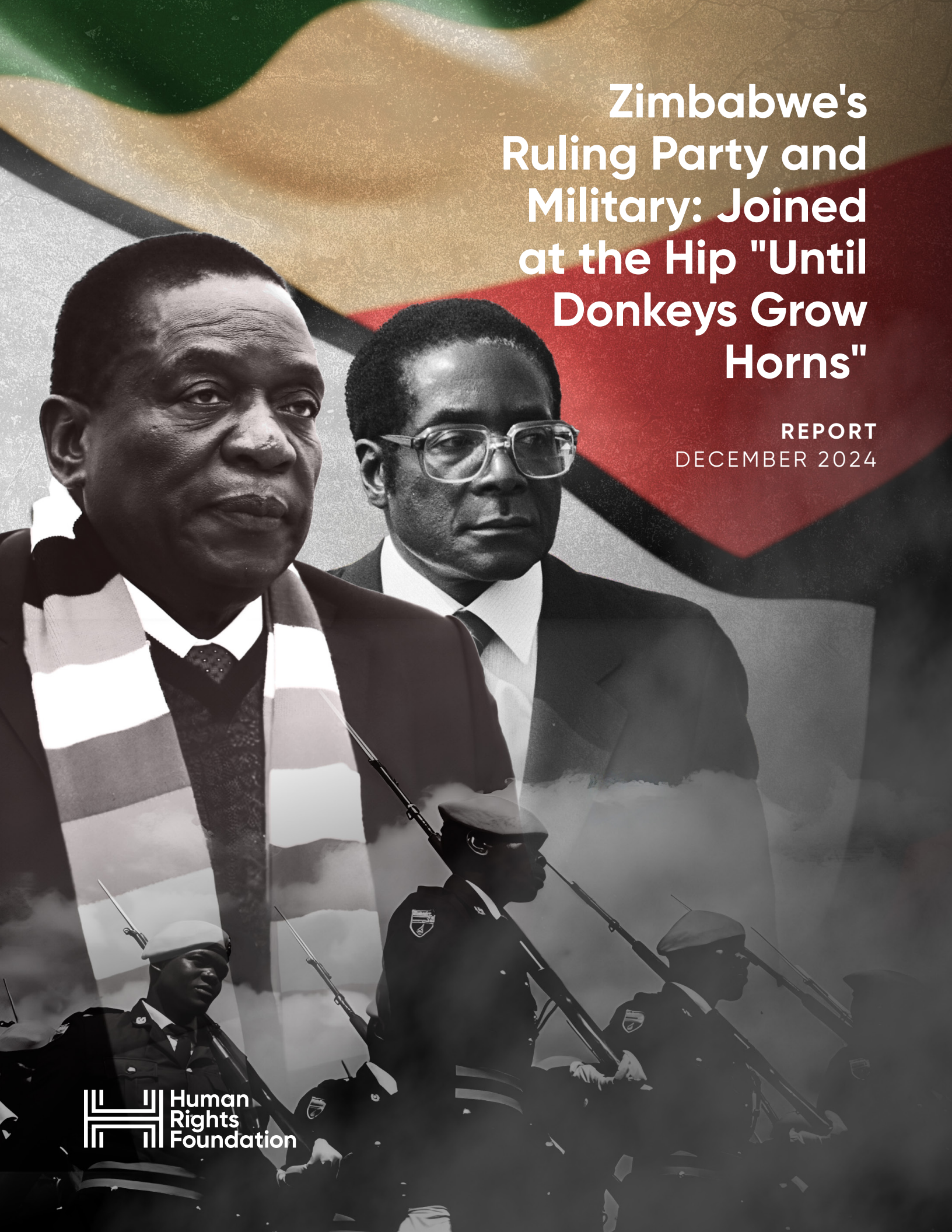




# Zimbabwe's Ruling Party and Military: Joined at the Hip "Until Donkeys Grow Horns"

REPORT  
DECEMBER 2024

*Legal Report Prepared by:  
Human Rights Foundation*

*Publication Date:  
December, 2025*

*Authors:  
Wiriranai Masara, Research Fellow  
Mohamed Keita, Senior Policy Officer,  
Africa*

*The Human Rights Foundation (HRF) is a nonprofit organization that promotes and protects human rights globally, with an expertise in the Americas. HRF unites people in the common cause of defending human rights and promoting liberal democracy. Our mission is to ensure that freedom is both preserved and promoted around the world.*

*Human Rights Foundation  
350 Fifth Avenue, #6500  
New York, NY 10118  
[humanrightsfoundation.org](http://humanrightsfoundation.org)*

# Table of Contents

---

|           |                     |           |
|-----------|---------------------|-----------|
| <b>01</b> | <b>Introduction</b> | <b>03</b> |
|-----------|---------------------|-----------|

---

|           |                                                               |           |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>02</b> | <b>The birth of the army-party alliance</b>                   | <b>05</b> |
|           | Guerrilla-based party and militarised electioneering strategy | 06        |
|           | ZANU-PF's capture of the newly independent Zimbabwe's army    | 08        |

---

|           |                                                              |           |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>03</b> | <b>Military operations as political warfare</b>              | <b>09</b> |
|           | Operation Gukurahundi                                        | 11        |
|           | Expropriation of white-owned farms                           | 12        |
|           | The 2008 elections: From CIBD to Operation Makavhotera Papi? | 14        |
|           | Operation Chimumumu                                          | 15        |
|           | Operation Restore Legacy                                     | 16        |

---

|           |                                                                              |           |
|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>04</b> | <b>The military takeover of election management</b>                          | <b>17</b> |
|           | The 2023 elections: a slight shift in the military's management of elections | 21        |
|           | A cold war between Mnangagwa and the military                                | 23        |
|           | Electoral Fraud                                                              | 24        |

---

|           |                                                          |           |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>05</b> | <b>Business Partners in Zimbabwe's Political Economy</b> | <b>25</b> |
|           | The army and the party war profiteering venture in DRC   | 27        |
|           | Military-owned pro-ZANU-PF media                         | 28        |

---

|           |                        |           |
|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| <b>06</b> | <b>Recommendations</b> | <b>29</b> |
|-----------|------------------------|-----------|

---

|           |                   |           |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
| <b>07</b> | <b>Conclusion</b> | <b>31</b> |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------|

---



Zimbabwean ruler Robert Mugabe (2nd, R) reviews the honor guard during the 31st Independence anniversary celebration in Harare on April 18, 2011.

Photo credit: Xinhua/Li Ping via Alamy

# Introduction

Article 207 of Zimbabwe's constitution prohibits the country's security forces, including the armed forces, from "acting in a partisan manner; furthering the interests of any political party or cause; prejudicing the lawful interests of any political party or cause; or violating the fundamental rights or freedoms of any person."

However, since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, the country's military, along with the state's general security apparatus, has operated as a politicized institution dedicated to guarding the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party's tight grip on power.

Furthermore, even though Zimbabwe has been holding elections since 1980, the military has been the most powerful determinant of who wields power in the country and the trajectory of the nation itself. This led Zimbabwean scholar Eldred Masunungure to coin the term "militarized electoral authoritarianism" to describe the nature of politics in post-independence Zimbabwe. This policy note chronicles the Zimbabwean military's deep entrenchment in politics and the evolution of its relationship with ZANU-PF. It traces the origins of the army-party alliance to the time when both entities were the military and political arms of the same liberation movement and explores how the ruling party and the military evolved into intimate partners for political warfare, electioneering, and the riches of Zimbabwe's political economy.

## "Until donkeys grow horns"

In June 2024, Zimbabwe's then army chief, Lieutenant General Anselem Sanyatwe, made a chilling public pronouncement. He proclaimed that the ZANU-PF, the party in power since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, would rule "until donkeys grow horns."<sup>1</sup> He promised "command voting," where citizens would be coerced into casting ballots "whether you like it or not."<sup>2</sup>

Dictator Emmerson Mnangagwa appointed Sanyatwe as army chief in October 2023, a few months after the unfree and unfair August 2023 elections. A former head of the presidential guard, Sanyatwe, is under US sanctions for allegedly ordering troops to open fire and attack pro-democracy protesters demonstrating against delays in the release

of the results of the 2018 presidential elections.<sup>3</sup> An official investigation later determined that security forces had used disproportionate and excessive force and killed at least six people.<sup>4</sup>

Sanyatwe is also one of the senior military officers that took part in the November 2017 coup led by then-army chief General Constantine Chiwenga against Mugabe, who had been the dictator of Zimbabwe for 37 years, from 1980 to 2017. Chiwenga installed Mnangagwa and became the latter's vice-president. Speaking to the BBC, Africa Confidential magazine editor Patrick Smith described the relationship between Mnangagwa and Chiwenga in these terms: "They are joined at the hip."<sup>5</sup>

In November 2017, when Gen. Chiwenga's troops surrounded Mugabe's residence, he had been under international sanctions for his alleged role in leading a brutal crackdown on the opposition in the wake of Mugabe's apparent defeat in the 2008 elections.<sup>6</sup> "He told Mugabe: 'We can't lose elections. We can't hand power to the MDC [opposition party]. We are going to obliterate them,'" Chiwenga allegedly told Mugabe at the time, according to Africa Confidential magazine editor Patrick Smith.<sup>7</sup>

To understand the deep-rooted alliance between the military and the ruling party, it is essential to consider the history of the liberation war movement, which gave birth to Zimbabwe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gumbodete, Privilege. "Storm over Sanyatwe's ZANU PF will rule forever remarks." NewsDay, July 4, 2024. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/local-news/article/200029144/storm-over-sanyatwes-zanu-pf-will-rule-forever-remarks>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Zimbabwe: Army Commander Threatens Election Integrity: Bar Security Forces Engagement in Partisan Politics." Human Rights Watch, July 10, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/10/zimbabwe-army-commander-threatens-election-integrity>

<sup>3</sup> U.S Department of the Treasury. "Press Release: Treasury Sanction Two Individuals for Human Right Abuse in Zimbabwe." US Department of the Treasury, March 11, 2020. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm935>

<sup>4</sup> ZimRights. "The Motlanthe Report: What's Next for Victims and the Nation. An Analysis of the Recommendations of the Motlanthe Report Two Years Later." ZimRights, August 2020. [https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas\\_d/files/The%20Motlanthe%20Report.pdf](https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/The%20Motlanthe%20Report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Chothia, Farouk. "Gen Constantino Chiwenga: The army chief who took power from Mugabe." BBC, November 20 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42053753>

<sup>6</sup> McGreal, Chris. "Mugabe clings on despite election defeat." The Guardian, March 31, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/31/zimbabwe1>

<sup>7</sup> Chothia, "Gen Constantino Chiwenga."



*Zimbabwe's ruler Robert Mugabe honors soldiers with medals on the occasion of the 26th anniversary of the founding of the Zimbabwean army in Harare.*

*Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy*

# The Birth of the Army–Party Alliance



# Guerrilla-Based Party and Militarised Electioneering Strategy

*ZANU Patriotic Front troops loyal to Robert Mugabe come in from the bush as part of the peace process.*

*Photo credit: via Alamy*

In 1976, Robert Mugabe — then heading the political wing of ZANU-PF, one of the two leading militant politico-military organizations waging an armed insurgency against the white minority-led regime of Ian Smith in what was then Rhodesia — made a declaration in the following terms: *“Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any votes we shall have shall have been the product of the gun. The gun that produces the vote should remain its security officer — its guarantor.”*<sup>8</sup>

In December 1979, peace negotiations between the three main politico-military groups — Mugabe’s ZANU-PF and its Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) Chinese-armed force, Joshua Nkomo’s Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and its Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) Soviet-armed force, and the incumbent Rhodesian government represented by Bishop Abel Muzorewa — resulted in the Lancaster House Agreement, which established a permanent ceasefire, the establishment of a constitutional framework of independent Zimbabwe and the first internationally recognized polls allowing all political factions and Zimbabweans to participate. The Lancaster House Agreement called for a specially-appointed British governor to supervise the 1980 election and ensure the freedom and fairness of campaigning and voting. ZANU-PF followed a militarized and coercive electioneering strategy

leveraging the strength of its ZANLA guerrilla force and political commissars. “The party and its commissars threatened to return to war if people did not vote for it and used the provocative and intimidatory image of guns in its campaign slogans, implying the war would continue if Mugabe lost the election.”<sup>9</sup>

Election observers accused guerrillas and political commissars of resorting to all manners of intimidation, including murdering those who resisted intimidation or telling voters that they had machines that could track how people voted. “ZANLA guerrillas, especially in the eastern part of the country, conducted an election campaign of violence and intimidation, thus violating the provision that elections be free and fair.”<sup>10</sup> Mugabe’s ZANU-PF claimed victory by a wide margin in the February 1980 elections, which were marred by widespread voter intimidation and accusations of ballot stuffing, casting doubt on their fairness.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Meredith, Martin. *Our votes, our guns: Robert Mugabe and the tragedy of Zimbabwe*. Public Affairs, 2002. [https://books.google.com.sl/books/about/Our\\_Votes\\_Our\\_Guns.html?id=-J8pyAAAAMAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.com.sl/books/about/Our_Votes_Our_Guns.html?id=-J8pyAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y)

<sup>9</sup> Kriger, Norma J. *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492167>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Thatcher, Gary. “Rhodesia counts heavy vote as charges of cheating fly.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 1980. <https://www.csmonitor.com/1980/0303/030341.html>

*Zimbabwe's ruler Robert Mugabe  
inspects defence forces in the National  
Sports Stadium in Harare, Aug. 13, 2013.  
Zimbabwe celebrated Defence Forces  
Day on Aug. 13.*

*Photo credit: Xinhua/Stringer via Alamy*

## ZANU-PF's Capture of the Newly Independent Zimbabwe's Army



Mugabe assumed power as prime minister, with the constitution giving him the power to appoint senior members of the new army of independent Zimbabwe.<sup>12</sup> He also concurrently served as minister of defense. He initially expressed public support for the outgoing caretaker British administration's plans to build an apolitical professional army that would integrate the two former guerrilla forces and the old Rhodesian security forces.<sup>13</sup>

In August 1981, Mugabe restructured the military command under a structure that reflected a power-sharing arrangement:<sup>14</sup> Rhodesian General Ian Maclean as the first commander



of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, former commander of ZANU-PF's military wing (ZANLA) Solomon Mujuru as the army chief, and Lieutenant General Lookout Masuku of the ZAPU guerrilla force (ZIPRA) as deputy army commander.<sup>15</sup>

However, Gen. Mujuru, better known as Rex Nhongo, pursued a policy of turning the army into the exclusive political force of the ruling party by sidelining the former Rhodesian soldiers and ZIPRA guerrillas.<sup>16</sup> With McLean's resignation in 1982, Mujuru enjoyed total supremacy over the armed forces until his retirement in 1992. *"The generality of ZANLA guerrillas harbored a sense of entitlement to*

*dominate the post-independence military and political composition because they campaigned for ZANU PF in the countryside, resulting in their party winning the 1980 election convincingly."*<sup>17</sup> In addition, the regime's propaganda solely lionized former ZANLA guerrilla fighters, making them the foundation of the new order and its legitimacy.<sup>18</sup> By August 1981, former fighters of ZANU-PF's guerrilla force represented 60 percent of the army and the officer corps.<sup>19</sup> The same month, North Koreans began training the infamous Fifth Brigade of the new army, which was made up exclusively of ZANU-PF's guerrilla force and which the regime would use to crush political dissidence.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Nalovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo. "Nationalist-military alliance and the fate of democracy in Zimbabwe." *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6, no. 1 (2006): 49–80. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC16291>

<sup>14</sup> British Pathé. "Zimbabwe: Former Rhodesian Army Chief Appointed Overall Commander of Restructured Military Hierarchy." British Pathé, 1981. <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/182038/>

<sup>15</sup> Tendi, Blessing Miles. *The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru, the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108561600>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe*, 62–64.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.



A passerby reads a newspaper next to a poster of Zimbabwean ruler Robert Mugabe in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy

# Military Operations as Political Warfare



*ZANU-PF propaganda poster in Harare.*

*Photo credit: via Alamy*

# Operation Gukurahundi

Mugabe created a special unit trained by North Korea called the Fifth Brigade, which was made up exclusively of former Shona-speaking guerillas and reported directly to him, outside of the normal command structure.<sup>21</sup>

Mugabe's regime used the Fifth Brigade to crush its chief political rival, the main opposition ZAPU party, by invoking the purported discovery of weapons on ZAPU-owned properties and blaming dissident former fighters of ZAPU's armed wing, ZIPRA, for carrying out sporadic attacks. The regime imprisoned deputy army

commander ZIPRA's Masuku on treason charges and deployed the Fifth Brigade in Matabeleland and Midlands, where it carried out indiscriminate massacres against ethnic Ndebele civilians, the base of support for ZAPU, in what the regime code-named Operation Gukurahundi, a Shona term referring to the early rain that washes away the chaff before the spring rain.<sup>22</sup> Some activists and scholars contend that the targeting of ethnic Ndebele amid the 20,000 people killed between 1982 and 1987 in Gukurahundi amounts to genocide, a charge that ZANU-PF has rejected.

The militarized violence allowed ZANU-PF to secure a landslide victory in the 1985 elections and a new five-year term for Mugabe as prime minister. The dictator exploited the victory to claim a popular mandate to turn the country into a one-party state. He also sent a chilling warning to opponents, vowing to persecute those who refused to unite under the "political umbrella" of his ruling party.<sup>23</sup> With political opposition to ZANU-PF at its weakest, Mugabe claimed landslides in the 1990 and 1995 elections.

# Expropriation of White-Owned Farms

In 1998, the regime announced a controversial land reform plan to expropriate more than 800 commercial farms owned and operated by descendants of white settlers, who seized ownership of the country's best lands during the colonial period.<sup>24</sup> The regime gave a militaristic name to the controversial and populist plan it sought to exploit to stem its loss of popularity amid a worsening economy: "Hondo Yeminda" ("the war for land reclamation").

In July 2000, the regime formalized the expropriation scheme, which was partially motivated by ZANU-PF's anger at white farmewwwhe opposition MDC party in the February 2000 referendum vote in which Mugabe's proposal for a new constitution was defeated.<sup>25</sup> Although the regime denied mobilizing the army to carry out the plan — which involved the seizure of 12 million acres of land (about two-thirds of all land owned by the country's white minority) and the resettlement of half a million black peasants on the seized land —, multiple investigations reported that the party mobi-

lized the army to manage the invasion and occupations of white-owned farms.<sup>26</sup>

News reports named senior military figures, including General Perence Shiri, air force chief and former commander of the notorious Fifth Brigade, as the architect of the controversial farm invasions. The military, in coordination with Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), deployed soldiers but also provided food and transportation to former ZANU-PF guerrillas or liberation war veterans who occupied the farms.<sup>27</sup> In 2009, the regime launched a renewed military-style operation to expropriate more than 150 of the remaining white-owned commercial farms.<sup>28</sup> A 2010 investigation later found that most of the seized farms went to Mugabe and his allies, including the military. "Of the nearly 200 officers from the rank of major to the lieutenant general in the Zimbabwe national army, 90% have farms in the most fertile parts of the country," the report said.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Bratton, Michael. *Power Politics in Zimbabwe*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014. [https://www.riennner.com/title/Power\\_Politics\\_in\\_Zimbabwe](https://www.riennner.com/title/Power_Politics_in_Zimbabwe)

<sup>22</sup> Nyoka, Shingai. "I cannot forgive Mugabe's soldiers — massacre survivor." BBC, July 13, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c51yl354ed2o>

<sup>23</sup> Frankel, Glenn. "Mugabe Warns Opposition: Zimbabwean Leader Claims Mandate For One-Party State." *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1985. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/07/07/mugabe-warns-opposition/f7248736-70c3-43c4-aa89-63b11a1ea651/>

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press. "Zimbabwe: Government Seizes 841 White Farms." Associated Press, November 20, 1998. YouTube, 2:55. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFFOLpXl\\_\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFFOLpXl__U)

<sup>25</sup> Slaughter, Barbara and Nolan Stuart. "Zimbabwe: Referendum defeat for Mugabe shakes ZANU-PF government." *World Socialist Web Site*, February 22, 2000. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2000/02/zimb-f22.html>

<sup>26</sup> McGreal, Chris. "Mugabe mobilises army for huge farm invasion." *The Guardian*, August 2, 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/aug/02/zimbabwe.chrismcgreal>

<sup>27</sup> McGreal, Chris. "Army set up farm occupations, says insider." *The Guardian*, May 5, 2000. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/may/05/zimbabwe.chrismcgreal>

<sup>28</sup> VOA. "Zimbabwe Military Deploys to Remove Country's Remaining White Farmers." VOA, December 31, 2009. <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/zimbabwe-military-deploy-to-remove-remaining-white-farmers-31dec09-80427157/1470742.html>

<sup>29</sup> Smith, David. "Mugabe and allies own 40% of land seized from white farmers — inquiry." *The Guardian*, November 30, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/30/zimbabwe-mugabe-white-farmers>

# The 2008 Elections: From CIBD to Operation Makavhotera Papi?

The March 29, 2008, general elections marked a watershed moment in Zimbabwe as all indications pointed to a historic win by the main opposition party, MDC. ZANU-PF delayed the release of results for five weeks, and when they were finally announced, they showed the MDC winning but not with the majority needed to avoid a second runoff. Within a day of the polls, Mugabe, realizing his loss,<sup>30</sup> announced his intention to give up power to his security chiefs.

However, Zimbabwe's military chief, Gen. Constantine Chiwenga, asserted that the choice was not Mugabe's and that the military would step in to keep him in power and drive a campaign of violence against the opposition. The military codenamed the plan CIBD during an April 8, 2008 meeting: Coercion. Intimidation. Beating. Displacement.<sup>31</sup>

From that point until the June 27, 2008, runoff elections, 200 senior army officers supplemented by ruling party militias orchestrated a brutal campaign of terror against the opposition MDC party code-named "Operation Makavhotera Papi?" (Operation Who Did You Vote For?).<sup>32</sup> The military repression unleashed left nearly 200 people dead and 36,000 displaced,<sup>33</sup> while thousands of others were either abducted, assaulted, or tortured.<sup>34</sup> The campaign forced opposition leader

Morgan Tsvangirai to withdraw and seek refuge in the Dutch embassy.<sup>35</sup> After ensuring Mugabe's return to power, the Joint Operations Command (JOC), which brought together all security chiefs and was headed by General Chiwenga, emerged as even more powerful than Mugabe.<sup>36</sup> Masunungure described the 2008 run-off elections as "a militarized moment," marked by the "brazenly intrusive and expansive role of the military/security complex" in the polls.<sup>37</sup>

---

*Zimbabwe's ruler Robert Mugabe arrives for the burial of a prominent member of his party, Misheck Chando, in Harare, Saturday, Oct. 31, 2009.*

*Photo credit: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi via Alamy*

---

<sup>30</sup> Tran, Mark. "Mugabe party sources concede loss of first round." *The Guardian*, April 1, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/01/zimbabwe1>

<sup>31</sup> NBC News. "Inside Mugabe's violent crackdown." NBC News, July 5, 2008. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna25537446>

<sup>32</sup> Masunungure, Eldred V. "A militarized election: The 27 June presidential run-off." In *Defying the Winds of Change*, edited by E.V. Masunungure. Weaver Press, 2009. <https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/defying-the-winds-of-change>

<sup>33</sup> Mavhinga, Dewa. "Partisan Security Forces a Key Election Threat." *Human Rights Watch*, August 7, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/07/partisan-security-forces-key-election-threat>

<sup>34</sup> Research and Advocacy Unit Trust (RAU). "Organised Violence and Torture and Election in Zimbabwe." RAU, 2021. <https://kubatana.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/OVT-and-Elections-final-26-June-2021.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Mutasa, Haru. "Tsvangirai: Why I pulled out." *Al Jazeera*, June 25, 2008. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2008/6/25/tsvangirai-why-i-pulled-out>

<sup>36</sup> Smith, Alex Duval. "Power sharing in Zimbabwe threatened by five-man cabal." *The Guardian*, February 15, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/15/zimbabwe-joint-operations-command>

<sup>37</sup> Masunungure, "A militarized election," 79.



*Zimbabwe Defense Forces Chief  
Constantino Chiwenga speaks in a  
press conference in Harare, Zimbabwe.*

*Photo credit: Shaun/Jusa via Alamy*



## Operation Chimumumu

The JOC launched a renewed campaign of brutal repression against the opposition and civil society in the months following the 2008 runoff elections and the formation of a power-sharing unity

government in which Mugabe served with Tsvangirai as prime minister. More than 40 activists and MDC party members were abducted, with some held at military bases during a wave of terror.<sup>38</sup> The

operation extended to intimidate citizens from speaking freely during nationwide public consultations ahead of a referendum for a new constitution, initially scheduled for 2011 but not held until 2013.<sup>39</sup>

# Operation Restore Legacy

In July 2017, amid tensions within the ruling party linked to an ongoing tussle for Mugabe's succession between his wife, Grace, and long-time enforcer and Vice-President Mnangagwa, Mugabe publicly accused the army of plotting a coup against him and sent a message to the generals.

*"Politics shall always lead the gun and not the gun politics,"* he declared, warning the army to steer clear of politics.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, he still maintained that the military should play a supporting role.

In November 2017, when Mugabe dismissed Mnangagwa as vice president of Zimbabwe and expelled him from the ruling party, then-commander of the ZDF, General Chiwenga, held a press conference

warning Robert Mugabe to cease the purging of liberation fighters within ZANU-PF or face potential military intervention.<sup>41</sup> Mugabe responded by accusing the generals of treason, and within four days, Chiwenga launched "Operation Restore Legacy" to depose Mugabe.<sup>42</sup>

When the military installed Mnangagwa as president, the latter rewarded the generals who successfully orchestrated the coup with key political positions.<sup>43</sup> For instance, Chiwenga was appointed vice president; Lieutenant General Sibusiso Moyo—who announced the coup on state television—was appointed minister of foreign affairs and international trade; and Air Marshal Perence Shiri was appointed minister of agriculture.

<sup>38</sup> Howden, Daniel. "Mugabe unleashes waves of terror with mass abductions." Independent, December 22, 2008. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/mugabe-unleashes-wave-of-terror-with-mass-abductions-1207395.html>

<sup>39</sup> The Standard. "Constitution: People's wishes must prevail." The Standard, July 23, 2010. <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2010/07/22/constitution-peoples-wishes-must-prevail>

<sup>40</sup> News24. "Mugabe accuses military of plotting a coup, tells them 'stop interfering in politics.'" News24, July 29, 2023. <https://www.news24.com/africa/zimbabwe/mugabe-accuses-military-of-plotting-a-coup-tells-them-stop-interfering-in-politics-20170729>

<sup>41</sup> Thornycroft, Peta. "Zimbabwe army chief warns Mugabe's party that military may intervene after sackings." The Telegraph, November 13, 2017. <https://www.news24.com/africa/zimbabwe/mugabe-accuses-military-of-plotting-a-coup-tells-them-stop-interfering-in-politics-20170729>

<sup>42</sup> BBC. "Zimbabwe: Army chief accused of 'treasonable conduct'." BBC, November 14, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41991425>

<sup>43</sup> BBC. "Zimbabwe's Mnangagwa gives key cabinet jobs to military figures." BBC, December 1, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42190457>



Newspaper front page announces the Zimbabwean military's coup deposing Robert Mugabe."

Photo credit: Aaron Ufumeli, EPA-EFE



Zimbabwean ruler Robert Mugabe (right) on the occasion of the elections in Harare.

Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy

# The Military Takeover of Election Management

The opposition MDC party's electoral inroads in the 2000 parliamentary elections left the regime rattled, and the military stepped in to take command of future elections. In January 2002, ahead of the March 2002 presidential elections, Zimbabwean military chief General Vitalis Zvinvashe publicly declared that the armed forces would not support or recognize anyone who has not fought against white minority rule. The statement illustrated the seriousness with which the regime feared opposition challenger Morgan Tsvangirai.<sup>44</sup>

Mugabe subsequently appointed retired army colonel Sobusa Gula-Ndebele as the head of the Electoral Supervisory Commission. Gula Ndebele, in turn, appointed Brigadier General Douglas Nyikayaramba to the second most crucial post: chief elections officer.<sup>45</sup> Evidence emerged that army commander General Chiwenga appointed security personnel to run and staff the national election nerve center, the hub for the supply of ballot boxes, communication with party representatives and the media, and the reporting of results. This was a blatant violation of the constitution, which limits military involvement in providing security.<sup>46</sup>

With the military in charge of every aspect of the vote, the regime cut the number of polling stations in urban areas where the MDC was popular, appointed former ZANU-PF guerrillas as poll monitors, purged the voter rolls of hundreds of thousands of people, limited foreign observers, and banned party representatives from vehicles carrying ballot boxes.<sup>47</sup> Current or former senior military figures, such as Nyikayaramba and Retired Brigadier General George Mutandwa Chiweshe, continued to dominate the electoral oversight body in the subsequent elections in 2005, 2008, and 2013.<sup>48</sup>

*Zimbabwean ruler Emmerson Mnangagwa votes in Kwekwe, Midlands, Zimbabwe, July 30, 2018. Zimbabweans began voting on Monday in the African country's first presidential election since former head of state Robert Mugabe resigned in November.*

*Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy*

In 2016, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) refuted allegations of being militarised.<sup>49</sup> But ahead of the 2018 elections, the first polls following Mugabe's ouster, Priscilla Chigumba, chair of the ZEC, disclosed that 15% of its personnel were former members of the military.<sup>50</sup> In May 2022, Jasper Mangwana, the spokesperson for the ZEC and a ruling party loyalist, not only acknowledged that the commission operates with

military personnel but asserted that no law prohibits its militarization.<sup>51</sup>

The ZEC's recently retired Chief Elections Officer, who headed the secretariat, Major Utloile Silaigwana, is a former guerrilla fighter and a career soldier who served in the army for 20 years before joining the ZEC. He oversaw the contentious March 29, 2008, election — alongside Brigadier General George Chiweshe, who was then the ZEC Chairperson





— in which Mugabe lost, and the election results were withheld for five weeks.<sup>52</sup> Before Major Silaigwana, Major-General Nyikayaramba was the chief election officer who led the now-defunct Electoral Supervisory Commission and oversaw the disputed elections of 2002 and 2005. His subsequent promotion to commander of a military brigade is widely viewed as a reward for his role in managing these elections.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>44</sup> CNN. "New Warning to Mugabe rivals." CNN, January 9, 2009. <https://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/africa/01/09/zimbabwe.vote/index.html?related>

<sup>45</sup> McGreal, Chris. "Mugabe hands poll to army." The Guardian, March 4, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/04/zimbabwe.chrismcgreal>

<sup>46</sup> VOA. "Documents Show Army Ran Disputed Zimbabwe Presidential Election." VOA, October 29, 2009. <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2003-05-02-20-document-67310177/381383.html>

<sup>47</sup> McGreal, "Mugabe hands poll to army."

<sup>48</sup> Mail & Guardian. "Payback for Zim's security chiefs." Mail & Guardian, August 15, 2013. <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-08-15-00-payback-for-zims-security-chiefs/>

<sup>49</sup> Chronicle. "Zec denies being 'militarised'." Chronicle, November 2, 2016. <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/zec-denies-being-militarised/>

<sup>50</sup> Mhlanga, Blessed. "Soldiers make up 15% of ZEC staff." NewsDay, February 27, 2018. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/slider/article/69958/soldiers-make-up-15-of-zec-staff>

<sup>51</sup> Muromo, Lorraine and Gumbodete Privilege. "ZEC: We are militarized, so what?" NewsDay, May 25, 2022. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/slider/article/2240/zec-we-are-militarised-so-what>

<sup>52</sup> Crisis In Zimbabwe Coalition. "Appointment of Silaigwana a consolidation of the militarisation of ZEC." Crisis Coalition, March 16, 2018. <https://kubatana.net/2018/03/16/appointment-silaigwana-consolidation-militarisation-zec/>

<sup>53</sup> Mail & Guardian. "Payback for Zim's security chiefs."

*Members of Zimbabwean security forces sit under a poster celebrating Emmerson Mnangagwa as the new ruler of Zimbabwe at the Harare International Stadium on November 24, 2017.*

*Photo credit: Belal Khaled/NurPhoto via Alamy*



# The 2023 elections: A slight shift in the military's management of elections



Notwithstanding, the 2023 elections marked a slight shift in the military's historic role in the management of elections. Mnangagwa somewhat sidelined the military in favor of the dreaded CIO and its Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ) — a well-funded hybrid securocratic entity created to discredit the opposition and campaign for Mnangagwa.<sup>54</sup>

FAZ's founders are individuals closely linked to the former Deputy Director General of the CIO, who in November 2025 was promoted to Lieutenant General and appointed as commander of the army.<sup>55</sup> The outfit recruited 5,910 volunteers to cover 1,970 wards and received more than \$10 million and 200 cars from the state treasury to ensure that ZANU-PF “dominate[s] and saturate[s] the environment while denying the same to opponents.”<sup>56</sup> SADC election observers reported that FAZ was deployed to around 36,000 villages.<sup>57</sup> Most controversially, FAZ set up illegal desks outside polling stations, asking and recording the ID numbers of voters before they voted and purporting to conduct exit polls.

The party's handing of election management to the CIO sparked tensions between the CIO and the army.<sup>58</sup> The military resented a lessening of its role in election management by FAZ partly because of the perception that it diminished its traditional power and influence

and that it could jeopardize its access to financial resources and patronage networks.

<sup>54</sup> NewsHawks. “Elections: CIO vs military.” NewsHawks, July 9, 2023. <https://thenewshawks.com/elections-cio-versus-military/>

<sup>55</sup> The Sentry. “Forever Associates Zimbabwe.” The Sentry, May 2024. <https://thesentry.org/reports/forever-associates-zimbabwe/>

<sup>56</sup> Keita, Mohamed and Graas, Mathilde. “Eight Ways Zimbabwe's regime hijacked the 2023 vote.” Human Rights Foundation, June 26, 2024. <https://hrf.org/latest/eight-ways-zimbabwes-regime-hijacked-the-2023-vote/>

<sup>57</sup> Southern African Development Community Electoral Observer Mission. “Report on the 2023 Harmonised Elections in the Republic of Zimbabwe.” SEOM, September 25, 2023. <https://www.sadc.int/document/sadc-electoral-observation-mission-preliminary-statement-harmonised-election-republic>

<sup>58</sup> Matiashe, Farai Shawn. “Zimbabwe: How Intelligence and military are running the upcoming general polls.” The Africa Report, May 29, 2023. <https://www.theafricareport.com/311011/zimbabwe-how-intelligence-and-military-are-running-the-upcoming-general-polls/>

*Zimbabwean ruler Emmerson Mnangagwa arrives to deliver his first state of the nation address to open the first session of the ninth parliament in Harare, Zimbabwe, on Sept. 18, 2018.*

*Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy*



## A cold war between Mnangagwa and the military

The tensions between the military and FAZ reflect the internal divisions within ZANU-PF<sup>59</sup> between a civilian faction with a power base in state intelligence led by Mnangagwa and a military faction led by Chiwenga, who is also eyeing the presidency.<sup>60</sup> Internal conflicts and power struggles have always been a part of ZANU-PF, but since Chiwenga installed Mnangagwa after the coup, the latter has forced many of Chiwenga's military associ-

ates to retire or accept ambassadorial posts abroad.<sup>61</sup> The sidelining of Chiwenga and his military associates by Mnangagwa has created a rift between the two.

However, despite FAZ managing the 2023 election, the military retains significant influence, particularly through the ZEC, which employs a significant number of servicemen. This intertwining of military person-

nel within ZEC suggests a continuity of military oversight in electoral processes. Additionally, Walter Tapfumaneyi, the alleged leader of FAZ, is senior military official. This duality indicates that while FAZ has taken on a more visible role, the military's influence remains entrenched within key institutions.

# Electoral Fraud

Allegations of fraud, manipulation, or vote tampering by the ruling ZANU-PF have tainted every election since Zimbabwe's independence, but the military's role in this came to light as it took over management of the 2002 elections. In November 2003, former army officer Lieutenant Herbert Ndlovu gave the first public testimony of the military's role in massive ballot stuffing in favor of ZANU-PF in the 2002 presidential election.<sup>62</sup>

The opacity maintained by the regime around the composition of the voter rolls, the tallying of votes, and the handling of ballot boxes created conditions for systematic fraud to take place in total impunity, although hard evidence of such was difficult to obtain.

In 2022, data experts revealed that the military housed and managed the server of the electoral body.<sup>63</sup> In 2022, an independent geolocation forensic investigation traced the client-server connection to Africom, a military-owned communication service provider.<sup>64</sup> The server was central to the 2018 rigging controversy, and initially, the ZEC acknowledged its existence but later retracted that statement.<sup>65</sup> Exiled former Information Minister Jonathan Moyo, in his book "Excelgate: How Zimbabwe's 2018 Presidential Election Was Stolen" also linked Africom to alleged tampering of the ZEC servers

in the collation, compilation, and transmission of the presidential results.<sup>66</sup> It is alleged that the military, through the JOC and ZEC, committed electoral fraud to consolidate the gains of the 2017 military coup.<sup>67</sup>

In 2017, a ruling by retired Brigadier General George Chiweshe — formerly the deputy to the current vice president in the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA), former ZEC Chairperson, and now a Supreme Court Judge — allowed the military to intervene in civilian affairs.<sup>68</sup> The judgment has encouraged the military further to deepen its involvement in Zimbabwe's electoral affairs, diminishing the likelihood of free, fair, and credible elections.<sup>69</sup> With a carte blanche, the military has since enhanced its partial function as a political police, monitoring, suppressing, and controlling political dissent and opposition activities.<sup>70</sup> Prominent advocates for change often face public accusations by the military of being security threats, leading to political intimidation.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Cotterill, Joseph and Musengi Kudzanai. "The shadowy NGO accused of manipulating Zimbabwe election process." *Financial Times*, August 17, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/b66cae06-a0da-4dbf-ae69-d91a40e69c89>

<sup>60</sup> Buwerimwe, Sharon and Jena, Nunurai. "Divisions rock ZANU PF, Commissar says time for slogans over." *NewsDay*, August 5, 2024. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/local-news/article/200030527/divisions-rock-zanu-pf-commissar-says-time-for-slogans-over>

<sup>61</sup> Matiashe, "Zimbabwe: How Intelligence and military are running the upcoming general polls."

<sup>62</sup> Meldrum, Andrew. "Army 'faked' voted for Mugabe." *The Guardian*, November 27, 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/nov/27/zimbabwe.andrewmeldrum>

<sup>63</sup> Masau, Problem. "ZEC in server storm." *The Independent*, April 13, 2022. <https://www.newsday.co.zw/theindependent/local-news/article/4802/zec-in-server-storm>

<sup>64</sup> NewsHawks. "ZEC should be investigated." *NewsHawks*, April 19, 2022. <https://thenewshawks.com/zec-should-be-investigated/>

<sup>65</sup> NewsHawks. "ZEC caught pants down on computer server storm." *NewsHawks*, April 23, 2022. <https://thenewshawks.com/zec-caught-pants-down-on-computer-server-storm/>

<sup>66</sup> Moyo, Jonathan. *Excelgate: How Zimbabwe's 2018 Presidential Election Was Stolen*. Sapes Books, 2019. <https://sapes.org.zw/excel-gate-by-prof-jonathan-moyo/>

<sup>67</sup> Mpofu, Jethro. "Excelgate: The anatomy of electoral fraud and force in Zimbabwe." *ZimLive*, May 27, 2021. <https://www.zimlive.com/excelgate-the-anatomy-of-electoral-fraud-and-force-in-zimbabwe/>

<sup>68</sup> Munyoro, Fidelis. "Military intervention legal, court rules." *Herald*, November 27, 2017. <https://www.herald.co.zw/military-intervention-legal-court-rules/>

<sup>69</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Zimbabwe After the Military Takeover: Prospects for Credible Elections and Human Rights Reforms." *Human Rights Watch*, December 12, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/12/zimbabwe-after-military-takeover-prospects-credible-elections-and-human-rights>

<sup>70</sup> BBC. "Itai Dzamara: The man who stood up to Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and vanished." *BBC*, May 23, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44209183>

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Crush Them Like Lice: repression of Civil and Political Rights Ahead of Zimbabwe's August 2023 Election." *Human Rights Watch*, August 3, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/08/03/crush-them-like-lice/repression-civil-and-political-rights-ahead-zimbabwes-august-2023>



*Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe(L) attends the Defence Forces Day celebrations in Harare, Zimbabwe.*

*Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy*

# **Business Partners in Zimbabwe's Political Economy**



*Zimbabwean ruler Robert Mugabe presents an award to a soldier at a military shooting competition in Harare.*

*Photo credit: Xinhua via Alamy*

# The army and the party war profiteering venture in DRC

In 1998, Mugabe's decision to send Zimbabwean Defense Forces to the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo proved a profitable business boom for the army and the party.<sup>72</sup>

During this war, a UN report on the plunder of DRC's natural resources implicated Mnangagwa, then the Speaker of Parliament, and other senior military officers in illegal

diamond trade. The report identified several companies headed by senior ZDF officers. For example, the report identified late ZDF chief General Vitalis Zvinavashe, Brigadier General Sibusiso Moyo (who announced the 2017 military coup), Air Commodore Mike Karakadzai, and Colonel Simpson Nyathi as corporate officers of a diamond trading company operating in the Congo called

COSLEG. Then-Defense Minister Sidney Sekeramayi was also a COSLEG shareholder. The report also identified two covert companies of Zimbabwean military financial interests: Tremalt and Oryx Natural Resources. A 2021 publication by The Sentry revealed that the ZDF controls an extensive business conglomerate closely associated with ZANU-PF oligarchs.<sup>73</sup>

# Operation Restore Legacy

The ZDF's military commercialism spans into media,<sup>74</sup> with some resources allocated to maintaining the existing order by keeping ZANU-PF in power through state-sponsored propaganda. Until 2020, Zimbabwe had one state-owned television station, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), which primarily functioned as a mouthpiece for the regime. However, in November 2020, the regime-controlled Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) issued six free-to-air broadcasting licenses, and ZANU-PF and the military emerged as winners. Nkululeko Rusununguko

Television (NRTV), owned by the army, mirrors the ZBC in manipulating the coverage in favor of the ruling party. The outlet consistently disseminates government viewpoints, and its programs are widely known for their pro-government stance. During campaigns, the mainstream opposition party is not granted equitable access to media channels controlled by ZANU-PF loyalists, which include those linked to the military. Therefore, through the media, the army is also contributing to tilting the electoral playing field for the benefit of ZANU-PF.

<sup>72</sup> Maringira, Godfrey. "The military in Zimbabwean politics." *Review of African Political Economy* 51, no. 179: 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0008>

<sup>73</sup> The Sentry, "Shadows and Shell Games."

<sup>74</sup> Reuters. "Zimbabwe issues six new TV licenses, including to defence ministry." Reuters, November 20, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/zimbabwe-issues-six-new-tv-licences-including-to-defence-ministry-idUSL8N2l61D5/>

*Commanding Officer 1 Presidential Guard Infantry Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Samson Murombo leads his battalion at a pass out a parade*

*Photo credit: Shutterstock*



*A protester holds a sign expressing opposition to the ruling alliance of the ZANU-PF political party and the Zimbabwean military.*

*Photo credit: Mark Kerrison via Alamy*

**#Freedom  
Not  
Zanu PF Junta**

**ZHRO**  
ZIMBABWE HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION  
[www.zhro.org.zw](http://www.zhro.org.zw)

# Conclusion

The alliance between Zimbabwe's ruling party and its military emerged during the country's armed liberation struggle and transformed into a deep, entrenched, and enduring partnership that has monopolized power, determined the trajectory of the country, and shaped its political economy. This has come at the expense of Zimbabweans' aspirations for democracy and has denied the people of Zimbabwe an accountable government, credible, free, and fair elections, and a fair and equitable

management of economic opportunities and resources. The army-ruling party relationship has also exacted a heavy and bloody cost, with countless Zimbabweans killed, injured, or brutalized in the violent suppression of dissent. For Zimbabwe to take a significant leap towards democracy — one in which the armed forces live up to the constitutional requirement of non-partisanship — the nation will require a major overhaul of the security sector, including depoliticizing the military.

## Recommendations

With the ruling party in control of the executive and legislative branches of government, Zimbabwe's institutional architecture of civilian control of the military — shared between the President, the Minister of Defense (a presidential political appointee), and parliament — is effectively the exclusive preserve of ZANU-PF. Giving a greater share of civilian oversight of the

Zimbabwe Defense Forces to sections of the public outside the ruling party could address this unbalance. An independent civilian oversight board that could receive citizen complaints and have the legal authority to summon military personnel could, for instance, foster more accountability or transparency.

**HRF has the following recommendations for the Zimbabwean regime:**

**01**

The Zimbabwean regime should step down, and in the process of doing so, it should facilitate a transition to democracy.

**02**

The Zimbabwean regime should respect the human rights of the Zimbabwean people by guaranteeing their basic rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and participation in free and fair elections.

**03**

While working on a transition to democracy, the Zimbabwean regime should enact a comprehensive code of conduct and ethical guidelines for the Zimbabwe Defense Forces, which includes and enshrines the principle of nonpartisan service as a pillar of the military profession. This code of conduct should prohibit military personnel from overt partisanship while in an official capacity or the use of official authority to influence the outcome of an election.

**04**

While working on a transition to democracy, the Zimbabwean regime should form an independent civilian oversight structure to oversee military activities, receive citizens' complaints, summon military personnel, and ensure that military operations are aligned with national interests rather than partisan objectives.

**05**

While working on a transition to democracy, the Zimbabwean regime should rebalance the shared oversight powers between the president, the minister of defense, and Parliament in a way that prevents the concentration of powers in either branch of government.

**06**

While working on a transition to democracy, the Zimbabwean regime should enforce constitutional provisions prohibiting military involvement in civilian governance, electoral processes, and political activities.

**07**

While working on a transition to democracy, the Zimbabwean regime should establish independent electoral oversight by reforming the ZEC and enhancing transparency in the electoral process.

**08**

While working on a transition to democracy, the Zimbabwean regime should review and amend electoral laws to prohibit using state resources for partisan purposes.

**HRF has the following recommendations for the international community:**

**01**

Call on the Zimbabwean regime to step down and facilitate a transition to democracy.

**02**

Call on the Zimbabwean regime to respect the human rights of the Zimbabwean people by respecting their basic rights to freedom of expression, assembly and to participate in free and fair elections.

**03**

While this democratic transition is planned, call on the Zimbabwean regime to consider incremental reforms to establish effective independent civilian control and oversight of the military.

**04**

While this democratic transition is planned, call on the Zimbabwean regime to professionalize the military and security services, notably through an ethical code of conduct that enshrines nonpartisan service as a pillar of the military profession.

**05**

While this democratic transition is planned, call on the Zimbabwean regime to engage with regional bodies, including the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), to advocate for security sector reform (SSR) in Zimbabwe.

## Contact Us

---

- 🌐 [hrf.org](https://hrf.org)
- ✉ [contact@hrf.org](mailto:contact@hrf.org)
- ☎ +1 (212) 246-8486

## Social Media

---

- ✂ @hrf
- 📘 /humanrightsfoundation
- 📺 @humanrightsfdn
- 📷 @hrf
- 🌐 Human Rights Foundation (HRF)



