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# Political Instability in Zimbabwe

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## INTRODUCTION

Political instability and potential violence could threaten Zimbabwe in the coming twelve to eighteen months. Zimbabwe's ninety-one-year-old president, Robert Mugabe, has no clear succession plan, and considerable uncertainty exists about whether a stable succession will take place. Zimbabwe's economy remains weak and vulnerable to potential shocks that might precipitate political instability as well. At the same time, government suppression of fundamental freedoms continues. Past crises have produced waves of refugees that have burdened Zimbabwe's neighbors. Renewed instability in Zimbabwe would be a special challenge for South Africa, which is attempting to deal with its own pressing economic and social needs. It would also set back U.S. interests in southern Africa, which are focused on support of good governance, trade, and investment. Alongside these risks, a post-Mugabe transition could present opportunities to begin to reverse the effects of decades of misrule in Zimbabwe. The United States should position itself to take advantage of these opportunities by working with others, notably South Africa and the other countries of the southern African region, to limit the risk of civil violence in Zimbabwe and to lay the groundwork for a better future.

## THE CONTINGENCY

The risk factors associated with political instability in Zimbabwe are growing. Although President Mugabe has moved to strengthen his already tight grip on the levers of power within both the government and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), doubts remain as to how long tight discipline will last. Following the ZANU-PF party congress held December 2–7, 2014, Mugabe ousted Joice Mujuru from the vice presidency of both the party and the government, installing former Justice Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa in her place. Although Mnangagwa is widely seen as having gained an important advantage, the identity of Mugabe's successor remains an open question. Mugabe may serve out his term and successfully hand off power to an anointed successor, but events may unfold in a less orderly fashion. Acute instability in Zimbabwe could emerge at any time and play out along one or more of the three following lines:

*Mugabe dies or becomes incapacitated before installing a chosen successor.* Mugabe's most imminent challenges are his advanced age and poor health. He has traveled abroad repeatedly for medical treatment of an undisclosed ailment. Despite this, Mugabe appears vigorous, maintains an active domestic and international schedule, and insists that he will run again for president in 2018. He was also elected in August 2014 to chair of the Southern African Development Community (SADC)—an intergovernmental organization that promotes economic, political, and security cooperation—and assumed the leadership of the African Union in January 2015.

In the past, Mugabe has treated his vice president as a figurehead rather than as a successor, and he seems to be continuing that practice even since the party congress. Mnangagwa has taken care of routine state functions during Mugabe's absences, but not the more important ZANU-PF party responsibilities. If this pattern continues, Mnangagwa will have limited opportunity to cement the loyalties he would need to rely on to succeed to the presidency. That failure could portend serious instability should Mugabe die or become incapacitated.

*Mugabe's control is challenged and undermined by growing factionalism.* The ZANU-PF won a resounding victory in the July 2013 national elections, and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is demoralized and somewhat discredited. Nevertheless, the run-up to the party congress demonstrated that factionalism is far from dead within the ruling party. The potential for intraparty strife may have increased as the result of the purge of former Vice President Mujuru, several of her loyal cabinet ministers, and large numbers of party and government officials at the regional and local levels. In dismissing Mujuru and her supporters—who at one point enjoyed majority support at the local level—Mugabe ran roughshod over electoral rules, made all significant decisions on his own, and dispensed with the facade of democratic procedures.

Mugabe will use his security apparatus to control the resentments and grievances of those who lost their offices and to provide the accompanying material benefits, but that dissent could boil over. Mujuru's allies have already filed a legal challenge to Mugabe's recent actions. Even in the likely event that the challenge goes nowhere in the courts, it symbolizes the open wound that exists in the ZANU-PF.

As the drama within the ZANU-PF plays out, President Mugabe will continue to play the dominant role, but the parts played by the current and former vice presidents, Mnangagwa and Mujuru, and by the first lady, Grace Mugabe, will bear close watching. Vice President Mnangagwa takes every opportunity to display his loyalty to Mugabe, sometimes even kneeling before him, but he has fallen into disfavor with Mugabe in the past. Historically, Mugabe's deputies have not fared well. Former Vice President Mujuru, the apparent major loser in the party congress and its aftermath, should not be counted out. She has strong support at the local and regional levels within the party, and she has significant ties to the security establishment on the basis both of her own record in the liberation conflict and that of her late husband, former army chief of staff Solomon Mujuru. Grace Mugabe is a wild card. Until the fall of 2014, she had occupied herself principally with tending the family's business interests. During the run-up to the party congress, she became hyperactive, waging a campaign against Mujuru, but also promoting her own role. Most observers believe that Grace Mugabe sees Mnangagwa as her future patron and protector, but others believe Mrs. Mugabe has ambitions to succeed her husband.

*An economic crisis triggers demands for political change.* Zimbabwe may be increasingly isolated from the West, but it is not insulated from the world economy. Bad economic news seems baked into Zimbabwe's future. Commodity prices have declined and a turnaround is not in sight. China, Mugabe's current principal benefactor, is focused on slowing internal demand and seems less willing to invest in Zimbabwe than in the past. In August 2014, President Mugabe came back from a high-profile visit to China with few commitments from Beijing for additional aid or investment. Prior to the trip, some media reports indicated that Mugabe was hoping for commitments by China for as much as \$4 billion in new funding.

The government's misguided economic policies, including land confiscation and forced "indigenization" of businesses, continue to have the predictable results of depressing productivity. According to the World Bank, Zimbabwe's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate is falling and will decline to less than 1 percent annually by 2016. Difficult economic circumstances could lead to both civil unrest and new flows of refugees. The opposition MDC party, which was credited with the currency reform that ended the last economic emergency, might reemerge as a political force.

#### WARNING INDICATORS

The following developments could provide warning of likely instability in Zimbabwe:

*Indications of Mugabe's declining health.* Mugabe remains remarkably vigorous, holding to a work and travel schedule that would challenge a person decades younger. Observers need to be alert to any changes in these patterns and the frequency of his appearances at official and ceremonial functions. Any evidence of diminished vigor on his part would be significant.

*Signs of increasing dissent, infighting, and factionalism within the ZANU-PF.* The state and ruling party are inextricably intertwined. Mugabe's "guided democracy" has long been the decisive factor in resolving debates over party rules and offices. With his latest moves, however, Mugabe has taken his personal control to a new level. Significant opposition to Mugabe's authoritarian role would likely be met by repressive measures, but conceivably could trigger a crisis within the ZANU-PF.

*Public unrest.* The security establishment, led by the "securocrats"—the senior leaders of the police and armed forces—controls not only the muscles of the state, but also a significant portion of the nation's economy. Civil violence or mass civil disobedience is unlikely as long as the grip of the securocrats remains firm. The failure of security forces to curb protests, strikes, and demonstrations through the use of force and intimidation might be an indicator of divisions among the securocrats. Observers should watch for changes in the major military and police commands and possible movements of army and police units. Likewise, it will be important to watch for increased willingness on the part of the political opposition and civil society groups to carry out protest activities.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

A serious political crisis in Zimbabwe could affect U.S. interests in several ways. It could generate a significant humanitarian problem that would likely require an expensive U.S. aid commitment. It could also delay hope of a productive bilateral trade and economic relationship, since U.S. trade with Zimbabwe would remain minimal. (In 2012, just over \$50 million worth of goods and services flowed in each direction.) Bilateral political relations, trade, and investment would continue to be limited by legally mandated sanctions. A crisis could require U.S. military forces to evacuate the small U.S. citizen population in the country, estimated in 2010 at less than one thousand. Perhaps more important, a crisis in Zimbabwe could lead to potential friction with South Africa and other SADC member states on how to respond to human rights violations by the Zimbabwean government.

On the other hand, a stable and prosperous Zimbabwe would likely advance U.S. interests in Africa. Zimbabwe's rich endowment in human and natural resources would allow it to play a leading role

in shaping Africa's future. Bilateral trade and investment would probably not increase rapidly, but would likely build over time. Revival of Zimbabwe's agricultural sector—perhaps with the benefit of American expertise—would obviate continued humanitarian food aid. Eventually, Zimbabwe's police and armed forces could be expected to play constructive roles in SADC and African Union peace operations. Zimbabwe would become a more attractive destination for U.S. tourists, resulting in improved interpersonal relations.

### *PREVENTIVE OPTIONS*

In crafting a preventive strategy for Zimbabwe, it is important to acknowledge that the United States possesses few policy instruments for directly influencing developments. High-level bilateral meetings take place in Washington, in Harare, and at the United Nations, but the relationship is, at best, formal and official. President Mugabe continues to characterize the United States as a hostile force.

U.S. assistance to Zimbabwe is significant, totaling \$130 million in 2013, but withdrawal of development assistance would have little effect on the policies of the government because aid is already channeled through civil society groups. The government in Harare quite likely assumes that U.S. humanitarian assistance would continue even if political repression increases. Targeted economic sanctions remain in place, but are widely seen as having little impact. Mugabe uses the sanctions as justification for promoting popular resentment toward the United States.

The United States could, broadly speaking, pursue two types of preventive strategies toward Zimbabwe. First, it could attempt to shape the outcome of the political transition through a combination of positive and negative incentives. The factors mentioned above, however, constrain the likelihood of this preventive strategy succeeding. Furthermore, the United States would have few, if any, partners in attempting to influence a succession in Zimbabwe. SADC, led by South Africa, has welcomed Mugabe back into its fold and is unlikely to reverse course. Beijing, which has great influence on the government in Harare, is not in the business of promoting democratic change. Even the European allies have begun limited economic partnerships with Zimbabwe and are unlikely to be willing to join in an activist strategy.

Second, the United States could accept the improbability of influencing the transition process and focus on minimizing the risk of political violence and economic turmoil, while also positioning itself to take advantage of post-succession opportunities to promote political and economic reform. This option would allow the succession drama within the ZANU-PF to run its course. A relatively swift and uncontested succession would enable the government of Zimbabwe to move past its political infighting and begin to attend to the economic and social challenges that the nation faces. This option would have much more modest goals than the first preventive option, aiming only to reduce the likelihood and potential severity of political violence and economic turmoil during the transition period.

Even though no single outside actor has the capacity to directly influence President Mugabe's choices regarding succession, a well-orchestrated multilateral strategy could help Mugabe and others in leadership positions understand the potential negative consequences of decisions that would increase repression, deepen the country's economic problems, and lead to social instability. In such a strategy, the United States would maintain its support for civil society in Zimbabwe and continue a frank and direct dialogue with the Mugabe government. Additionally, it would seek to persuade South Africa and the other SADC countries, China, and the European Union (EU) countries to act along the following lines.

South Africa and Zimbabwe's other SADC partners could, in the interest of regional stability, shed their usual reticence and remind President Mugabe of his responsibilities under the organization's statute to maintain peace and stability in his own country. Especially in the event that Mugabe might attempt to use his role as chair of SADC to justify repressive actions, it would be important for his SADC counterparts, especially South African President Jacob Zuma, to personally intervene. To the extent that Mugabe sees his SADC chairmanship as part of his legacy, he might be motivated to see his term through without controversy.

China is Zimbabwe's most important economic partner with bilateral trade of over \$1 billion annually. Recently, China has refrained from large new investment commitments, perhaps over concerns for stability in Zimbabwe. In the interest of protecting its sizable investments in Zimbabwe, China might be motivated to quietly indicate to Mugabe its concerns over the possibility of instability.

The EU countries could increase their involvement with civil society organizations in Zimbabwe and indicate clearly to the Mugabe government that they would consider reimposing sanctions should greater repression of the opposition become the norm or should political violence break out.

#### *MITIGATING OPTIONS*

As efforts to prevent violence and instability in Zimbabwe move forward, the United States could act on a parallel track to reduce the consequences of any potential violence. It could coordinate preparatory measures with several international partners.

With South Africa and other SADC partners, there could be quiet, advance consultations regarding possible SADC actions in the event of violence in Zimbabwe. Possible SADC actions in the event of a crisis in Zimbabwe would include a prompt condemnation of violence and a call for opposing factions to lay down arms and cease provocative behavior. Although such a hortatory statement would have little direct effect, it would provide a foundation for eventual, more substantive measures such as the dispatch of a high-level mission to mediate among opposing factions in Zimbabwe. In addition, South Africa and other states bordering Zimbabwe could ensure that they are prepared to deal with additional refugees, should violence or an economic crisis prompt new emigration from Zimbabwe.

China would be unlikely to agree to consult in advance on actions that it might take in the event of violence in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, Zimbabwe could be given a prominent place on the agenda for U.S.-Chinese consultations on Africa. Sharing information and reviewing the range of options available might increase the likelihood that China would use its influence with the government of Zimbabwe to prevent violence.

With the EU countries, the United States could coordinate contingency planning for humanitarian assistance, including food aid, both inside Zimbabwe and among populations of refugees outside the country. In addition, the United States and European countries could agree to form a contact group to track developments in Zimbabwe and prepare for advocating action by the UN Security Council to attempt to bring an end to political violence in Zimbabwe.

If, despite these efforts, significant political violence occurs in Zimbabwe, prompt action would be needed to prevent widespread loss of life and destruction of vital infrastructure. U.S. policy options include the following:

- *Intervention by SADC.* During the political and economic crisis that preceded the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe, SADC gave Thabo Mbeki, the former president of South Africa, a mandate to negotiate an accord between ZANU-PF and the two wings of the MDC. He successfully brokered an agreement, helping lower the level of preelection violence during the 2008 election campaign. Mbeki's effort could serve as a precedent for SADC in the event of renewed violence. The choice of mediator would be crucial. A South African would be most likely to gain Mugabe's attention and cooperation, but President Zuma seems preoccupied with internal challenges. Although not Mugabe's equal in rank, South African Vice President Cyril Ramaphosa has had recent mediation experience in Lesotho and would be an option.
- *Action by the UN Security Council.* Although the Security Council holds a mandate to act only with regard to threats to international peace and security, the latter concept has often been interpreted expansively. China might block decisive action by the Security Council, but might agree to the creation of a UN special envoy for Zimbabwe, including a mandate to contact all the internal parties in Zimbabwe with the objective of negotiating a ceasefire.
- *Coordinated increases in economic sanctions.* Broadening – sanctions would have a mainly symbolic effect. Reimposition of EU sanctions, however, would have a more powerful effect on the calculus of the Mugabe government.
- *Intensified official U.S. and Western dialogue with moderates in the ZANU-PF.* Many senior figures in the ZANU-PF have extensive business interests that would be damaged by prolonged civil unrest. Their interest in limiting violence might be a basis for dialogue.
- *Increased U.S. humanitarian assistance.* Additional humanitarian assistance, especially food aid, would be important both to saving lives and to countering the Mugabe government's demonization of the United States and the West. In past times of economic hardship, the Mugabe regime has threatened to block Western assistance, but has never made good on its bluster.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is both time and opportunity for effective action to reduce the likelihood of political instability and civil violence in Zimbabwe, while also preparing for a transition to better governance and economic prosperity. In crafting its approach to a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, the United States should think and plan ahead, with its broad regional interests in mind.

Even as its bilateral relationships with the governments of East and West Africa have grown stronger, the United States' ties with the SADC countries have tended to stagnate. This has been particularly true in the case of South Africa. While differences over Zimbabwe have not been the primary driver of U.S. relationships with the southern African region, they have been a significant negative element.

Yet, despite the uncertain political leadership of the Zuma government, labor unrest, and economic weaknesses, South Africa remains the most capable nation on the continent and an indispensable partner for the United States. In recent years, South Africa has begun to take a more active interest in African security issues, employing its armed forces as peacekeepers and its officials as peacemakers. Establishing a more active and constructive partnership in addressing African security challenges would benefit both countries.

Zimbabwe presents an opportunity to begin strengthening the partnership. The United States and South Africa share interests in promoting stability and peaceful change in Zimbabwe. South Africa

would be the country most burdened by any new influx of refugees from Zimbabwe. Persistent economic depression in Zimbabwe damages the export economy of South Africa, which is Zimbabwe's largest trading partner. Although Zimbabwe weighs far less on U.S. interests, the risks and costs of a potential breakdown there are considerable. Bilateral U.S.–South African differences on Zimbabwe have been more over tone and tactics than over ultimate objectives, and better understanding and coordination should be within reach.

With these interests in mind, the United States should put in place a strategy for dealing with the threat of instability and civic violence in Zimbabwe. Early contacts with South Africa, other SADC countries, European allies, and China should be pursued. The U.S. policy agenda should include the following:

- *Intensify interagency efforts to define U.S. interests and options in Zimbabwe.* In the context of a formal interagency contingency planning effort on Zimbabwe, the U.S. government should assess the current situation, achieve consensus on the goal of limiting violence and economic turmoil in Zimbabwe, and define the incentives and disincentives available to influence the actions of the Mugabe government or its successor. Given the proven capacity of the government in Harare to bob, weave, and dissemble in the face of proffered incentives and disincentives, it would be wise to avoid aiming at a U.S. “roadmap” for Zimbabwe. Rather, the objective should be an integrated approach that would focus on practical, measurable steps that the government of Zimbabwe could take to permit a greater range of political expression and to liberalize the economy. Just as is the case with relations with other countries, the emphasis should be on changing actual practices rather than altering the radical rhetoric of the ZANU-PF.
- *Open a consultative channel on Zimbabwe with Congress.* Although Zimbabwe is far down the current list of executive branch foreign policy priorities with Congress, it is important to establish a consultative process with Congress in parallel to the interagency effort described above. Initially at least, these consultations should be at the staff level with the relevant subcommittees and with representatives of relevant members. The purpose of this channel would be to help members of Congress understand that positive change in Zimbabwe is likely to take place incrementally if at all to avoid confronting Congress with unpleasant surprises and to build a basis of trust for actions, whether carrots or sticks, further down the road.
- *Pursue understandings on Zimbabwe with South Africa and other SADC countries.* South Africa possesses the greatest potential influence on Zimbabwe's government and would also be directly affected by a crisis there. Conversations with the Zuma government should focus on achieving South African agreement to consistently urge President Mugabe and other ZANU-PF leaders to avoid violence. South Africa should also be prepared to mediate between factions in the ZANU-PF, as well as between ZANU-PF and the opposition, should widespread violence appear imminent.
- *Consult regularly on Zimbabwe with senior African affairs officials in EU countries.* These contacts should be made based on the results of U.S. interagency conclusions. The United States should aim to reach a common assessment of the situation and to work toward consensus on positive and negative incentives for Zimbabwe, including sanctions. There should also be agreement to coordinate public statements by Western governments in the event of a crisis in Zimbabwe.
- *Seek to influence China on Zimbabwe.* The United States currently consults with China on a variety of African issues, and China has begun to contribute to international efforts on the continent, including peace operations in South Sudan and antipiracy patrols off the coast of Somalia.

Due to the potential consequences of a crisis in Zimbabwe for both U.S. and Chinese interests, the United States should propose regular, in-depth conversations on Zimbabwe, focused on persuading the Chinese government to support a peaceful political transition in Zimbabwe.

- *Seek senior-level dialogue with the Zimbabwean government in multiple venues.* Contacts between the U.S. embassy in Harare and senior ZANU-PF figures are constrained by the tense relationship between the two capitals and party officials' fear of incurring Mugabe's wrath by appearing too close to American representatives. To supplement contacts by the embassy, the United States should seek to strengthen parallel communications channels in Washington and at the United Nations. Coordinated messaging in all three channels will be essential. The United States might seek to validate these channels by proposing small incentives, such as promoting greater U.S. investment in Zimbabwe in return for agreement by the Mugabe government to suspend aspects of its most objectionable economic policies, including "indigenization."
- *Expand youth and student exchanges.* Zimbabwe already participates in the U.S. government's Young African Leader Initiative (YALI). Consideration should be given to further expanding access by young Zimbabweans to YALI and similar programs. Although the objective effect of such a decision would not be immediate, it would be a timely counter to the argument of the Mugabe government that the United States has abandoned the people of Zimbabwe.
- *Ensure the security of the U.S. mission in Zimbabwe.* In the event of significant civil unrest, U.S. interests in Zimbabwe could become the target of violence. Plans for ensuring the security of the embassy and its personnel and for conducting an evacuation of those personnel if necessary should be updated regularly.

To encourage stability and prosperity in Zimbabwe beyond the transition, the United States should prioritize the following long-term recommendation:

- *Test the waters for expanding the bilateral dialogue.* Given the economic plight of Zimbabwe and its humanitarian needs, there is potential for cooperation with a new government on trade and commercial issues. Since the actual reach of sanctions has been less than that claimed by the Mugabe government, it would be possible to begin to unfreeze the bilateral relationship relatively easily with agreement on such steps as trade and investment missions. The United States should then pursue political dialogue in close coordination with its Western allies and South Africa. Keeping SADC in the lead publically while actively pursuing private diplomacy would probably increase the likelihood of measured, step-by-step progress.

## CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe's problems, which have been created by decades of authoritarian misrule and poor economic management, will not be quickly solved. Any successor to Mugabe will have to deal with a bitter political legacy and difficult economic conditions. The alternatives open to the United States are limited by strained political relationships and minimal economic ties. This scarcity of options is not a rationale for doing little or nothing. Rather, it is a call for the United States to focus on what is essential—reducing the possibility of political instability and civil violence during the post-Mugabe succession—while laying the groundwork for a better relationship with an eventual successor government.

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