

Political Instability in Zimbabwe: Planning for Succession Contingencies

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Political instability and potential violence are ever-present threats in Zimbabwe. The country's nonagenarian president, Robert Mugabe, born on February 21, 1924, has not established a clear succession plan. The nation's economy is perennially weak and vulnerable to shocks. The government suppresses the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Instability in Zimbabwe would be a threat to the region and especially to South Africa, which would lose trade revenue and gain the burden of additional refugees. It would also be a blow to U.S. interests in southern Africa, which are focused on support for good governance, trade, and investment. At the same time, post-Mugabe transition scenarios provide some opportunities that the United States could take advantage of by working with others, notably South Africa and the other countries of the southern African region.

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Editor's Note: Ambassador (retired) Ward's article was originally written in 2015, and the political situation in Zimbabwe has changed dramatically since then. Robert Mugabe resigned as Zimbabwe's president and former Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa was inaugurated in November 2017. Interestingly, many of Ambassador Ward's predictions about how events might evolve in Zimbabwe have proven accurate.

Potential Contingencies, Warning Indicators, and Possible Effects on U.S. Interests

President Mugabe has retained a tight grip on the levers of power within both the government and the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), but potential successors are jockeying for position. In 2014, Mugabe removed one potential successor, Joice Majuru, from her positions as vice president of both the government and party, and installed former Justice Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa in her place. Since then, Mnangagwa has not been able to solidify his status as successor to Mugabe. As political infighting has increased, so have the risks of instability and violence, which could play out along one or more of the following lines:

- *Mugabe dies or becomes incapacitated before installing a chosen successor.* Mugabe's health is clearly deteriorating. True to past form, Mugabe treats his current vice president as a figurehead rather than as a successor. Mnangagwa has not been able to cement the loyalties he would need to smoothly assume power.
- *Mugabe's control is challenged and undermined by growing factionalism.* The political opposition party in Zimbabwe is demoralized, discredited by electoral losses, and divided into factions. Nonetheless, the ruling party is also

divided, with factions crystalizing around Vice President Mnangagwa and First Lady Grace Mugabe.

- *An economic crisis triggers demands for political change.* Misguided economic policies, including land confiscation and forced indigenization of businesses, continue to depress productivity. Economic growth fell to 0.5 percent annually in 2016. No apparent plan is in place for resolving Zimbabwe's debt problem and returning the country to the economic mainstream. Renewed economic decline could lead to both civil unrest and new flows of refugees.

The following are developments that could warn of impending instability in Zimbabwe:

- *Further decline in Mugabe's health.* Observers should be alert for repeated absences by Mugabe from important state or party functions.
- *Increasing dissent, infighting, and factionalism within the ZANU-PF.* Party factionalism may be the most likely source of political violence. Observers should be alert for evidence of choosing of sides within the party by the leaders of state security organizations.
- *Public unrest.* Divisions within the ZANU-PF and increased activity by opposition parties have already stimulated an uptick in civil unrest. Observers should track trends and watch for changes in reactions to unrest by the major military and police commands.

Should a serious political crisis develop in Zimbabwe as a result of such developments, U.S. interests

could face one or more of the following negative effects:

- A humanitarian crisis generated by refugee flows or food shortages would likely require an expensive U.S. aid commitment.
- Hopes for a productive bilateral trade and economic relationship would fade, and U.S. trade with Zimbabwe would remain minimal.
- U.S. military forces might be needed to evacuate the small U.S. citizen population in the country, estimated in 2010 at less than one thousand.
- Frictions could arise between the United States and member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) on how to respond to human rights violations by the Zimbabwean government.

On the other hand, a stable and prosperous Zimbabwe would benefit U.S. interests. Zimbabwe is richly endowed with human and natural resources that could give it a leading role in shaping the future of the African continent. Bilateral trade and investment would likely build over time. Revival of Zimbabwe's agricultural sector would obviate continued humanitarian food aid. Eventually, Zimbabwe's security forces might play constructive roles in peace operations by the SADC and the African Union.

Ways of Preventing Violence

The United States possesses few policy instruments for directly influencing developments in Zimbabwe. Diplomatic relations are, at best, formal. President

Mugabe continues to characterize the United States as a hostile force. U.S. assistance to Zimbabwe provides little political leverage because it is channeled through civil society groups. The government in Zimbabwe's capital city of Harare likely assumes correctly that U.S. humanitarian assistance would continue despite political instability. Targeted economic sanctions are widely seen as having little impact, and Mugabe uses the sanctions to stir up rancor against the United States.

Two types of preventive strategies are available to the United States. First, the United States could use both positive and negative incentives to attempt to shape a political outcome. The limited policy instruments available to the United States, mentioned above, would constrain the effectiveness of this strategy. Further neither Zimbabwe's neighbors nor the European allies of the United States would be likely to join such a strategy.

Second, the United States could choose a less ambitious but more realistic strategy by seeking to minimize the risk of political violence and economic turmoil, while positioning itself to support post-succession opportunities for political and economic reform. Under this strategy, the United States could seek a relatively swift and uncontested succession in order to enable a new government in Harare to begin to attend to Zimbabwe's economic and social challenges.

No single outside actor has the capacity to directly influence President Mugabe's choices regarding succession, but a well-orchestrated multilateral strategy could help him and others understand the potential negative consequences

of decisions that would increase repression, deepen the country's economic problems, and lead to social instability. In pursuing such a strategy, the United States would maintain support for civil society in Zimbabwe and continue a frank and direct dialogue with the Mugabe government. It would also seek to persuade others to act as follows to prevent violence or, failing that, reduce the consequences of violence:

- South Africa and other SADC member states could remind President Mugabe of his responsibilities under the organization's statute to maintain peace and stability in his own country.
- China is Zimbabwe's most important economic partner with bilateral trade of over \$1 billion annually. In the interest of protecting its sizable investments in Zimbabwe, China might be motivated to privately indicate to Mugabe its concerns over the possibility of instability.
- The European Union (EU) countries could increase their involvement with civil society organizations in Zimbabwe and indicate clearly to the Mugabe government that they would consider reimposing sanctions in response to greater repression.

Mitigating the Consequences of Potential Violence

In addition to working to prevent violence, the United States could seek to reduce the consequences of any potential violence:

- With South Africa and other SADC partners, there could be quiet,

advance consultations on the response to violence in Zimbabwe. Advisory warnings to Mugabe by SADC countries could lay the basis for more meaningful measures in the future.

- In addition, South Africa and other states bordering Zimbabwe could ensure that they are prepared to deal with additional refugees.
- Even though China would be unlikely to agree to consult in advance on actions that it might take in the event of violence in Zimbabwe, the subject should be given a prominent place on the agenda for U.S.-China consultations on Africa.
- With the EU countries, the United States could coordinate contingency planning for humanitarian assistance, including food aid.

If, despite these efforts, significant political violence occurs in Zimbabwe, U.S. policy options could include support for the following:

- *Mediation by SADC.* The choice of mediator would be crucial. South African Vice President Cyril Ramaphosa was effective as a mediator in Lesotho.
- *Action by the United Nations Security Council.* China might block decisive action by the Council, but might agree to the creation of a United Nations special envoy for Zimbabwe.
- *Coordinated increases in economic sanctions.* Reimposition of EU sanctions could affect the calculations of the Zimbabwe government.
- *Intensified official U.S. and Western dialogue with moderates in the*

ZANU-PF. Senior figures in the ZANU-PF with extensive business interests might be interested in limiting violence.

- *Increased U.S. humanitarian assistance.* Additional humanitarian assistance, especially food aid, might be essential in order to assist large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Recommendations

In crafting its approach to a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, the United States should keep its broad regional interests in mind. Even as bilateral relationships with East and West Africa have grown stronger, U.S. ties with the SADC countries have tended to stagnate. This has been particularly true in the case of South Africa. Zimbabwe presents an opportunity to begin strengthening the U.S.-South African security partnership. Early contacts with South Africa, other SADC countries, European allies, and China should be pursued as follows:

- *Intensified interagency efforts to define U.S. interests and options in Zimbabwe.* In the context of a formal interagency contingency planning effort on Zimbabwe, the U.S. government should forge a consensus on the goal of limiting violence and economic turmoil in Zimbabwe, and define the incentives and disincentives available. The objective should be an integrated approach that focuses on practical, measurable steps that the government of Zimbabwe could take to permit greater political expression and liberalize the economy.

- *Open a consultative channel on Zimbabwe with the U.S. Congress.* The purpose would be to help members of Congress understand that positive change in Zimbabwe is likely to take place incrementally if at all, and to build a basis of trust for executive branch actions, whether carrots or sticks, further down the road.
- *Pursue understandings on Zimbabwe with South Africa and other SADC countries.* Conversations with members of South Africa's government under President Jacob Zuma should focus on achieving South African agreement to urge President Mugabe and other ZANU-PF leaders to avoid violence.
- *Consult regularly on Zimbabwe with senior African affairs officials in EU countries.* The objective of these contacts would be to work toward consensus on positive and negative incentives for Zimbabwe, including sanctions.
- *Seek to influence China on Zimbabwe.* The United States should propose regular, in-depth conversations on Zimbabwe, focused on persuading the Chinese government to support a peaceful political transition in Zimbabwe.
- *Seek senior-level dialogue with the Zimbabwean government in multiple venues.* To supplement contacts in Harare, the United States should seek to strengthen parallel communications channels in Washington, D.C., and at the United Nations.
- *Expand youth and student exchanges.* Consideration should be given to further expanding access by

young Zimbabweans to the Young African Leader Initiative and similar programs.

- *Ensure the security of the U.S. mission in Zimbabwe.* Plans for ensuring the security of the U.S. embassy and its personnel and for conducting an evacuation of those personnel if necessary should be updated regularly.

Looking toward the longer term, the United States should test the waters for expanding the bilateral dialogue. Given the economic plight of Zimbabwe and its humanitarian needs, there is potential for cooperation with a new government on trade and commercial issues. It would be possible to begin to unfreeze the bilateral relationship with steps such as trade and investment missions. The United States should then pursue political dialogue in close coordination with its Western allies and South Africa.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's problems, which have been created by decades of authoritarian misrule and poor economic management, will not be quickly solved. Any successor to Mugabe will have to deal with a bitter political legacy and difficult economic conditions. The alternatives open to the United States are limited by strained political relationships and minimal economic ties. The scarcity of options should not be a rationale for doing little or nothing. Rather, it should be seen as a call for the United States to focus on what is essential—reducing the possibility of political instability and civil violence

during the post-Mugabe succession—
while laying the groundwork for a

better relationship with an eventual
successor government.



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This article is based on “Political Instability in Zimbabwe,” Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 53 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Preventive Action, March 2015), <https://www.cfr.org/report/political-instability-zimbabwe>. A follow-up piece, “The Day After in Zimbabwe: Contingency Planning Memorandum Update,” was published online on June 15, 2017, and is available at <https://www.cfr.org/report/day-after-zimbabwe>.