regime. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance challenged and contested against the ZANU-PF regime promising a truly democratic Zimbabwe. Moreover, given the departure of Mugabe and the promise of Mnangagwa, sworn as president after the military 'coup', for a truly democratic and open Zimbabwe, the contest had become interesting. The international community, primarily the African Union (AU), EU, and US were closely watching these elections.

The Contestation and Doubts

The preparations of 2018 elections had begun long before Mugabe's departure. Seven opposition parties had come together to form the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance on August 5, 2017.³ The alliance chose Nelson Chamisa as its leader to contest for presidency. Although the situation had changed with Mugabe gone, the opposition still faced the same party backed by the formidable military that once had supported his regime. His departure did not change the party in government. The new president Mnangagwa was seeking to cement his position while the opposition saw him as just another protégé of ZANU-PF. Therefore, yearning of the government for legitimacy and a probable opportunity for the opposition to win drove intense campaigning and contestation. Although a product of Mugabe times, Mnangagwa projected himself as different. The fact that he had fallen out with Mugabe and was removed from vice presidency before helped him project this line. In his inaugural presidential speech after the 2017 'coup', Mnangagwa had said, "We have an economy to recover, a people to serve." He promised to reduce the perception of Zimbabwe as a high-risk country "among existing and prospective investors"⁴; and defined the post-coup conditions as "the second phase of its birth."⁵ Although there were other parties as well, the contest was primarily between ZANU-PF and the newly formed MDC Alliance that registered itself as a political party shortly before elections. Both sides promised similar democratic and economic changes but the ruling party had a baggage of resorting to force and manipulation and not allowing free and fair elections. So, as Mnangagwa distanced himself from the policies and ways of Mugabe, speculations about the (im)possibility of free and fair elections loomed.

The Process

Elections were held as scheduled on July 30, 2018. Although a bomb explosion killed two presidential guards, injured two of Mnangagwa's vice presidents and several other party officials at his rally in Bulawayo,⁶ there was a visible absence of violence and excesses by the government machinery during campaigning.⁷ Yet, before elections, the opposition was suspicious about the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's (ZEC) fairness. It claimed that ZEC had a shady deal with the government regarding designing, printing and storing the ballot papers to favour ZANU-PF candidates.⁸ Claims of voter register not being provided on time and irregularities in booth administration were also there, which prompted opposition protest-march to the ZEC, twice before the elections.⁹ Therefore, precisely to prove the legitimacy of election process, the

incumbent Mnangagwa government revoked the long standing ban on ‘western’ election observers. Among 63 invitees (both countries and organisations) to observe the process, he included EU and US representatives as well.¹⁰ The African Union Commission (AUC) sent a 14-member long-term observer mission.¹¹ Countries and organisations like India, China, Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) also sent their observers. The Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) brought together independent observers representing NGOs, parliaments and academic institutions from 40 countries including Mozambique, South Africa, Cape Verde, Mongolia, India, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Russia and Ukraine.¹² The pre-election procedures and environment seemed to be remarkably peaceful as compared to the previous elections in 2008 and 2013; and the ruling party was upbeat due to availability of more resources to spend. The polling on election-day was marked by voters’ enthusiasm and turnout.

Results and the Post-Election Chaos

The election process, hitherto running unprecedentedly peacefully, came under clouds of violence during the declaration of results. Among 210 directly elected seats in the National Assembly, ZANU-PF won 145 (69.04%) while the MDC Alliance was restricted to 63 (30%). The incumbent party in power also acquired 35 (58.33%) seats each in the women quota as well as the senate where the MDC Alliance could get 24 (40%) each.¹³ The two-thirds majority acquired by ZANU-PF gives it the power to amend the constitution unilaterally. But, the major contention between the two parties was the presidential result. A celebrating opposition encouraged by the early trends turned bitter later; and alleged massive rigging. Even before the counting was complete, Tendai Biti, an important opposition leader, announced that the MDC Alliance was sure that it had won the presidency and if the results were otherwise, they would announce their own results.¹⁴ Although delayed due to rigorous verification process, as claimed by ZEC, the final results were neither favourable nor convincing for the opposition. Mnangagwa received 50.8 (later revised to 50.6) per cent of the votes-pollled while Chamisa received 44.7 (later revised to 44.3) per cent. Meanwhile, the opposition had also grown impatient about the delay strengthening suspicions of rigging and manipulation. Its supporters started massive protests resulting in clashes with military personnel and six deaths. The government responded with charges of violence, arson and keeping illegal arms on the opposition; and arrested several of its leaders and workers. There were also allegations of abductions, intimidations, beatings and raping of people by members of the security forces.

The Challenge in Court

Nelson Chamisa went to court demanding cancellation of the election results. His lawyer claimed that there was massive “cover-up” and “doctoring of evidence” by the incumbent government.¹⁵ Their arguments were based on irregularities and discrepancies regarding voter register, counting process, several adjustments in results and manipulative activities including use of force by the government. They also pointed out several “imaginary” numbers at ghost polling booths as ballot counting at several booths were exactly the same. The opposition claimed that irregularities, wiped out the “narrow margin” by which Mnangagwa had avoided the second round of polls. However, the constitutional bench of the court unanimously decided against the opposition and declared Mnangagwa as the winner. The court highlighted that the opposition could not provide “clear, direct, sufficient and credible evidence”¹⁶ supporting their allegations; and dismissed the petition with costs.

International Observations

According to the ZEC, 202 foreign journalists covered the elections and a total of 1007 other foreign observers monitored it.¹⁷ Their task became difficult once violence broke out in Harare. A group of foreign observers had to issue a joint statement acknowledging “excessive use of force” by army and police to control opposition protests; and called them to “exercise restraint”.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the SADC mission reported “remarkable improvement in the exercise and protection of civil and political rights in Zimbabwe.”¹⁹ The AU mission concluded that the process, by and large, “was peaceful and well-administered”.²⁰ COMESA observers stated that it was “generally peaceful, transparent and adhered to national, regional and international standards”.²¹ However, there were negative opinions as well. Both the AU and SADC missions also pointed out the state media’s bias in favour of the ruling party. Among others, the US and EU observer missions had the most adverse opinion regarding fairness and level-playing field available to the opposition. Amid the process of enacting Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZIDERA) Amendment Bill extending sanctions,²² the US Department of State labelled the elections as “marred by violence” and alleged “a disproportionate use of deadly force against protestors.”²³ The EU mission observed that the “freedoms were respected during a generally peaceful campaign, but misuse of state resources and reports of intimidation of voters undermine belief in the right to vote freely.”²⁴ AU and SADC missions also noted the low credibility of ZEC but explained it as largely a residue of the distrust of institutions that had ingrained into the people due to past experiences. However, all field observers perceived an “improved” and more “inclusive” political space in Zimbabwe. Chinese authorities congratulated President Mnangagwa as soon as the results were announced. Their observer while advising the opposition to “exercise refrain from going onto the street” was convinced that the ballot process was “peaceful, orderly” and “credible”.²⁵ The Indian mission was satisfied with the conduct of the elections, and agreed with ZEC’s results.²⁶

Meaning and Implications

Domestically, the National Assembly elections reassert ZANU-PF as a powerful force. But, the fact that the second round of presidential election was narrowly evaded by a margin of just 0.6 per cent creates a problem of procedural and constitutional legitimacy of the government, given the alleged quantum of rigging. However, the difference of more than six per cent in votes-received by Chamisa and Mnangagwa strengthens the latter’s case in perception. Had this margin been of one per cent or less, the legitimacy of the government would have been further questionable. Mnangagwa still has a lingering issue of his image. To address this, he has resorted to consistent positive messaging in his interviews and speeches. His not going after Mugabe despite serious issues with him is seen as a sign of mature politics. However, assurances aside, there are doubts about the qualitative difference of Mnangagwa government as he has a history of working with and for Mugabe. The post-elections use of excessive force by army and police only adds to these doubts. Nonetheless, the international community has largely legitimised his election by labelling the process unprecedentedly “peaceful” and “free”.

Emphasising on a “sturdy reengagement programme with all the nations of the world”, Mnangagwa, in his recent inauguration speech, sought “foreign direct investment”, “inclusive growth”, “better livelihoods” and “better service delivery” for Zimbabwe.²⁷ Here, it is important to take into account the views of US and EU on these elections as they have been instrumental in enforcing sanctions on Zimbabwe. The US position on sanctions is crucial as the use of US Dollars by Zimbabwe after renouncing its own currency has improved its economic conditions. Although EU had eased sanctions much before the elections, its arms embargo and ban on key personalities

of the country continue. With Mnangagwa confirmed in power, both have decided to wait and watch his actions before any further relaxation.

Despite the toll exacted by the tremendous pressure exerted by the US, Europe and international financial institutions, Zimbabwe continues with its controversial land policy that had originally invited western sanctions. However, recently, the ‘international community’ also appears to be realising the futility of its position on Zimbabwe as it seems to achieve no change in Zimbabwean land policy. Although the new president seems keen to improve relations with the ‘west’, he is not likely to budge on this issue. Moreover, the international financial and geopolitical context is also changing, with Zimbabwe in a relatively better position to get new supporters despite sanctions; and try overcoming the financial drought. To achieve this, the country needs better economic management and a credible currency. With the alternative Asian finances and advice coming to Africa, if taken, this seems to be achievable; and President Mnangagwa is open to it. However, there is much on his shoulders, as he has to positively prove his qualitative difference from his predecessor. If he ensures his domestic political legitimacy and manages the economy better, this moment of change has an opportunity for him as well as the larger international community to mutually reengage and rebuild Zimbabwe.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ It was ‘harmonised’ as the presidential, parliamentary and local elections were held together.

² Zimbabwe, Country Profile, *World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/zimbabwe>

³ The parties constituting the MDC Alliance were: MDC-T (lead by Nelson Chamisa), MDC (lead by Welshman Ncube), People’s Democratic Party (lead by Tendai Biti), Transform Zimbabwe (lead by Jacob Ngarivhume), Zimbabwe People First (lead by Agrippa Mutambara), Multi-racial Christian Democratic Party (lead by Mathias Guchutu), and ZANU Ndonga (lead by Denford Masiyarira).

⁴ President ED Mnangagwa’s Inauguration Speech on November 24, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Explosion at political rally an ‘assassination attempt’ on Zimbabwe’s President Mnangagwa”, *news.com.au*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/world/africa/explosion-at-political-rally-an-assassination-attempt-on-zimbabwes-president-mnangagwa/news-story/4d6a961d0adee955a6bd93a8b15ec456>

⁷ Mugabe era elections used to be violent and were especially known for the security forces, police and the ZANU-PF supporters harassing and restricting opposition campaign to the urban areas only.

⁸ “Zimbabwe opposition marches on electoral agency to demand reforms”, *Reuters*, July 11, 2018, *Reuters*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-politics/zimbabwe-opposition-marches-on-electoral-agency-to-demand-reforms-idUSKBN1K11FW>

⁹ Ibid.

- ¹⁰ “Zimbabwe lifts ban on election monitoring by EU and US”, *The Irish Times*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/zimbabwe-lifts-ban-on-election-monitoring-by-eu-and-us-1.3458408>
- ¹¹ “African Union deploys long-term election observation mission to assess Zimbabwe’s electoral process”, *African Union*, July 16, 2018, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20180716/african-union-deploys-long-term-election-observation-mission-assess-zimbabwe>
- ¹² “Observer teams give polls thumbs up”, *The Herald*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.herald.co.zw/observer-teams-give-polls-thumbs-up/>
- ¹³ Data acquired from the list uploaded by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).
- ¹⁴ “Zimbabwe issues prosecution warning after opposition claims poll win”, *Daily Nation*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Zimbabwe-election-results/1066-4691374-11a5ymz/index.html>
- ¹⁵ “Overview: 'If Mnangagwa claims to have won the vote he should give us the figure,' says MDC lawyer”, *News24*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/Zimbabwe/live-zimbabwes-constitutional-court-hears-mdcs-election-petition-20180822>
- ¹⁶ “Overview: ConCourt declares Mnangagwa as duly elected president of Zimbabwe”, *News24*, August 24, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/Zimbabwe/live-all-eyes-on-zim-concourt-as-ruling-on-election-challenge-expected-today-20180824>
- ¹⁷ The total number of monitors of the 2018 harmonised elections given by the ZEC is 12,966. It includes foreign journalists, foreign observers, local journalists and local observers.
- ¹⁸ Joint statement by international election observation missions to Zimbabwe’s harmonised elections, July 30, 2018. The signatories on the statement were the representatives of AU Election Observation Mission (AUEOM), Commonwealth Election Observation Mission, SADC Parliamentary Forum Election Observation Mission, ECF-SADC Mission, COMESA Election Observation Mission, EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), Carter Centre Election Observation Mission, and the Joint International Delegation of IRI and NDI.
- ¹⁹ Preliminary statement released by the SADC Election Observer Mission (SEOM) on July 30, 2018.
- ²⁰ Preliminary statement released by the African Union Election Observer Mission (AEOM) on August 1, 2018.
- ²¹ Preliminary statement released by the COMESA Election Observer Mission (AEOM) on August 1, 2018.
- ²² ZIDERA Amendment Bill was passed by the US Congress only a few days before, and signed into an Act after the elections.
- ²³ US Department of State press statement on Zimbabwe’s Elections, August 3, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/284915.htm>
- ²⁴ Preliminary statement released by the EU Election Observer Mission (EU EOM) on August 1, 2018.
- ²⁵ “Chinese observers endorse July 30 poll”, *The Herald*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.herald.co.zw/chinese-observers-endorse-july-30-poll/>
- ²⁶ “Observer teams give polls thumbs up”, *The Herald*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.herald.co.zw/observer-teams-give-polls-thumbs-up/>
- ²⁷ “Inauguration speech by president ED Mnangagwa”, August 26, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/president-mnangagwas-inauguration-speech-in-full/>