

## **Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Examining the Prospects for Democracy in Post- Mugabe Zimbabwe**

Eric Keels  
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Global Security Program  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
Howard L. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy

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Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public  
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# Meet The New Boss, Same As The Old Boss: Examining The Prospects For Democracy In Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe

Eric Keels

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Global Security Program

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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With the recent resignation of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, there has been a flurry of speculation over the future of this fragile African country. Following 37 years of brutal rule, the ouster of Zimbabwe's first, and only, president, has led to jubilant crowds flooding the streets of Harare as Zimbabweans welcome a new leader. Equally, members of the international community have wondered openly about the prospects for meaningful democratic reforms in this former British colony. Despite both domestic and international praise for the transition of power, it is unlikely that major reforms will emerge as a result of Mugabe's ouster. Rather, many of the structural factors that led to Mugabe's long rein are still in place today, preventing the emergence of meaningful democratic changes within society.

The origins of Mugabe's ZANU-PF party are deeply rooted in the politics of the Rhodesian Civil War. Prior to the start of the civil war, white minorities in the newly independent state of Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe) refused to allow black Rhodesians from participating in the political process. Banned political parties such as the Zimbabwe African Political Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) abandoned conventional avenues for participation and engaged in armed conflict as a way to pressure the state to offer universal suffrage. Following 15 years of brutal fighting, the Rhodesian government acquiesced to opposition demands, and a new constitution was drafted. Shortly after the settlement of the civil war, Mugabe took control of the state following popular elections. Though ZAPU and ZANU cooperated towards the end of the war, tensions between the two organizations emerged during the first post-war election. Members of Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU party, upset over the ouster of Nkomo from the coalition government, collected arms and moved to their stronghold in the Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe. The government quickly crushed the nascent rebellion, leading to massacres throughout the Matabeleland region. While the new insurgency was stopped, Mugabe (like many other post-civil war leaders) sought to consolidate his control so as to maintain a monopoly over the coercive apparatus of the state.

Following the massacres in the Matabeleland, the Mugabe government succeeded in ensuring the dominance of ZANU-PF in Zimbabwean politics. This dominance in society was accomplished in two ways. First, shortly after the end of the war, Mugabe's government began an aggressive expansion of social services to disaffected communities that suffered under white minority rule. These policy programs generated significant popularity for the early Mugabe regime. Second, the ruling ZANU-PF party brutally undercut opposition forces in society. Mugabe sought to preserve his position by ensuring that key members of the military as well as other power-brokers in Zimbabwean politics benefited handsomely from state patronage. Many of these key players were veterans of the Rhodesian Civil War, who still wield extensive power in Zimbabwe today. One common tactic was the confiscation and redistribution of white-owned farms to loyal members of the Zimbabwean government. Unfortunately, the radical redistribution of land helped contribute to the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy. As the Zimbabwean currency began a free-fall, greater opposition to the regime emerged. While Zimbabwe has many of the institutional characteristics that are associated with democracy such as regular elections, opposition parties, and universal suffrage, the Mugabe government has historically prevented meaningful competition by rigging elections, jailing opponents, and brutally repressing antigovernment demonstrations. Following

widespread international condemnation of Mugabe's tactics, the president ensured his political survival by continuing to redistribute state assets to loyal members of his inner-circle.

Surprisingly, it was these members of the inner-circle that helped overthrow Mugabe and install Emmerson Mnangagwa as president. With over three decades of ruling the country, widespread speculation began to emerge over who would succeed Mugabe as the leader of Zimbabwe. One such contender to the proverbial throne was Mugabe's longtime ally, Emmerson Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa had served in many positions in the Mugabe government, from ministerial positions of Security, Justice, and Defense, to the Vice Presidency of Zimbabwe. Unfortunately for Mnangagwa, Mugabe's second wife, Grace Mugabe, also began to actively campaign to replace her husband as head of state. As part of her effort to ensure control, Grace Mugabe pushed her husband to separate himself from many of the vested interests that Mnangagwa represented (namely, the key power-brokers that contributed to Mugabe's survival in office). This jockeying for political power eventually resulted in the ouster of Mnangagwa as Vice President. Concerned over their relative influence in Zimbabwean politics, leaders within the military (as well as other key power-brokers in ZANU-PF) ousted Mugabe from power and installed Mnangagwa as the new head of state.

The recent military coup has done less to introduce radical change, and more to ensure the preservation of the status quo. While it is true that actions by the military forced the resignation of a leader who has tightly controlled Zimbabwe for well over three decades, the perpetrators of the coup were the beneficiaries of Mugabe's kleptocratic policies. Mugabe's successor, Mnangagwa, has played a key role in crushing opposition to the dominant ZANU-PF. As head of state security, Mnangagwa led the massacre of ZAPU supporters in Matabeleland. During the 2008 election, Mnangagwa was instrumental in brutally suppressing opposition activists, thereby prolonging Mugabe's control. By allowing free and fair elections, Mnangagwa runs the risk of losing power and (importantly) allowing victims of his brutality the opportunity to hold him accountable for his past misdeeds. Meaningful democratic competition would also threaten the interests of other leaders in ZANU-PF. Sensible reforms that would cut down on corruption and foster transparent governance would dilute the influence of key party officials, reducing the incentive for elites to advocate for change in the post-Mugabe era. Given the clear benefits for maintaining the status quo, it seems unlikely that Mugabe's ouster will result in reforms to either the democratic process or economic policies. This continuation of the status quo will also be reflected in the current policy of the US towards Zimbabwe. Though the US government has long advocated for improved human rights practices by the Mugabe government, it is unlikely that the new Mnangagwa regime will acquiesce to American demands. Equally, regional leaders are likely to begrudgingly accept this new regime. Generally, the African Union often takes a hardline stance against the act of forcibly removing elected officials from office. But the pro forma vote by the ZANU-PF party calling for Mugabe's removal has provided enough of a democratic fig-leaf for African Leaders to accept these changes. This is especially true as the continent continues to grapple with the effects of major conflicts in Nigeria and South Sudan. For the near future, many Zimbabweans will meet a new boss, who (unfortunately) is a lot like the old one.