

Partisan Security Forces:

Zimbabwe's Biggest Election Risk?



Prepared by Dewa Mavhinga for Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition

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Zimbabwe's Biggest Election Risk?



Dewa Mavhinga
Human Rights Watch

The biggest barrier to the holding of credible, free and fair elections in Zimbabwe, which are constitutionally due in 2023, is the highly partisan and extremely politicized security forces.

The key to ensuring free and fair elections is to urgently reform Zimbabwe's security sector to remove it from any involvement in the country's civilian and political affairs.

It is largely the security sector leadership that is openly partisan towards ZANU-PF and benefitting from political patronage; the rank and file of the security forces remains independent and professional.

During the so-called 'military-assisted-transition' in November 2017, which is the coup that removed longtime ruler, Robert Mugabe, from power and replaced by current leader Emmerson Mnangagwa, the decisive role and presence of the security forces controversially became overt and ubiquitous in the civilian space.

The Zimbabwe authorities need to reform the security forces, completely end their involvement in partisan politics, and ensure that they act constitutionally, professionally, and in a rights-respecting manner. For any civil society, social movement,

or citizens campaign for creating a national environment conducive for the holding of free and fair elections to be successful, it must tackle the elephant in the room, that is, the military factor in Zimbabwean political and economic affairs.

Zimbabwe's state security forces, notably the military, have for decades since independence in 1980, interfered in the country's political and electoral affairs in ways that have adversely affected the ability of Zimbabweans to vote freely. This brazen interference has in the past severely undermined the credibility of elections and resulted in widespread countrywide political violence.

The security forces have operated within a system that has allowed elements within their ranks to arrest, torture and kill perceived opponents with impunity.

The first post-independence overt military involvement in Zimbabwe's political affairs was during the period from 1983 to 1987 when Mugabe and ZANU-PF deployed a section of the army, the Fifth Brigade (a special army unit trained by North Korean instructors and code named "Gukurahundi" – the rain that washes away the chaff), ostensibly to quell dissident disturbances in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces.

The disturbances were characterized by violence between ZIPRA and ZANLA soldiers as well as sporadic attacks on civilians by agents of apartheid South Africa.

Instead, the brigade was used to destroy ZAPU's political base in those provinces.

The Fifth Brigade carried out systematic and widespread atrocities such as torture and extrajudicial executions of more than 3,000 people (the late ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo put the figure at 20, 000) in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces between 1982 and 1987.

In 1988 the ZANU-PF government issued Clemency Order Number 1, granting amnesty to all those involved in human rights violations committed between 1982 and 1987, benefiting mainly the army and the state security agency, the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). On October 6, 2000, following widespread political violence during parliamentary elections, Mugabe pardoned those responsible for politically motivated crimes committed during the January-July 2000 campaign period.

To shore up its power and stop the army from turning on it, ZANU-PF since 2000 has relied upon a patronage system to reward and retain the loyalty of the military. Former and sitting military officers have been appointed as ministerial permanent secretaries, directors in ministerial departments, provincial

governors, and other key posts.

Some soldiers were assigned to run Grain Marketing Board projects and Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe's farm mechanization programme. Military chiefs, ZANU-PF, and government officials were implicated in the US\$3billion corruption scandal that hit the command agriculture programme launched in the 2016/17 season.

A United Nations Experts Panel report of 2002 implicated the Zimbabwe military in the loot and plunder of the resources of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The report noted that although troops of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces were a major guarantor of the security of the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo against regional rivals, its senior officers have enriched themselves from the country's mineral assets under the pretext of arrangements set up to repay Zimbabwe for military services.

Zimbabwe's political-military elite signed six major trade and service agreements in August 2002 with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The UN reported noted, "The key strategist for the Zimbabwean branch of the elite network is the Speaker of the Parliament and former National Security Minister, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa has won strong support from senior military and intelligence officers for an aggressive policy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo."

In 2008, The ruling party, ZANU-PF, and elements in the security forces, unleashed violent attacks against activists and perceived supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) after its unexpected victory in the national elections.

The Joint Operations Command (JOC), comprising the heads of the security forces, played a major role in the large-scale and systematic abuses that led to 200 deaths, the beating and torture of 5,000 people, and the displacement of 36,000.

As with previous state-sponsored political violence, the authorities failed to hold accountable those responsible, entrenching impunity within the security forces.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Election Observer Mission to Zimbabwe for the 2008 elections found that, "The period leading to the run-off election was characterized by politically motivated violence resulting in loss of life, damage to property, and serious injuries sustained and hindering political activities." Zimbabwe is party to the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections established to promote regular free and fair, transparent, credible and peaceful democratic elections.

Global Witness reports in 2012 and 2013 showed how diamond companies concealed their finances and shielded their operations from public scrutiny, hiding significant stakes in these companies held by the Zimbabwean military, the CIO, and the government itself.

There is widespread concern that diamond money secretly financing institutions responsible for oppressing the Zimbabwean people and the 2017 coup.

Between 2010 and 2017 Zimbabwe officially exported over US\$2.5 billion in diamonds, according to official figures from the Kimberley Process, but available government reports show only about US\$300 million of this can clearly be identified in public accounts.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) provides that no member of the security services may, in the exercise of their functions, act in a partisan manner or further the interests of any political party or cause.

The Zimbabwe Defense Forces regulations instituted in 1988 strictly prohibit partisan conduct or participation in party politics.

Existing national laws and regulations, if complied with, seem sufficient to ensure non-partisanship, independence, and professionalism within the security forces. But these laws and regulations are ignored with impunity at the highest level within the security forces.

Under President Mnangagwa over the last three years, the Zimbabwe security forces

have continued to commit serious and intensified violations, including violent attacks, abductions, torture, and other abuses against the opposition and civil society activists with absolutely no accountability.

On 1 August 2018, post-election protests over delayed presidential election results erupted in Harare and resulted in widespread violence.

The military was deployed and fired live ammunition indiscriminately. President Mnangagwa then set up an international panel, the Motlanthe Commission of Inquiry, which found that six people died and 35 others were injured because of actions by the state security forces.

Some commission recommendations, which have not been implemented, include ensuring perpetrators are held accountable and a special committee to compensate those killed and those who lost property is set up.

Again, in mid-January 2019, the security forces used excessive lethal force to crush nationwide protests that had been triggered by President Mnangagwa's sudden announcement of a fuel price increase.

During the demonstrations throughout Zimbabwe the security forces fired live ammunition, killing 17 people, and raping at least 17 women. No-one has been held accountable for these heinous crimes.

Scores of government critics have been subjected to abduction and torture by suspected

State security agents over the last three years.

Obert Masaraure, the national president of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, was abducted by armed men at his home in Harare on January 18, 2019, and severely beaten with leather whips.

He was later handed over to Harare Central Police Station, and later appeared before a Harare magistrate on charges of subversion and inciting public violence.

In June 2019, Masaraure was similarly abducted, stripped naked and beaten by gunmen suspected to be state security agents. Before abandoning him in a bush, his captors ordered him to stop mobilizing teachers for strike actions.

In August 2019, six masked gunmen abducted, beat, and forced the popular Zimbabwean comedian and government critic Samantha Kureya (known as "Gonyeti") to drink raw sewage before she was released.

Another activist, Tatenda Mombeyarara, was abducted by eight masked gunmen wielding AK-47 assault rifles.

The abductors accused him of organising anti-government protests and beat him severely, breaking his left leg and a finger, then abandoning him.

On September 14, 2019, three unidentified men abducted Dr Peter Magombeyi, then leader of the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association, which had organised a series of protests to demand better salaries for govern-

ment health workers.

On 30 July 2020, security forces raided the house of Mduduzi Mathuthu, a prominent journalist and editor of the online newspaper Zimlive, in Bulawayo. Failing to find him, they arrested his three nephews, Tawanda Muchehiwa, 22, Advent Mathuthu, 25, and Amandlenkosi Mathuthu, 19.

The security agents also detained Mathuthu's sister, Nomagugu Mathuthu, to compel him to turn himself in, but released her hours later. Advent Mathuthu was charged with incitement of public violence after allegedly being found with flyers saying "Mnangagwa & His Cabinet Must Resign," but was freed by a court.

According to the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), in April and May 2020, the police and army topped the list of perpetrators of human rights violations in Zimbabwe.

ZPP noted that state security agents were been major perpetrators of human violations since the beginning of the Covid-19 induced lockdown in March 2020.

All major periods of serious human rights abuses in Zimbabwe since independence have been characterized by the involvement of the security forces with impunity. It is like the army is at war with its own people.

Zimbabwe's security forces have committed these abuses with impunity as no security force personnel have been arrested or prosecuted for these abuses.

Without accountability for the serious abuses by the security forces, it will be difficult to bring an end to the abuses.

The Zimbabwe Constitution established in 2013 provides (section 210) for an Independent Complaints Mechanism to receive and investigate complaints from the public about misconduct or abuses by members of the security forces and provide remedies.

But the Mnangagwa administration is yet to set up this crucial Independent Complaints Mechanism which is long overdue given the scale of human rights abuses in which security forces are implicated.

For the outlined serious human rights abuses over the last three years – including arbitrary arrests, torture, murder, and rape – the government should order prompt investigations, implement reports of investigations and recommendations of commissions including the prosecution of implicated members of security forces in accordance with national law and international standards.

Zimbabwe's neighbors in the SADC and the African Union should assist in preparing for credible, free, and fair elections. They should press Zimbabwe to ensure that security forces are politically neutral and that they don't interfere in the country's civilian and electoral affairs. Such actions include by investigating and prosecuting alleged abuses by security force personnel, publicly directing the leadership of the security forces to carry out their responsibilities in a professional

and impartial manner, and appropriately punishing or prosecuting those who fail to do so.

Zambia's recent smooth transition and transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition UPND party led by Hakainde Hichilema was made possible, in part, because the security forces in Zambia are non-partisan and do not interfere in civilian and electoral affairs. Unlike the Zimbabwe security forces.

Now is the time for Mnangagwa to move ahead on the security sector reforms needed for credible, free, and fair elections. Without such reforms, the risk of widespread human rights abuses and sham elections in 2023 remains high. Security sector reform is fundamental to the restoration of normality and respect for human rights, not just in ZANU-PF political affairs, but also in the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans. It is important now for the military leadership to publicly announce its commitment to credible, free and fair elections and to pledge to respect the outcome.

To demonstrate a real commitment to leveling the electoral playing field, Mnangagwa and his administration should make it clear to the security forces that their involvement in political affairs is unacceptable. Security sector reform is fundamental to creating a society that respects the human rights of ordinary Zimbabweans.

Summary of Key Recommendations



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Human Rights Watch

President Mnangagwa and his administration should make it clear to the security forces that their involvement in political affairs is unacceptable and should publicly direct the leadership of the security forces to carry out their responsibilities in a professional and impartial manner.

The government of Zimbabwe should promptly investigate and take appropriate disciplinary action against officers in the security forces, regardless of rank, who have violated laws and regulations prohibiting partisan conduct.

The government of Zimbabwe should order prompt investigations into rights abuses by security forces, implement reports of investigations and recommendations of commissions including the prosecution of implicated members of security forces in accordance with national law and international standards.

The Mnangagwa administration should urgently set up the crucial Independent Complaints Mechanism established by the 2013 Constitution (section 210) to receive and investigate complaints from the public about misconduct or abuses by members of the security forces and provide remedies.

Civil society organizations, social movement, or citizens campaigning for a national environment conducive for the holding of free and fair elections to be successful, should focus on military factor in Zimbabwean political and economic affairs.

Zimbabwe Security Forces should adhere to, and respect the Zimbabwe Constitution and other laws that prohibit partisan conduct and involvement in civilian, political, and electoral affairs.

Zimbabwe's neighbors in the SADC and the African Union should assist in preparing for credible, free, and fair elections. They should press Zimbabwe to ensure that security forces are politically neutral and that they don't interfere in the country's civilian and electoral affairs.

Dewa Mavhinga is the Southern Africa director at Human Rights Watch (follow on Twitter @dewamavhinga)