

Zimbabwe's Political Transition: Issues for Congress

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In mid-November 2017, spurred by an [intra-party rivalry](#) within the ruling Zimbabwe National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party to succeed President Robert Mugabe, 93, the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) seized control of key national political and military facilities.

The ZDF then initiated efforts to force Mugabe to resign, reverse Mugabe's recent dismissal of Vice President Emmerson [Mnangagwa](#) in favor of Mugabe's wife, [Grace Mugabe](#), and halt ZANU-PF's purge of Mnangagwa's supporters. (See CRS Insight IN10819, [Zimbabwe: A Military-Compelled Transition?](#), and for further Zimbabwe background, CRS Report R44633, [Zimbabwe: Current Issues and U.S. Policy](#).) ZANU-PF [removed Mugabe](#) as party leader, appointed Mnangagwa as his interim successor, and expelled Grace Mugabe and several of her allies.

Preempting an impeachment vote, Mugabe resigned November 21. Zimbabweans' initial reactions to the ZDF intervention appeared broadly positive. They turned out for large, peaceful demonstrations, and, after the resignation, celebrations.

International responses to the military intervention have been cautious: the [African Union](#) (AU), the [Southern African Development Community](#) (SADC), and the [United States](#)—which

generally oppose coups—initially called for constitutional governance and peaceful dialogue. The United States has since urged "[unwavering respect](#) for the rule of law and for established democratic practices" and declared that the "path forward must lead to [free and fair elections.](#)" The Chairperson of the AU Commission welcomed Mugabe's decision to resign and [recognized the will of the people](#) for a "peaceful transfer of power in a manner that secures the democratic future of their country."



Considerations for the Transition

The question of who may succeed President Mugabe arguably presents the most immediate and pressing challenge for Zimbabwe's political system, and for foreign governments engaged with the country. The stakes are high. Succession outcomes are likely to shape future developments in all major policy arenas, and the succession process could generate political and economic instability, possibly violent, in the wider southern Africa region. Succession is subject to the interplay of diverse, primarily domestic factors, however, making it an unpredictable and fluid process, and one not readily influenced by U.S. or other foreign policy interventions.

Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF allies are widely viewed as likely to take the lead in shaping Zimbabwe's prospective political transition, possibly with [Mnangagwa as acting president](#) and with [Movement for Democratic Change \(MDC\) leader Morgan Tsvangirai](#) as prime minister in a government of national unity (GNU). Mnangagwa and his allies may attempt to [sideline](#) the opposition, seek a renewed electoral mandate in polls slated for 2018, and potentially perpetuate the widely [criticized](#), often repressive, governance approach pursued by ZANU-PF in recent years. Such a tack could be politically risky, given Mnangagwa's untested electoral strength, widespread socioeconomic [discontent](#), and an uncertain post-Mugabe political landscape.

A more ambitious move would be to capitalize on political transformation and reform opportunities presented by Mugabe's exit by pursuing a more inclusive approach to governance. Such a decision could garner substantial international and Zimbabwean domestic support.

Under a new GNU, the 2018 elections might be delayed, pending greater party and electoral administration preparations, full [implementation](#) of the [2013 constitution](#), and attempts to address the [foundering economy](#). A GNU could also act as a mechanism for addressing more divisive challenges (e.g., [land tenure](#) reform, diamond sector [transparency](#), and [security sector reform](#)). A key departure point for a GNU could be the [partially implemented](#), regionally mediated 2009-2013 coalition government [reform roadmap](#) abandoned after [elections in 2013](#).

Issues for Congress

Zimbabwe's transition could provide the United States with a crucial opening to advance long-standing [U.S. assistance](#) and [congressional](#) objectives in Zimbabwe. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has briefly [set out](#) State Department views on the intervention. A separate State Department statement [calls for](#) "an expedient transition to democratic, civilian order ... through democratic, transparent and constitutional processes...[and] respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms"—and for the ZDF to "exercise restraint, respect the rule of law, [and] uphold the constitutionally protected rights of all citizens." In the short term, the United States is likely to look toward Zimbabwean stakeholders to negotiate a transition, likely aided by [SADC](#) mediation—as several U.S. Senators have [called for](#).

Subsequent U.S. responses, if any, may depend on the nature of any prospective outcome. If U.S. policymakers viewed the outcome as negative, they might respond with increased [targeted sanctions](#), expressions of censure, and other tactics to compel change.

A prospectively credible transition aligned with U.S. bilateral objectives, might, instead, spur U.S. policymakers to support such a process. One option for doing so would be intensive technical assistance—in close coordination with Zimbabwe's other development partners—aimed at

- **Ensuring [free and fair elections](#)**, including through electoral technical assistance and robust domestic and foreign election monitoring.
- **Reversing [negative economic trends](#)**, possibly accompanied by a strongly conditioned deal to clear Zimbabwe's large [international debts](#) and [arrears](#).
- **Robust rule of law and human rights capacity-building**, especially tied to [implementing the 2013 constitution](#).
- **Accountability for [diamond revenue](#)**, both [past](#) and future.
- **Transparent land reform**, as outlined in the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA), and support for agricultural development and reform.
- **Security sector reform.**

Congress could also potentially

- review [ZDERA](#) and consider successor legislation tied to current circumstances; and
- consider setting out explicit conditions that would have to be met in order to prompt U.S.

consideration of changes to the [current U.S. Zimbabwe sanctions](#).