

ZIMBABWE—POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DISARRAY

By George F. Ward

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



In this Friday June, 2, 2017, photo, Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe and his wife Grace attend a youth rally in Marondera, about 100 km east of Harare. Zimbabwe's 93-year-old president is ditching the old for the young as he makes a pitch for a fresh five year term ahead of next year's election. (Source: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi.)

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South Sudan's President Salva Kiir attends a ceremony marking the 34th anniversary of the Sudan People's Liberation Army in the capital Juba, South Sudan, Thursday, May 18, 2017. South Sudan's civil war has killed tens of thousands and driven out more than 1.5 million people in the past three years, creating the world's largest refugee crisis. (Source: AP Photo/Bullen Chol.)

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The ZANU-PF: Mugabe in Control Even in Absentia

On July 7, 2017, President Mugabe, having canceled a planned appearance at a political rally, [flew](#) to Singapore for medical treatment. This absence was the latest in a string of trips that have taken Mugabe out of the country for close to three months this year. Although the government characterized the trip's purpose as a routine medical checkup, rumors of further deterioration in his health are rife, fueled by reports that Mugabe seemed to be physically unsteady and to be dozing off during official functions. One [report](#) quoted an unnamed Zimbabwean government official reportedly close to the Mugabe family as saying, "Because of old age and associated complications, there has been a noticeable decline in his cognitive abilities, including thinking, memory, and speech skills." The same report depicted faction leaders within the ZANU-PF as scrambling for advantage in a post-Mugabe future.

One of the reasons that Robert Mugabe has managed to remain in power for 37 years is that he has maneuvered adroitly to prevent putative successors from gaining too much power. Thus, former Vice President Joice Mujuru, one of ZANU-PF's most popular figures, was [purged](#) from the party and government in December 2014. Emmerson Mnangagwa was installed as vice president in her place. Before long, [two strong factions](#) emerged within the ruling party. "Team Lacoste" coalesced around Mnangagwa, whose nickname is "Ngwenya" (Crocodile), also the symbol of the Lacoste fashion brand. A group of relatively younger party notables formed the "Generation 40," or "G-40," group, which claimed first lady Grace Mugabe as an adherent.

Team Lacoste benefited from the support of most of Zimbabwe's powerful security-service officials and seemed to be ascendant. The G-40 fought back, with Grace Mugabe making no secret of her ambitions. The party infighting was chronicled by Martin Fletcher in an [interesting article](#) in the *New Statesman's* Christmas 2016 issue. Team Lacoste counterattacked through its alliance with the war veterans' association, which in unprecedented fashion attacked not only the G-40 but also President Mugabe. By early 2017, both factions were weakened: Mnangagwa's star had fallen, Grace Mugabe had abruptly ceased her whirlwind barnstorming tour of the country, and Saviour Kasukuwere, the party's "political commissar" and a leading figure in the G-40 faction, was under investigation for alleged political offenses. [Street brawls](#) between the party factions broke out in Harare on April 15. Mugabe's political magic had worked again. His potential rivals were weakened, and his status as the ZANU-PF candidate in the 2018 elections was solidified.

The Political Opposition Draws Together

As foreshadowed in the [March 23, 2017](#), *Africa Watch*, Zimbabwe's two main opposition parties, the National People's Front led by former Vice President Joice Mujuru and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by long-time (and ailing) leader Morgan Tsvangirai, signed a [coalition pact](#) on April 19. Other, smaller opposition parties joined the coalition, called the National Election Reform Agenda (NERA), which was immediately dismissed by President Mugabe

as inconsequential. Whether or not NERA is a threat to the ZANU-PF's rule, Zimbabwe's security services were taking no chances, [deploying](#) riot police and water cannons on the streets of Harare ahead of a planned NERA demonstration.

The formation of NERA was hailed by some as a momentous development, but the coalition faces sizable [challenges](#). Not the least is that Mujuru was for a decade the deputy in a party and government that authorized the violent repression of the MDC. Tsvangirai was himself threatened, arrested, and assaulted by the government. Second, the coalition at this point consists only of the piece of paper that Mujuru and Tsvangirai signed, which pledges to campaign in the 2018 elections as a united front. There is no coalition structure. Third, it is far from clear who will lead the coalition. Will each party field candidates, or will single candidates represent the alliance? Would Mujuru or Tsvangirai become president in the event of electoral success? There are already reports that the coalition may [break up](#) over this issue. On the positive side, both Mujuru and Tsvangirai are seasoned leaders with significant followings. The MDC's strengths in urban areas complements Mujuru's strong rural base. If the coalition overcomes the obstacles cited above and becomes an operational alliance, it could be a formidable force in the election.

Continued Economic Decline

Zimbabwe's economy remains in ruins. The once prosperous agricultural sector has never recovered from the expropriation in the early years of the century of the lands held by white commercial farmers. The hyperinflation that took hold in the same period progressively destroyed most of Zimbabwe's industrial sector. Lack of investment resources has prevented any recovery. Shortages of U.S. dollars, the country's de facto currency, led to the introduction of so-called bond notes in dollar denominations. Earlier this year, real dollars commanded a [premium](#) of up to 30 percent over bond notes.

Zimbabwe's central bankers have long hoped for a lifeline from the international financial institutions, which cut off lending when Zimbabwe was unable to pay its debts. To that end, the government of Zimbabwe recently conducted consultations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although the IMF's [statement](#) of July 7 on the conclusion of those consultations noted some progress, its overall tone was negative. On the positive side, the statement noted that exceptional rains promised some recovery in the agricultural sector and welcomed Zimbabwe's clearance of its arrears with the IMF, and it cited progress in improving the business climate. But the statement also stressed that debt arrears, improvident fiscal policies, and the crowding out of private sector investment by government expenditures remained fundamental problems.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe is a country and a society under continual threat of instability. At least three potential triggers of violence are discernible in the circumstances described in this article. Perhaps the [most likely](#) risk is the possibility that factional disputes within the ZANU-PF could spin out of control. Another trigger could be the emergence of the NERA coalition as an effective alliance. Were that to occur, at least some in the ZANU-PF would be tempted to move forcefully against the opposition. Third, greater loss of confidence in the bond notes could lead to significant inflation, which could trigger popular protests and a renewed wave of emigration from the country. Finally, the greatest risk of all might be the sudden death of 93-year-old Robert Mugabe, who, by preserving personal power at all costs, has diminished the likelihood of an eventual smooth transition of power.

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Political Solutions in Short Supply

Although it is widely understood that a political solution is needed to stop ongoing fighting, previous efforts to broker an agreement have fallen flat. As [Africa Watch](#) noted, in 2015 both Kiir and Machar agreed to a power-sharing agreement, called the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan ([ARCSS](#)), brokered by the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

ARCSS fell apart in July 2016 when fighting between forces loyal to Kiir and Machar forced Machar to flee Juba. Machar was ultimately flown to South Africa, where he is [allegedly](#) under house arrest. In his absence, he was replaced as First Vice President by Taban Deng Gai, a Kiir loyalist. Although Deng Gai's appointment was recognized by the international community, opposition forces outside Juba refused to recognize him and have mobilized against South Sudanese government forces.

The international community's attempts to broker peace have so far proved unsuccessful. In December 2016 the UN Security Council [rejected](#) a resolution calling for an embargo on arms sales and sanctions against South Sudanese officials. Regional attempts to launch a recommitment to ARCSS have also failed. In June 2017, IGAD hosted a [summit](#) to revitalize the agreement, but Salva Kiir declined to attend. On July 7, a South Sudanese government spokesman [announced](#) that the government would not renegotiate ARCSS.

Continued Conflict Has No Clear Victors

The Government of South Sudan's reluctance to negotiate may be partly based on its perception that it is close to defeating opposition forces. On July 7, the United Nations announced it was evacuating humanitarian workers from [Pagak](#), an opposition stronghold in Upper Nile region, as government forces reportedly advanced on the area. In Equatoria, a south-central region that has seen significant fighting, [reporters](#) find that opposition forces are struggling to hold territory and face a shortage of weapons as Sudan has cut off its traditional support in response to an [agreement](#) with the United States.

In addition to overseeing military advances against the opposition forces, Kiir has moved to consolidate power within the government. On May 8, he announced he had [fired](#) Chief of the General Staff Paul Malong following rumors Malong was plotting a coup. Malong is a critical power broker with control of a private militia, called [Mathiang Anyoor](#), which has

allegedly been deployed alongside government forces and is accused of widespread ethnic targeting. By firing Malong, Kiir emphasized his personal power independent of Malong's influence. Kiir has further sought to portray himself as South Sudan's legitimate leader by instituting a [National Dialogue](#) to oversee a government-led peace process.

Despite these public displays of strength, Kiir's position remains fragile. The military's use of [collective punishment](#) against civilians has turned many against the government and created an effective recruitment tool for opposition forces. In addition, the country's ruined economy has direct implications for its military effort—the government is reportedly struggling to pay military [salaries](#), and some soldiers complain they have not been paid for months. Historically, South Sudanese power brokers have relied on oil rents to [pay](#) for loyalty from a variety of militia leaders folded into the military. With oil production halted since 2012, the government's lack of revenue gives it few levers for promoting military loyalty.

Ethnic Conflict an Increasing Concern

As the conflict drags on, there are concerning signs that it is entrenching ethnic divides within South Sudan's population. As [commentators](#) have noted, in the absence of financial resources to buy military loyalty, South Sudanese elites have turned to ethnic mobilization to recruit and motivate militias. As armed groups target civilians along ethnic lines, these divides affect the civilian population.

Interviews with South Sudanese [refugees](#) suggest that many blame other ethnic groups, rather than politicians or specific militias, for their suffering. Within South Sudan ethnic rhetoric continues. In [June 2017](#) a group calling itself the "Bor Community Youth Association" issued a letter demanding that Equatorian aid workers be removed from Jonglei state or risk violence.

Conclusion

As conflict continues, a political solution looks increasingly difficult to achieve. With no armed group able to secure a decisive military victory, there are few external inducements to force political leaders to the negotiating table. Further, as the conflict continues to affect civilians along ethnic lines, rebuilding the civic trust needed to reestablish a legitimate government has become increasingly difficult. Despite the humanitarian and economic costs of continued warfare, the likelihood of South Sudan securing a lasting peace appears distant.

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