



# THE FALL OF MUGABE

Anthony Tucker-Jones reports on the security ramifications of last year's coup in Zimbabwe

**T**he international media reported with great excitement the 'surprise' fall of President Mugabe on 14 November 2017, followed by his official resignation a week later. In reality his downfall had been a long time coming and the real surprise was that it did not happen much sooner. Ironically, over a decade and a half ago Mugabe had faced a very similar situation, but he successfully headed it off. In the wake of his poor Presidential election results in 2002 and the subsequent Hoogstraten arms scandal that year, the Zimbabwean Defence Forces were at a dangerous crossroads. They wanted on the one hand to support the

*status quo* while on the other desperately needed political change following their debilitating and costly intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Nonetheless, for almost four decades through coup threats, election defeats and foreign wars the ZDF helped keep Mugabe firmly in power. Hampered by poor discipline, morale, leadership incompetence and a lack of spares, Zimbabwe's military were publicly seen as party political stooges for Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF. While the military tried to remain aloof from politics, the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) was nonetheless regularly deployed for public order duties and the Zimbabwe Central Intelligence

**Mugabe addressing party members to show support for his wife Grace becoming Vice President**

Organisation (CIO) ran smear campaigns against Mugabe's political opponents.

In contrast, the Air Force of Zimbabwe (AFZ) – once the most professional cadre of the armed forces – was regularly perceived as a potential threat to Mugabe's regime and as a result its proficiency and capabilities were gradually eroded. After its involvement in DRC, much of its aircraft were grounded for the want of spare parts. Now the AFZ is a shadow of its former self.

## STRUGGLE FOR POWER

The ousting of 93-year-old Mugabe was the result of an internal power struggle within Zanu-PF as much as any long festering discontent within the military. It was the sacking of Mugabe's long-term ally Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the attempted arrest of Army Chief General Constantino Chinwenga that was the final straw. They were angry that the ailing Mugabe was manoeuvring to position his unpopular wife Grace to be his successor as President. He hoped to found a dynasty, but his legacy as President was simply too toxic. Judging by the response of the population in Harare, people welcomed the coup. Interaction between the troops and civilians was visibly good-natured resulting in a holiday atmosphere rather than a hostile takeover.

Mugabe was evidently in denial and refused to acknowledge his own failings or even step down. His television announcement shortly after the coup had all the elements of a comic opera. Flanked by dumbfounded generals, he falteringly read out a prepared speech in which he agreed that mistakes had been made, but made no mention of his imminent departure. Only after the threat of impeachment and a backroom deal, undoubtedly including immunity from prosecution, did Mugabe agree to go.

To save face Mugabe was hailed as an elder statesman figure who led Zimbabwe to black majority rule, which conveniently ignored the decades of mismanagement, corruption and fraud that brought the country's economy to its knees. Following his bloodless coup, Mnangagwa was sworn in as President of Zimbabwe on 24 November 2017. However, until free and open elections scheduled for later in 2018 are conducted it remains very much business as usual in Zimbabwe.

Mnangagwa and his supporters know they cannot put Mugabe in trial because his Zanu-PF regime remains largely intact and Mugabe would inevitably implicate his former brothers in arms. Mnangagwa is no more innocent than Mugabe. Indeed after fighting in the guerrilla war against white rule in Rhodesia, he was in charge of security during the notorious operations to suppress the Matabele in the eighties. While reports that Mugabe was to be pensioned off with \$10 million (£7.5m) were denied, this smacked of hush money.

The Movement for Democratic Change opposition party has understandably welcomed the chance for new elections. Its leader Morgan Tsvangirai, though, has bitter memories about how the 2008 election was stolen from the MDC by Mugabe's bully boy tactics on the streets. They know that ultimately Zanu-PF will do all it can to cling onto power.

While Mugabe's policies fatally wrecked Zimbabwe's economy, most notably by destroying its highly lucrative tobacco industry after giving the land to subsistence farmers, there also remains the vexed

question of Mugabe's wars. The ZNA, CIO and Zimbabwe Defence Industries (ZDI) all profited from President Mugabe's costly foreign adventures. Zimbabwe's involvement in DRC cost the country up to \$10 billion, with the ZNA losing well over \$200 million worth of military equipment. During the eighties he also intervened in the war in Mozambique at great cost.

The UN investigated allegations of corruption and pointed a finger at the Zimbabwean armed forces in 2000, stating they had made huge sums by exploiting DRC's natural resources including timber, copper and diamonds. The ZNA and ZDI secured themselves lucrative business deals with their hosts, partly it has to be said to help fund the deployment. Granted licences to deal in diamonds and gold, they ran offices in-country manned by military officers at Mbuji-Mayi. ZDI also secured a \$26 million deal for logistical supplies for the DRC, though ZNA was unhappy with the quality of the products, delegating ZDI supplied ammunition for range work. Senior Zimbabwean figures personally made millions of dollars from these deals.

## THE ZDF HELPED KEEP PRESIDENT MUGABE FIRMLY IN POWER FOR ALMOST FOUR DECADES

Fighting erupted in the DRC in the late nineties when Rwanda, Uganda and later Burundi backed Congolese rebels seeking to oust President Laurent Kabila. Troops from Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia stepped in to support Kabila. By the summer of 2001 there were rumours of a coup plot in Zimbabwe due to political instability, near bankruptcy and food shortages. However, such an event would have been difficult to orchestrate with a third of the ZNA in the DRC.

Under Operation Sovereign Legitimacy, Zimbabwe deployed 12,000 troops, tanks and fighter aircraft to the DRC's resource-rich Kasai Oriental and Katanga provinces to help prop up the Government. Mugabe had already provided a steady supply of stockpiled North Korean weapons to Kabila's rebels before they came to power. Mugabe did not withdraw his forces until 2003. Already in terminal decline the Zimbabwean defence budget was unable to make good the losses in DRC for many years.

## ILLICIT DEALINGS

The AZF was tainted by alleged dealings with a white Zimbabwean land owner to underwrite a much-needed fighter purchase from Russia in 2002. One of Mugabe's central tenets has always been the alleged injustice of the Lancaster House Accords of 1979, which left much of the country's farmland in the hands of its white farmers. However, while Mugabe's administration was moving to evict them, one of the country's biggest white landowners Nicholas van Hoogstraten was prepared to underwrite a MiG-29 jet contract in return for 1.2 million acres of farmland. Air Vice Marshal R Mhlanga even



recommended Hoogstraten, who ended up in prison in the UK.

Mugabe's wife, Grace, is also mired in controversy. She has three children by Mugabe and one with a previous husband. Her lavish lifestyle and spending habits gained her the nickname 'Gucci Grace'. It is alleged that she personally profited from Zimbabwe's diamond trade and has been accused of violent outbursts. None of this has done much to endear her with average Zimbabweans. Even members of Zanu-PF were aghast at the very idea of her becoming President.

What does all of this mean for the wider international community? Everyone, particularly its immediate neighbours Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia, hopes that Zimbabwe has a smooth transition to true democracy so that it can rebuild its shattered economy. No one wants

## THE REAL SURPRISE IS THAT MUGABE'S DOWNFALL DID NOT HAPPEN MUCH SOONER

to see a failed state. Certainly South Africa's ruling African National Congress has been watching events in Zimbabwe with some apprehension. Very large numbers of Zimbabweans work legally and illegally in South Africa and the last thing the ANC wants is a mass exodus of Zimbabwean refugees across the border.

Worryingly, in recent times factions within the ANC have been resorting to anti-white rhetoric very similar to Mugabe. There have been calls for an end to 'white monopoly capital' and some feel that Nelson Mandela made far too many concessions to South Africa's whites. However, South Africa

is a much more resilient society than Zimbabwe, economically and racially. To South Africa's business community such talk is clearly detrimental.

In the wings China has also been taking an interest in developments. When Mnangagwa was sacked by Mugabe, General Chinwenga backed the former Vice President. Interestingly, Chinwenga first flew to China and then returned avoiding arrest by Mugabe and staged the coup. There is no way of knowing if China was privy to Mnangagwa and Chinwenga's plans. When the general was younger he received military training in China and Egypt and has long had links with the Chinese military.

### CHINESE INFLUENCE

China was a backer of the Zimbabwean armed forces from the start. When the military took over in Harare in late 2017 the world's media reported tanks on the streets, these were actually elderly Chinese armoured personnel carriers that had been supplied years ago. During the early eighties China, who had supported the Zimbabwean guerrilla armies, stepped into the breach to provide the fledgling ZNA with tanks and APCs. Russia will also watch developments in Zimbabwe. In the past it fell out with Mugabe over a \$35m debt for attack helicopters, similarly a deal for \$400 million worth of jets fell through because of financial irregularities.

Everyone wants a stable and prosperous Zimbabwe. However, Mnangagwa dubbed 'the Crocodile' knows where all the skeletons are buried and will be extremely loath to relinquish power should his party be voted out. Perhaps coalition Government could be the way ahead if the main political parties can solve their differences for the good of the country. While Mnangagwa has done much to soothe international concerns and signalled Zimbabwe's doors are open to foreign investors, it is much too early to predict Zimbabwe's future following the fall of Mugabe ●

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**Mugabe inspects a guard of honour during official Heroes Day commemorations in Zimbabwe in August 2017**



Picture credit: Getty