

ZIMBABWE—WARNING LIGHTS FLASHING

By George F. Ward

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- President Robert Mugabe dies or becomes incapacitated before installing a chosen successor.
- Mugabe's control is challenged and undermined by growing factionalism.
- An economic crisis triggers demands for political change.

In recent weeks, there have been increasing indications that all three of these scenarios may be emerging. As a result, the risks of political instability and even of significant violence have increased. Although Robert Mugabe has earned his reputation as Africa's ultimate survivor, the threats to his rule are mounting to unprecedented levels. [more...](#)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses.



A man shows the new notes introduced by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe in Harare, Monday, Nov. 28, 2016. Zimbabwe has rolled out a new currency for the first time since 2009 in hopes of easing biting shortages of the U.S. dollar. Banks across the country started issuing the new currency, called bond notes, Monday. (Source: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi.)

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By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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Migrants stay in an impoverished neighborhood in the city of Agadez, Niger, April 27, 2015, until they have enough money to continue their journey through the Sahel desert to Libya or Algeria, as part of their path toward Europe. (Source: Photo by Kristin Palitz/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

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Charlotte Osei, Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Ghana. (Source: Electoral Commission of Ghana, "Leadership," <http://www.ec.gov.gh/about/leadership.html>.)

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Waning Health and Hints of Retirement

At age 92, President Mugabe understandably appears increasingly frail. Most recently, wide notice was taken of his ["wobbly" arrival](#) at the UN climate summit in Morocco in mid-November 2016. Soon after his return from Morocco, on Sunday, November 20, Mugabe gave a speech at a meeting attended by senior leaders of the government and security forces in which [he said](#), "If I am failing, let me know. I will go." That statement and others in his speech resulted in headlines such as, ["Robert Mugabe Announces Retirement."](#) Like many things in Zimbabwean politics, the story was not that simple. According to a [translated text](#) of Mugabe's speech provided by Africa Check, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting accuracy in public debate and the media in Africa, Mugabe also pointed out the importance of proper leadership transition:

We are in a critical time of regime change. To think that we will be toppled by whites who say, "we want to change the government of Zimbabwe"—which we fought for all these years, will we simply yield? I say no. . . . So change will come in good time. . . . If I have to retire, let me retire properly; people must sit down and discuss it cordially.

Dissension in the Ranks

The net impression left by Mugabe's speech was that of a leader who, while realizing that there eventually must be a succession, is determined to control that process and, in the meantime, has no intention of stepping down. The problem for Mugabe—and for Zimbabwe—is that the ruling ZANU-PF party is increasingly divided into factions and unable to govern effectively. As previously reported in *Africa Watch*, most recently in the August 18 [edition](#), allegiances are shifting even in the security sector, which heretofore has been the ultimate guarantor of Mugabe's power. Leaders of the powerful war veterans' organization have turned against Mugabe. With [political fractures](#) appearing in the military, the party faction led by Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa ("Team Lacoste") no longer can count on the unqualified allegiance of the security sector. Some senior military figures seem to be supporting the "Generation 40" movement. The *de facto* leader of the latter is Grace Mugabe, the president's wife, who recently said in a [speech](#) to the ZANU-PF Women's League that she "plans and does everything with President Robert Mugabe," leaving the impression that she is already running state affairs.



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The Gathering Economic Storm

The disarray within the ZANU-PF leadership was evident during the run-up to the introduction of so-called bond notes on November 28. Since its bout with hyperinflation in the past decade, Zimbabwe has recognized a basket of foreign currencies as legal tender, but the U.S. dollar has been dominant. Most recently, dollars have been in short supply in part because of the decline in Zimbabwe's ability to acquire the U.S. currency through exports. Bond notes were proposed as a means to address this shortage, which had led to lines of customers forming outside banks each night, hoping to be able to acquire dollars in the morning.

Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank chief was at pains to describe the bond notes not as a currency, but as [export incentives](#) pegged to the dollar at 1:1 and backed by a \$200 million facility provided by the African Export-Import Bank. Vice President Mnangagwa undermined this position in an October 6 [speech](#) that was reported by The Herald, a ZANU-PF mouthpiece, saying that the bond notes would be "a currency that circulates within its jurisdiction," and which "we can control."

Of course, the bond notes cannot remain both pegged firmly to the dollar and under the control of Zimbabwe's government or central bank. The [statement](#) made by the Reserve Bank upon the initial issuance of the bond notes emphasized the export incentive feature and the peg to the dollar. The Bank pledged to release bond notes "on a measured basis." It is not clear whether the Bank's pledge will be honored in practice. So far, the bond notes are being used as a substitute for dollars in bank transactions. Their function as export incentives has not been evident. [Reports](#) are circulating that banks have obliged customers to accept bank notes rather than dollars and that some merchants have refused to accept them. According to Reuters, [one money changer](#) demanded two "dollars" in bond notes for each U.S. dollar. Although it is too early to judge the fate of the bond note system, the specter of [Gresham's Law](#)—bad money driving out good—looms.

Growing Potential for Violence

Taken together, the deterioration in Mugabe's capacities, the strife within the ZANU-PF leadership, and Zimbabwe's increasing economic problems warn of possible crisis ahead. In a perceptive [report](#), the Early Warning Project of the United States Holocaust Museum makes the case that Zimbabwe is entering a period of "acute risk of mass atrocities that will last at least through the next planned general elections in 2018." The report outlines two non-mutually-exclusive scenarios: escalation of intra-ZANU-PF strife into open violence and repression of increasing anti-government protest activity by security forces.

Conclusion

Given the looming possibility of widespread violence in Zimbabwe, the Early Warning Project's report urges, among other things, engagement by the United States, other Western countries, the United Nations, the Southern African Development Community, and the European Union in a focused conflict prevention and mitigation effort. For those interested in security and stability in the key southern African region, that seems like good advice.

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Migrants In and Transiting Agadez: A New Security Concern?

To date, despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, Niger has managed these threats on its borders. In 2009, the government negotiated a successful peace agreement with the Tuareg population in the north. The Tuaregs had led a series of insurgencies over the preceding two decades. Unlike its neighbor, Mali, whose government failed to effectively address the concerns of its northern population, Niger successfully created an inclusive government in which northerners are now represented. Niger has also managed to avoid losing vast swaths of territory to extremist groups that operate in the Sahel, a development that has befallen northeastern Nigeria. Now, a new phenomenon has emerged that has the potential to significantly affect Niger—large numbers of migrants transiting Niger's vast territory and the smugglers that move them to North Africa and Europe.

In recent years, the flow of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe has increased dramatically, contributing to a European migrant crisis that Africa Watch examined in [October](#). Niger has been one of the countries most affected by this migrant flow, particularly through the northern Sahelian town of Agadez, which is located on the southern edge of the Sahara and the northernmost inhabitable edge of West Africa. Citizens of member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can move freely from anywhere in West Africa to Agadez. Once in Agadez, migrants require smugglers knowledgeable of the difficult Sahelian terrain to traverse the desert. This year, the International Organization on Migration (IOM) [announced](#) that it expects migration through the Agadez region to reach 300,000, which is more than double the 120,000 estimated to have transited the town in 2015.

Agadez—An Evolving Town

Historically, Agadez was an important trans-Saharan trading town and one of the continent's most important Tuareg cities. It was a popular tourist attraction until Tuareg rebellions from 2007 to 2009 and the increase in kidnappings by armed Islamist groups in the Sahara discouraged tourism. Today, Agadez, with a population of approximately 120,000 people, is an active market town and transportation center for uranium that is mined in the surrounding area. It is also a well-known [smuggling](#) town and departure point where migrants from across West and sub-Saharan Africa travel in hopes of reaching a better life in Libya, Algeria, or Europe. Many local residents have benefited from this development by [providing services](#) to migrants. The act of smuggling people across the desert, however, was [outlawed](#) by the Nigerien government in 2015 under pressure from the [European Union](#), which was experiencing an immigration crisis. Because [corruption of government officials](#) is commonplace, however, smugglers continue to operate largely unimpeded by local law enforcement.

An effective crackdown on smugglers could have unintended consequences. It would remove a source of income and employment for many in a town with few options for work. Such unemployed young men could become easy recruits for Islamic extremist groups operating in the region. To date, the government of Niger has not committed to major development programs in and around Agadez that could reduce the appeal of either of these options by offering other opportunities for financial gain.

In fact, the Government of Niger has not invested any significant public funds in the region that could alleviate the pressure that will inevitably be placed on local resources if the population, both permanent and transient, continues to grow. Many migrants aspiring to reach Europe [end their journeys](#) in Agadez once money and motivation run out. There are numerous accounts of individuals who believed they had the financial resources necessary to pay smugglers to take them to Europe only to be left in Agadez until they could earn more money or their families could send additional funds. In some of the [worst cases](#), migrants have been forced into slavery or prostitution by smugglers to whom they are indebted.

Conclusion

As long as Africa's population boom and high unemployment continue to fuel large-scale migration to North Africa and Europe, towns such as Agadez will continue to be major hubs for migrant smuggling. The IOM's 2016 data suggest that this trend will continue and that the Nigerien government's crackdown on migrant smuggling has [failed to deter](#) migrants or their smugglers. As a result, corruption that undermines local governance is likely to continue—and possibly destabilize—the region. Although the Government of Niger's security forces have an impressive track record, the prospect of collaboration between Islamic extremist groups and disaffected migrants would present an ominous development in the Sahel.

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Citizen Support

The Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), a West African think tank with offices in Ghana and Nigeria, conducted a [survey](#) of Ghanaians that revealed robust and growing support for the country's electoral institutions. Eight in 10 Ghanaians responded that they believe that the elections will be "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems." In particular, trust in the Electoral Commission (EC) is on the rise. In July 2016, the administrators of the survey found that 63 percent of Ghanaians believed the institution could "administer free, peaceful, and credible elections." By November, that number had risen to 73 percent. The high levels of confidence in the EC are particularly encouraging since the body came under criticism after the 2012 election. The election that year was particularly tight, and the results were challenged by the opposition in the country's Supreme Court. Although the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the EC's decision in a 5–4 vote, the process "[kept Ghana on tenterhooks for much of 2013](#)." The retirement of the EC's head allowed Ghana to take a "[bold step](#)," appointing Charlotte Osei (the former head of the National Commission for Civic Education) to lead the body through the 2016 elections. Osei, who is relatively youthful at 46 and has a background in youth issues and law, was selected to "[inject vigour, rigour, and fresh ideas](#) into the EC."

A less sanguine finding was that roughly one in three surveyed "indicated a certain apprehension about the outbreak of violence" once the results of the votes are made public. This fear appears to be concentrated in the country's north, where more than half the respondents expressed concern about violence.

Despite these concerns, respondents overall expressed [confidence](#) in the institutions responsible for addressing electoral issues: 72 percent reported satisfaction with the conduct of security personnel, 68 percent reported the same for political party agents, and 65 percent indicated satisfaction with registration officials responsible for managing the country's electoral registration regulations. Equally important, over three quarters of respondents ([76 percent](#)) said that they intend to vote, and the majority (over 60 percent) reported that they value peaceful, free, and fair elections.

Signs of Trouble

Even though Ghana's citizens have expressed confidence in the upcoming elections, troubling signs have developed. The CDD [reported](#) that "the tone of the election campaign, as well as political discourse [is] increasingly bellicose," noting

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“the use of inflammatory language in the media and political party . . . [and] mobilization of private militias.” Some of this mobilization and discourse include potentially divisive “ethnic undertones,” according to the CDD [survey](#).

Further, a handful of incidents have already challenged the credibility of the elections and the independence of the EC. Pro-opposition groups have organized the “Let My Vote Count Alliance” (LMVCA), which in 2015 staged “[street protests](#)” to put pressure on the Commission to compile a fresh voters’ register.” These protests turned violent that September when the group reached EC headquarters, where they met “[riot](#) police armed with tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannon, batons and bamboo canes.” Osei did not meet with LMVCA leadership after the incident.

Journalists have also lodged complaints with the EC for attempting to charge “[media accreditation fees](#)” to cover the elections. A Ghanaian journalist noted that “it is [the right of every Ghanaian](#), journalists or not, to be able to supervise the election,” and he emphasized the importance of the “right to information” in the country.

In May 2016, the Supreme Court was forced to adjudicate the question whether a National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) card is an acceptable form of ID to use when voting—the incumbent party asserted that it should be, whereas the opposition challenged that these cards are not proof of identity. Ultimately, the Supreme Court confirmed its original recommendation, favoring the opposition with its ruling that NHIS cardholder names be removed from the voting rosters. The EC returned with “a list of names that looked distinctly [underwhelming](#),” complying with the Supreme Court’s ruling but not significantly altering the electoral calculus.

The EC’s neutrality has also come into question following its decision in October that disqualified [12 candidates for president](#). Although the EC cited issues with registration paperwork, some opposition parties argued the decision was political. A handful of candidates have [petitioned the courts](#) about their disqualification. A political analyst, Kwesi Jonah, told [Deutsche Welle](#) that he is concerned about the impact of the court cases on the electoral process.

What’s At Stake?

As Ghanaians head to the polls, their hopes are high. No matter who wins, Ghana’s role as an example of successful democratization in Africa is at stake. In that regard, it is crucial for the elections to be conducted peacefully and for their result to be seen as fair.

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