

# Zimbabwe: A Military-Compelled Transition?

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Between November 14 and 15, members of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) [seized control](#) of the state-owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and secured other key political and military facilities, in an action seen by some observers as a coup d'état. The ultimate objective and possible trajectory of their intervention remain unclear, but the move appears to have been sparked by a succession struggle within the ruling Zimbabwe National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

Specific triggers were President Robert Mugabe's November 6 dismissal of one of Zimbabwe's two vice presidents, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and a [purge](#) of Mnangagwa's supporters. These actions followed signs that Mugabe, age 93, was moving to make Grace Mugabe, his politically ambitious wife, a vice president. This would likely have positioned her to succeed him as president and sidelined her main rival, Mnangagwa, an ex-intelligence chief and Defense Minister. Top security force leaders, many reported allies of Mnangagwa—and, like him, veterans of Zimbabwe's war of independence, unlike Grace Mugabe—apparently viewed these prospective changes as anathema.

The situation in Zimbabwe remains fluid, and what outcomes may result from the military's intervention are unknown. The ZDF's action holds the potential to bring about a political transition reversing a years-long trend of undemocratic governance, human rights abuses, and a badly ailing economy. Alternately, it could possibly worsen the security and economic situations. How the United States—and other external actors—might affect the outcome remains to be seen. Talks involving regional actors, the military, Robert Mugabe, and others

are under way, but their nature and goals are currently unclear.

## Intervention

The military's intervention was preceded by an [explicit warning](#) on November 13 by ZDF commander Constantino Chiwenga. He [demanded](#) an end to the intra-party purge and stated that regarding "matters of protecting our revolution, the military will not hesitate to step in."

The Mugabe administration responded by labeling Chiwenga's statement "[treasonable](#)," and the next day the military acted. In a live TV [statement](#) at dawn on November 15, a military [spokesman](#) asserted that the ZDF was acting to "pacify a degenerating political, social and economic situation ... which if not addressed may result in violent conflict." He averred that the military was not taking over the government and anticipated a "return to normalcy" after "we have accomplished our mission." He said the ZDF was "targeting criminals around" President Mugabe "who are committing crimes that are causing social and economic suffering ... in order to bring them to justice." The statement also warned other Zimbabwean security services not to resist the military's actions. "Criminals" is a likely reference to allies of Grace Mugabe, several of whom have reportedly been arrested. While the statement said that the security of the president and his family was guaranteed, the president is reportedly [under house arrest](#). His wife's whereabouts remain uncertain.



## Mnangagwa's Ouster

Mnangagwa's removal represented a stunning turnaround for a long-time regime insider, but followed a long-standing pattern in which Mugabe, as head of ZANU-PF and the executive branch, has controlled elites' elevation to and demotion from key party and state posts. Notably, demotion targets have been those appearing to challenge his leadership or publicly suggest the possibility of a post-Mugabe transition. Mnangagwa himself became vice

president in 2014 after his predecessor, opposition figure and ex-ZANU-PF loyalist Joice Mujuru, [faced a similar ousting](#).

Mnangagwa's dismissal was portended by a series of [increasingly personalized](#) political [attacks](#) on him by Grace Mugabe. She also claimed that Mnangagwa's allies had planned a [coup d'état](#), and denied reports that Mnangagwa had been targeted in a [poisoning plot involving ice cream](#) made by her firm. An [official statement](#) explaining Mnangagwa's ouster accused him of "disloyalty, disrespect, deceitfulness and unreliability." The president, who had [stated](#) his willingness to sack Mnangagwa days earlier, also stripped Mnangagwa of his role as Justice Minister on October 10, 2017. He also reassigned or dismissed several other key ministers, some putative Mnangagwa allies, notably then-Finance Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who became head of a newly created [cyber security ministry](#).

ZANU-PF also expelled Mnangagwa from the party. He then [fled to South Africa](#) on November 8 after reported death threats. Following these events, a key group of veterans publicly [repudiated President Mugabe](#). Mnangagwa, meanwhile pledged to challenge Robert Mugabe's leadership.

### Succession Politics

Mnangagwa's removal generated intense political controversy, as it appeared to presage Grace Mugabe's possible ascendance to the co-vice-presidency of ZANU-PF during a late-2017 party congress, and then to the national vice presidency. This might have placed Grace Mugabe, her husband's former secretary, in pole position to temporarily succeed him, were he to resign or die while in office, and then possibly to consolidate power and become president for the longer-term.

It would also have signaled a generational transition of power, from a ZANU-PF dominated by independence war veterans and a wing of the party grouped around Mnangagwa and allies in the security services—some of whom oppose any president lacking independence war credentials—to a cohort of politicians who came of age after independence in 1980. This cohort includes Grace Mugabe and is grouped together as a faction known as "Generation 40."

Despite support from many in this group, her relative backing within ZANU-PF more broadly absent her husband was difficult to gauge. Labeled by critics as "[Gucci Grace](#)" due to her reported penchant for [luxury goods](#), she has been accused of [abusive](#) and "[opportunistic](#)" behavior. She has also repeatedly lashed out at perceived enemies since entering politics in 2014, including powerful party figures, and disparaged veterans, historically a core ZANU-PF constituency.

### Prospects

The ZDF intervention is almost certain to fundamentally reshape the political landscape. Whether the military may, however, simply attempt to protect its interests and those of the historically hardline ZANU-PF wing of the party with which it is allied—or whether it facilitates a governance agenda centered on "investment, development and prosperity" (as its intervention [statement](#) suggested)—remains to be seen. An alternative option could be a government of national unity akin to one that existed between 2009 and 2013. It [ended after](#)

procedurally flawed elections in 2013.