

Zimbabwe Elections

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The elections that opened the way for the independence of Zimbabwe took place in February 1980 according to the Lancaster House agreement. They were internationally recognized and acclaimed by many, but not by everybody. In particular the pressure on the voters, exercised by the armed persons who had not been confined to assembly points, was reported. Besides, apart from Commonwealth forces, deployed in the country according to that agreement, six thousand armed South Africans (Moorcraft and McLaughlin, 2008: 125) and at least 500 Mozambicans (Moorcraft, 2011: 40) were allegedly present there.

The results were critically assessed by leaders of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), including its president Joshua Nkomo who just did not believe his party could receive just 20 seats in parliament. One of its former military leaders even told the author: "There was no election in 1980" (Discussion).

During the next two decades the elections in Zimbabwe were less controversial, though it was difficult to call them always really "free and fair", especially under the conditions of mass repressions in Matabeleland in 1983-1987.

The obvious problems began on a threshold of the 2000. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was founded in 1999, an opposition party, led by Morgan Tsvangirai and formed from members of the broad coalition of civic society groups in particular the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. Unexpectedly for the leadership of the ruling party, ZANU-PF, it failed in a referendum on the draft of the new constitution in February 2000 opposed by the MDC. But this failure was also "a blessing in disguise" for the ruling party – since the prospect of defeat at the parliamentary elections scheduled for June of the same year was real, it made them mobilize all their resources – from the party structures at different levels to the security forces; it was reported that during the election 29 MDC supporters were killed (Chan, 2003: 158).

Having received just 2 % more of the votes than the MDC, ZANU-PF retained a reliable majority in parliament only at the expense of additional members appointed by president and elected by the Zimbabwe Council of Chiefs. At the same time, there was a clear difference in the electoral preferences of the urban and rural population of Zimbabwe: the opposition received all seats in parliament from the largest cities, Harare and Bulawayo.

The parliamentary elections were followed in 2002 by presidential ones; Robert Mugabe won with 56,2 % of votes over Morgan Tsvangirai (42 %) among new accusations of election rigging. Dr Ibbo Mandaza, head of the SAPES Trust NGO in Harare even claimed (though many years later) referring to a senior official of the Zimbabwe Election Commission that "during the presidential election in 2002, Mugabe only polled 18 percent of votes while Tsvangirai amassed the remaining percentage" (The Zimbabwean).

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The 2005 election were more successful for ZANU-PF, probably because MDC had split by that time. Much more problematic were next elections in March 2008. They were held in the atmosphere of the deep economic and financial crisis with galloping inflation and were preceded by political talks between the government and the opposition mediated by the South African President Thabo Mbeki. They resulted in certain improvements of the electoral procedures and the President was no more able to appoint additional members to the House of Assembly, be it directly or through the Council of Chiefs.

This time the level of violence during the elections was much lower, but the tension increased after the elections due to the long delay in publication of their results. After the recount and the verification of the results, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) announced on 2 May that Tsvangirai won 47.9 % of the vote and Mugabe 43.2 %, necessitating a second round which was to be held on 27 June 2008.

Moreover, ZANU-PF for the first time lost majority in the National Assembly; it received only 99 seats, less than MDC-T (100 seats). Besides, ten seats went to MDC-M headed by Arthur Mutambara and one to an independent candidate.

The period following the first round was marked by political violence. ZANU-PF and the MDC each blamed the other's supporters for it. On 22 June 2008, Tsvangirai announced that he was withdrawing from the run-off, but it was too late and his name remained on the ballot. So, the second round of elections went ahead and Mugabe, the only actively participating candidate, received 85,5 % of votes.

The tension was growing but in July the talks began between ZANU-PF and two "formations" of MDC, led by Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara. Their success was achieved due to the mediation of Thabo Mbeki and his team on behalf of the Southern African Development Community. Finally on 15 September 2008, the leaders of the SADC 14 member states witnessed the signing of the Global Political Agreement by three main political forces in Zimbabwe. According to it, Mugabe remained president, Tsvangirai became prime minister, and Mutambara became deputy prime minister.

The inclusive government (the word "coalition" was not used by ZANU-PF) survived till July 2013, when after the adoption of a new constitution, general elections finally took place after three year delay. The success of ZANU-PF was expected, but the results went beyond such expectations. Mugabe received 61,9 % of votes and Tsvangirai just 33,94 %; in parliament the gap was even larger – 197 seats for ZANU-PF and just 70 for MDC-T and 2 for another MDC formation.

This time the elections took place in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere and the difference was so evident that Tsvangirai limited his protest actions by loud complains. The attitude of Tsvangirai's sponsors can be seen from such titles of British publications as "Zimbabwe inconvenient election truth" (The Guardian, 5 August 2013) and "Facing an uncomfortable truth" (Economist, 6 August 2013).

The defeat in the elections caused confusion in the ranks of the opposition. Their culmination was the "overthrow" of Tsvangirai and even his exclusion from the party. In response, he and his supporters expelled their opponents, including Tendai Biti, who served as general secretary of MDC-T, and he had to create one more "formation", MDC – Renewal Team. When the author asked one of the Zimbabwean politicians about the reasons for such a sharp rapture, he replied: "Everything is very simple. There is less money from outside, so the quarrelling is more".

As distinct from the opposition, Robert Mugabe remained an undisputed leader of ZANU-PF, however a bitter struggle began for his heritage, and dismissals and expulsions of prominent members took place here as well as consequences of personalities' struggle for power.

The new elections were expected in July 2018, but dramatic developments took place in Zimbabwe earlier. For many years, the Western countries, and especially the former metropolis Great Britain, have set themselves the goal of a “regime change” in Zimbabwe, applying sanctions and leading a constant information war. Nevertheless, the changes, when they did happen, were caused mainly by internal dynamics, moreover they took place outside the election process.

Although the departure of the 93-year-old leader was then inevitable, Mugabe was in no hurry to resign and, on the contrary, was going to run for president again in the elections in 2018. Moreover, many believed that he and his party ZANU-PF would win again in particular due to splits in the opposition.

However, the developments in November 2017 led to a drastic change in the political configuration in Zimbabwe. These events are well covered in academic literature and the author will limit the narrative to few main points.

The immediate cause of the internal political crisis was a sharp intra-party conflict in ZANU-PF. By this time, two opposing factions had been formed: the so called Lacoste¹, representing veterans of the national liberation movement, led by Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the Generation 40 (G40), a group of younger politicians, mostly between 40 and 50 years. It is believed that the G40 faction was created by the then Minister of Education Jonathan Moyo and informally led by Robert Mugabe’s wife Grace.

Between the two factions, there began an open struggle for the place of the successor of the still living president. Mugabe’s wife seemed to be winning: on November 6, 2017 Mnangagwa was removed from his post as vice-president on charges of attempting a coup d’état, expelled from the party by its Central Committee and forced to flee to South Africa via Mozambique. It was expected that his rival, Grace Mugabe would be elected ZANU-PF vice-president at the party congress scheduled by the end of 2018, and then the country’s vice-president, becoming the successor of the noticeably fragile leader.

The removal of Mnangagwa, who was close to the Zimbabwean military, forced the army command to act. On November 13, at a press conference, General Constantino Chiwenga, the commander, accompanied by some 90 senior military figures, bluntly stated that “if comes to matters of protecting our revolution, the military will not hesitate to step in” (The Telegraph, 2017) if the purges did not stop.

In response, on the same evening, the then Minister of Information and the ZANU-PF spokesperson, Simon Khaya-Moyo, on behalf of the leadership, called the conduct of the general “treasonable” (This is Africa, 2017), but it was already late. On the night of November 14, 2017, the military took control of the strategic points in Harare, including the official residence and the house of Robert Mugabe.

However, in an official statement early on the morning of November 15, Major-General Subisiso Moyo, the military spokesperson (who is now Minister of Foreign Relations) stressed on behalf of the Zimbabwean Defence Force that these actions were not a coup: “We wish to assure the nation that His Excellency, the President Robert Gabriel Mugabe and his family are safe and sound and their security is guaranteed. We are only targeting criminals around him who are committing crimes” (The Zimbabwe Independent, 2017).

No doubt, the ZDF Command was well aware that the illegal overthrow of the president and violence would seriously weaken the position of the military in the international arena. Of particular concern to the military was the position of the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which do not recognize the change of power by force.

¹ The grouping was named Lacoste after the French clothing company whose logo is a crocodile because Mnangagwa is commonly known in Zimbabwe as ‘Crocodile’ (*Ngwenya* in the Shona language).

The army actions were broadly supported by Zimbabwe's population. The demonstration for the resignation of Mugabe held at the call of the Association of War Veterans on November 18 was peaceful. Thousands of jubilant people, both black and white Zimbabweans, representatives of various political forces, in the spirit of unity, without party slogans, took to the streets in the country's major towns demanding Mugabe's resignation. So, these dramatic developments took place outside the electoral competition between the major political parties.

On the evening of November 19, Mugabe, who was accompanied by the commanders of the armed forces, spoke on television, and his speech was in a conciliatory spirit: he stressed that the events of previous week were no challenge to his authority as head of state. However, instead of the expected resignation, he assured that he would preside at the upcoming congress of his party (Mail and Guardian, 2017), warning of the inadmissibility of violation of party rules and procedures. So Mugabe refused to resign in an "amicable" way, instead he (or was it his wife?) clung to power.

Following this, a party leadership meeting was held on November 20 in which 201 of the 300 members of the ZANU-PF Central Committee participated and the same people who two weeks earlier expelled Mnangagwa, elected him President and First Secretary of ZANU-PF instead of Mugabe, who was "unanimously" recalled. It is noteworthy that this decision was announced by the same party spokesperson S. K. Khaya-Moyo. In this situation, the opponents of Mugabe in ZANU-PF decided to resort to impeachment, and given that both the majority of parliamentarians from ZANU-PF and the opposition were against Mugabe, they would be able to get the necessary two-thirds of votes.

The drastic change of the situation became clear when as head of state, Mugabe appointed a government meeting on the morning of November 22, but it was attended only by five ministers and the prosecutor general, while the remaining 17 ministers preferred to participate in the meeting in parliament on impeachment. It seems that for Mugabe this was a "moment of truth", a confirmation of the loss of real power and finally prompted him to resign.

In a letter, received by the Speaker of the National Assembly on the same day, Mugabe stressed that his decision to resign was voluntary and was caused by "concern for the welfare of the people of Zimbabwe" and his "desire to ensure a smooth, peaceful and non-violent transfer of power" (Al-Jazeera, 22 Nov. 2017). The news abruptly halted an impeachment hearing that had already begun against him.

The immediate successor to Mugabe was Mnangagwa, who returned to Zimbabwe on November 22 and delivered his first speech as the future president. He was sworn in as the new President of Zimbabwe on November 24, 2018 and Chiwenga became Vice-President. The latest presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Zimbabwe on July 30 last year, the first elections after the resignation of Robert Mugabe and after the death of Morgan Tsvangirai, who had led the opposition for almost two decades.

ZANU-PF won the parliamentary elections, having received 145 seats in the National Assembly (though 14 seats less compared to the last elections in 2013) of the possible 210 (another 60 seats are women's quota elected by proportional system). 63 seats were received by the Movement for Democratic Change – Alliance, a coalition of several of the 125 (!) parties that were registered in Zimbabwe after Mugabe's resignation.

The presidential election was won by the incumbent head of state Emmerson Mnangagwa, just with 50.8 % of the vote while the leader of the Alliance, Nelson Chamisa, scored 44.3 %. While earlier, in 2013, Mugabe scored 61.1 % of the vote against 33.9 % of Tsvangirai and such a convincing result did not allow the opposition to launch a protest campaign, Mnangagwa's victory was less impressive.

It should be noted also that other opposition candidates completely failed. The third place in the presidential election was taken by Tokozani Khupe (head of the faction that broke away from the main opposition, but retained the name of the party of the times of Tsvangirai – MDC-T), gaining only 0.9 % of the vote.

Apparently, the main reason for the good result of the main opposition was its new leader. The relatively young (40 years old) and energetic Chamisa contrasted strongly with 75 year Mnangagwa. It may sound strange, but it looks like the departure of Tsvangirai who for almost two decades failed to bring his party to power, did not worsen the chances of the opposition, especially in the eyes of young voters. In particular Chamisa managed to bring into MDC-Alliance some prominent opposition members, like Tendai Biti, who had earlier split from Tsvangirai.

The second reason for this result is the absence of a large number of violations that were observed in the 2013 elections not to say about the earlier ones. Finally, it is noteworthy also that during the election campaign Chamisa positioned himself more left-wing than the incumbent president. If earlier Mugabe accused the opposition of working for the West, during the 2018 election campaign Chamisa blamed Mnangagwa for concessions to the West. In addition, the opposition leader spoke critically about the role of China in Zimbabwe promising to expel Chinese investors if he wins the due in July (BBC News, 2018), and that was positively perceived by many voters dissatisfied with the “domination of the Chinese”.

However the main surprise of the election campaign was Mugabe’s international press-conference on July 29, on the eve of the election. He stated that he could not vote for Mnangagwa as he was among “those who have tormented” him while Chamisa was “doing well judging by his rallies” (Quartz Africa, 2017). However, given that Mugabe became a discredited figure, it is difficult to say whether his support for Chamisa helped the opposition leader, or on the contrary, pushed some voters away from him.

Unlike the previous elections, the government allowed observers from Western countries, in particular from the European Union) to attend the elections. More than 600 foreign and 5,541 local observers have been accredited (The Guardian, 27 Jul. 2018), and visas were issued given to international media. This time even hardened MDC activists talked of the “strangely peaceful atmosphere”, however soon the situation turned to worst.

According to Zimbabwean legislation, the election commission had the right to announce the results of the elections no later than August 5 and these terms were not violated. But the opposition, dissatisfied with the coming results of the parliamentary elections, organized protest events in Harare on August 1, demanding the early announcement of the results of the presidential elections. Apparently, they remembered well the experience of the 2008 elections, when, according to the opposition, the delay in announcing the results of the first round and the fraud led to Mugabe’s subsequent victory in the second round. When dispersing demonstrators who used violence and created chaos in the Central Business District of the capital, six people were killed. In this case, the authorities used not only and not so much the police but the army, whose soldiers fired live ammunition. The main complaints concerned the fact that in 20% of polling stations the results of the voting were not posted immediately after the counting of votes (as required by law), which could affect the representativeness of the elections. Given the small margin between Mnangagwa and Chamisa, this fact caused doubts about the election results. It is believed that two different explanations can be given for delays in publicizing presidential results. First, ZANU-PF’s opponents believe the results were distorted in order to ensure the victory of Mnangagwa in the first round. Secondly, the desire to delay as much as possible the announcement of Mnangagwa’s “weak” results against the background of the “strong” results of ZANU-PF in parliamentary elections in order to psychologically “fix” the victory of the ruling party.

It should be noted, however, that according to representatives of the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), which is a coalition of 36 local non-governmental organizations, the official results of the presidential election generally correspond to their sample from polling stations (50.8 % against 50.7 % for Mnangagwa and 44.3 % versus 45.7 % for Chamisa), (Zimbabwe Election Support Network, 2018: 63).

As in the previous elections, there was a big gap in political preferences between the city and the village. The largest cities in the country, Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare and Gweru, preferred Chamisa. Thus, in Harare, Mnanganva won 27 % of the vote, and Chamisa 71 %. At the same time, in the neighbouring rural province of Central Mashonaland, Mnangagwa received 76 % of the vote, and Chamisa 20 %. Indeed, apart from redistribution of land, smallholder farmers in rural areas receive from the government inputs, loans, and services and that makes many of them staunch ZANU-PF supporters.

In spite of the change in the leadership, the opposition resorted to its spoiling tactics: though this time the Western election monitors were on the ground well before the elections, Chamisa's MDC-A was setting the scene in advance to reject the election results as not "free, fair, and credible", if it loses. Then, after several days of delay, Chamisa filed a lawsuit to the Constitutional Court on August 10 to annul the results of the presidential elections. He failed but this circumstance led to the delay for two weeks to August 26 the inauguration of Mnangagwa, scheduled initially for August 12.

The forceful suppression of the opposition undermined Mnangagwa's desire to look different than Mugabe, especially in the eyes of foreign investors. However, perhaps even more damage was caused by the accusation that he is just a "puppet of the military who overthrew Mugabe".

Carrying out the "damage control" Mnangagwa apologized for the behaviour of the security forces. In addition, S.K. Moyo as minister stopped on the spot the police's attempt to disperse the opposition press conference.

As distinct from "Mugabe's era" Mnangagwa, having promised to investigate the events, asked Khalema Motlanthe, highly respected former president of South Africa to head the Commission of Inquiry into the Zimbabwe post-election violence, comprised of both Zimbabwean and foreign prominent persons.

The MDC Alliance and their supporters in the media immediately denounced the composition of the commission and expressed doubt in its capacity to produce a credible report (The Patriot, 2018). Then, after he was subpoenaed to testify before the Commission, Chamisa branded the demonstrators "stupid", adding that their actions were uncalled for (The Herald, 2018) and trying to dissociate them from his party. Naturally therefore he could not be satisfied with the report that stated: "On the basis of the evidence presented, the Commission found on a balance of probabilities that the protest were pre-planned and well-organised as shown, for example, by the evidence of the pre-election speeches of the MDC Alliance leaders and the evidence of all of the events that took place on the 1st of August 2018 including the fact that groups arrived with an assortment of objects such as containers of stones, bricks, logs and posters, which they used in their demonstrations" (Zimbabwe. Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 2018: 45). Nevertheless Chamisa claimed: "The Motlanthe findings were not backed by any fact" (The Standard, 2018).

The Commission confirmed that six people died and thirty-five were injured as a result of actions by the military and the police but concluded that "on the basis of all the prevailing circumstances, and in the light of all the evidence presented including the rapid escalation of the situation in a very short space of time, the decision to deploy the Military to assist the Police in the containment of the riots was justified" and, "in accordance with the Constitution and the applicable law". However "the operational framework" in terms

of Public Order and Security Act “was not fully followed in that the deployed troops were not placed under the command of the Regulating Authority” (Zimbabwe. Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 2018: 46) and “the use of live ammunition directed at people especially when they were fleeing was clearly unjustified and disproportionate” (Zimbabwe. Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 2018: 47).

In conclusion the report regarded the appointment of the Commission of Inquiry, with a majority of international members, as the confirmation of “President Mnangagwa’s determination to ensure a non-repetition of such an unwholesome national experience in future”. They believed “that President Mnangagwa is determined to open a new chapter in the policies and activities of the Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe, including the restoration of the country’s diplomatic and commercial relations with the international community.” (Zimbabwe. Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 2018: 55).

The developments of the later period of Zimbabwe’s history are beyond the theme of this paper. Unfortunately we have to say that both political and especially economic problems of the country remain². A new wave of protests began in Zimbabwe on 14 January 2019 following a 130 % increase in the price of fuel; and the confrontation with police resulted in hundreds of arrests and several deaths and new problems for Zimbabwe’s “diplomatic and commercial relations”.

Conclusion (perhaps, controversial)

With due respect to the “universal values of democracy”, we have to say that the major changes in the political history of independent Zimbabwe, be them positive or negative, took place outside the election process.

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² Just one example. During a short visit in late May the author was surprised not to see prices in the menu in the famous restaurant in a five-star hotel in Harare, the waitress explained they were changing several times a day.

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