

## ZIMBABWE IN TRANSITION: MOVE ALONG, NOTHING TO SEE HERE

By George F. Ward

Only days after the resignation of longtime president Robert Mugabe and the inauguration of Zimbabwe's new leader, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the government, the army, and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Popular Front (ZANU-PF) are making a concerted effort to project a return to normalcy. Shops, schools, and civil government institutions have remained open, and ordinary citizens have continued to go about their business. The presence on city streets of joint army-police patrols serves as a reminder, however, that there has been an extraordinary turn of events. Looking toward the future, President Mnangagwa and his allies are faced with many challenges, including securing their dominance within the ZANU-PF, maintaining the party's governing role, addressing the economic problems that become more urgent every day, and dealing with the aspirations of ordinary Zimbabweans for freedom and democracy. [more...](#)

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



Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa speaks after being sworn in at the presidential inauguration ceremony in the capital Harare, Zimbabwe, Friday, November 24, 2017. (Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis.)

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In this Tuesday, October 10, 2017, file photo, people wait to cast their votes during a presidential election in Monrovia, Liberia. (Source: AP Photo/Abbas Dulleh, File.)

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Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa speaks after being sworn in at the presidential inauguration ceremony in the capital Harare, Zimbabwe, Friday, November 24, 2017. (Source: AP Photo/Ben Curtis.)

## An Adroitly Managed Transition

As circumstantial details of the tumultuous month of November 2017 in Zimbabwe have emerged, it has become evident that what occurred was more a [settling of scores](#) within the ZANU-PF than a traditional military coup. As the author pointed out in a Council on Foreign Relations [memorandum](#) in June 2017, the most likely source of instability in Zimbabwe had long been the intra-ZANU-PF strife that former President Mugabe was unwilling or unable to quell. When Mugabe finally acted to end the in-fighting and removed Mnangagwa, leader of the "Lacoste" faction within the ZANU-PF, as vice president, he set in motion the chain of events that led to his own downfall. In the end, the alliance of self-interest between the leaders of the Zimbabwe Defense Force (ZDF) and Mnangagwa and his party faction proved stronger than the ties of loyalty to Mugabe himself.

Mnangagwa and army chief Gen. Constantine Chiwenga were the orchestrators of an adroitly managed scenario. On November 5, Chiwenga, having reportedly learned of a planned purge of the ZDF leadership by the ZANU-PF faction that supported former first lady Grace Mugabe, left for a meeting in Beijing with China's defense minister. According to [press accounts](#) and [commentary](#), the hastily arranged meeting may have been aimed at gaining China's support for President Mugabe's removal. On the same day, Robert Mugabe denounced Mnangagwa for stirring division within the party, and Grace Mugabe accused Mnangagwa of planning a coup. The next day, Mugabe removed Mnangagwa as vice president, and the latter fled on November 7 to South Africa via Mozambique. In South Africa, according to [The New York Times](#), Mnangagwa, met with officials to persuade them not to describe any intervention as a "coup."

When General Chiwenga arrived back in Harare on November 12, ZDF soldiers, who had infiltrated the airport grounds wearing maintenance worker coveralls, overpowered police officers who had been dispatched by supporters of President Mugabe to arrest the general. Two days later, on November 14, Chiwenga launched "Operation Restore Legacy," sending armored vehicles into the streets of Harare and effectively placing both Robert and Grace Mugabe under house arrest. Mnangagwa returned to Harare on November 22, and he took the oath as president two days later. To all appearances, Chiwenga and Mnangagwa did their jobs in China and South Africa well, as both countries refrained from criticizing the transfer of power.

## Can Mnangagwa Succeed?

The apparent rapid return to normalcy in Zimbabwe may be misleading. Retaining power may prove more difficult for Mnangagwa than seizing it. To succeed, he will have to solidify his hold on both the party and the government and deal effectively with Zimbabwe's economic dilemma. Within the party, he has already moved to limit the risk of dissent at the Extraordinary Congress of the ZANU-PF that is planned for December 2017. According to [The Herald](#), which functions as the government's mouthpiece, the duration of the congress has been reduced from six to three days, the number of delegates has also been reduced, and the budget for the congress has been slashed.

Even though reduced in size and scope, the ZANU-PF congress will be an important moment for Mnangagwa. There will be other challenges for him in the coming months. Here are some of them:

- **Dealing with opponents within the ZANU-PF.** So far, Mnangagwa has emphasized national unity and has reached out rhetorically to other factions in the ZANU-PF and in the political opposition. On the other hand, former Finance Minister Ignatius Chombo and former party youth Kudzanai Chipanga remain [incarcerated](#). Chombo is accused of financial crimes that allegedly occurred decades ago. At local and regional levels, [factional fights](#) between the Lacoste and G40 factions have not disappeared. Will Mnangagwa hold out the olive branch, or will he act in accordance with his revolutionary *nom de guerre* of "The Crocodile"? If the former, will he seek to make peace with former vice president Joice Mujuru, who founded an opposition party after Mugabe replaced her with Mnangagwa in 2014?
- **Securing the loyalty of all the security services.** At Mnangagwa's [swearing-in ceremony](#), Gen. Chiwenga was cheered, but the head of the police, who seemed to have backed the G40 faction, was booed. The loyalties of the intelligence service during the succession scenario were not clear. Mnangagwa will need the support of the ZDF, the police, and the intelligence service to survive, and he appears to have work to do in two of the three areas.
- **Avoiding hyperinflation and economic ruin.** Despite a good harvest and rising international prices for Zimbabwe's commodities, the economy remains in shambles, with unemployment rampant. The availability of U.S. dollars, the *de facto* currency, has dropped to unworkable levels, and the [depreciation](#) of the so-called "bond notes," issued in U.S. dollar denominations, has reached 65 percent. Increased economic assistance from China may be a possibility, but real economic recovery will be contingent on dealing with Zimbabwe's large international financial arrears and attracting Western private investment. To accomplish the latter, Mnangagwa will need to limit corruption, which is the glue that holds together both the ZANU-PF party and the party's alliance with the ZDF leadership. Doing that, of course, could threaten his leadership of the party.
- **Maintaining ZANU-PF dominance.** With elections due in 2018, Mnangagwa has the advantage of facing a divided opposition. Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, is [seriously ill](#). Joice Mujuru's effectiveness as an opposition leader has been limited by [difficulties](#) within her own party. Mnangagwa also can rely on the Zimbabwean military's determination, demonstrated in the past, not to allow an opposition candidate to take office. On the other side of the ledger, Mnangagwa has been for decades a notoriously unpopular figure in Zimbabwe. He is seen as responsible for regime excesses in the past. If he tries to prevail in the election by repressing the opposition, he may find himself confronted by a populace that has been emboldened by social-media-driven movements such as [#ThisFlag](#) and that is determined not to have one strongman replaced by another.

In summary, Emmerson Mnangagwa has triumphed in a long-running intraparty feud. Whether he will succeed in replacing Robert Mugabe as leader of his country over the long haul is an open question.

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## The First Round

The October presidential election was the third since Liberia's return to civilian rule in 2003, after more than a decade of civil war that left at least 250,000 dead and many more injured or displaced. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, having served two terms in office, is constitutionally barred from seeking a third term. She will officially leave office in January 2018. The successful conclusion of this election would mark the first time that Liberia, independent since 1847, has experienced a peaceful transition of power under its new democratic dispensation.

Approximately 20 candidates vied for the presidency on October 10. The main contenders included Senator George Weah of the Congress for Democratic Change, a retired soccer star; Vice President Joseph Boakai of the ruling Unity Party; Senator Prince Yormie Johnson, a former [rebel leader](#); and lawyer Charles Brumskine of the Liberty Party, former president pro tem of the Senate, and one-time close ally of ex-rebel leader Charles Taylor. Taylor, president of Liberia from 1997 to 2003, is currently serving a 50-year sentence in a British prison for [war crimes](#) committed in Sierra Leone.

Initial election returns had Weah and Boakai in first and second place, receiving 38.4 percent and 28.8 percent of the vote, respectively. The NEC was preparing for a second round of elections to be held on November 7, but one day before the election, the Supreme Court [postponed](#) the runoff indefinitely, ordering a full investigation by the NEC into claims of fraud and mismanagement made by Brumskine, who finished in third place with about 10 percent of the vote. Election observers, however, have stated that they saw [no evidence of fraud](#). Boakai and the ruling Unity Party have [allied](#) with Brumskine and publicly supported a rerun of the first round. Prince Johnson, on the other hand, has thrown his support behind Weah.

## Violence, Rebel Leadership, and Conflicted Support

Previous elections in 2005 and 2011 experienced [low levels of pre-election violence](#) and intimidation, and, according to a 2017 national survey, [61 percent](#) of respondents were concerned about the potential for election disputes to lead to violence. The number of candidates reduced the access individual candidates had to state resources, especially state security forces, which in the past helped prevent violence and worked to level the playing field. Fortunately, the campaign period was deemed [relatively peaceful](#), although there were some instances of hate speech and [fisticuffs](#) breaking out between rival supporters.

The role that Charles Taylor has played in the election has also been a cause for concern. Taylor still has a small support base in Bong County, which includes former combatants. His ex-wife, Senator Jewel Howard Taylor, is Weah's running mate, and they have been deliberately courting Taylor's supporters. It was alleged in late 2016 that Weah had traveled



In this Tuesday, October 10, 2017, file photo, people wait to cast their votes during a presidential election in Monrovia, Liberia. (Source: AP Photo/Abbas Dulleh, File.)

[to visit Taylor in prison](#) to secure his support, reportedly by placing Senator Taylor on the ticket. On the campaign trail, Senator Taylor told local reporters that the country needed to return to the [agenda](#) that her ex-husband had been pursuing as president. Audio recordings of Charles Taylor [endorsing](#) his ex-wife were also leaked at the beginning of the 2017 presidential campaign, much as they were before her 2014 senate run.

Surprisingly, President Sirleaf [did not campaign](#) on behalf of her vice president, Boakai. She reportedly shifted her support to his opponents, and Boakai even accused her at one point of backing Weah. Perennial opposition candidate Weah, who spent the majority of the civil war playing soccer in Europe, enjoys significant popularity among the youth. He has come close to the presidency in previous elections but was defeated by Sirleaf in 2005 and 2011 when he ran as vice president

## Next Steps

To many, the Supreme Court's decision to force the NEC to thoroughly [investigate](#) the opposition's claims of fraud was a welcome demonstration of judicial oversight of the electoral process. The opposition has a [seven-day](#) window from the issuance of the NEC's decision on November 24 to appeal. The Supreme Court will then have [seven days](#) to issue a ruling. The Supreme Court could call for a complete repeat of the first round, or it could determine that the NEC's investigation was sufficient and allow the second round to proceed based on the results of the October 10 election. The NEC has stated it could organize fresh elections within about [two weeks](#) of a Supreme Court ruling, so late December is the earliest the next election would held.

Peaceful compliance with the Court's rulings by all actors up until this point bodes well for the next phase of Liberia's elections. On the other hand, it is troubling that Charles Taylor is still relevant in Liberian politics. To continue to shore up its democratic gains, the next government of Liberia needs to return to implementing the 2009 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's [final report](#), which stalled under President Sirleaf. The report's recommendations were made as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed to end the civil war in 2003. They included provisions for reparations; justice and reconciliation mechanisms; reforms in the fields of governance, anticorruption, and human rights; and stipulations as to who should and should not run for political office.

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