

Military 'Running' the Country

Author: [Nonthando Bhebhe](#)

Ruling party insiders say President Mugabe is effectively hostage to his security chiefs' demands for continuity.

Officials of the ruling ZANU-PF party say President Robert Mugabe is no longer fully in control, with much of the government's day-to-day affairs being run by military and security chiefs.

Senior ZANU-PF insiders have told IWPR that Mugabe is now out of touch with what is happening on the ground.

Instead, they said, key decisions were being made by the Joint Operations Command, JOC, which consists of the heads of the army, air force, prison services and intelligence. The JOC, which is chaired by the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Constantine Chiwenga, coordinates military and security affairs and many observers believe it carries more real clout than the cabinet.

Their ties with Mugabe date back to the liberation struggle of the Seventies.

The party officials, who did not want to be identified, said decision-making was taken over by military and security chiefs after it became clear that Mugabe had lost the March 29 presidential election to Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

It was they who made the controversial decision to stop the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, from releasing the result of the ballot.

According to these sources, Mugabe was considering stepping down but was forced to carry on when the military threatened to take over if he resigned.

"Mugabe was willing to step down. He had actually indicated that he would retire to his rural home and his Borrowdale mansion and hand over power to Tsvangirai, if people voted for him," said one official. "He even said he was willing to surrender his fate to Tsvangirai, to do whatever he wanted with him.

"However, the army generals and commanders told him that if he did [resign], it would leave them with no other choice but to take over the country. What a lot of people have missed is that Mugabe agreed to avoid a bloody coup by the military. It was better him than the military taking over."

Chiwenga and retired Major-General Paradzai Zimondi, head of the penal service, vowed before the election that they would never salute anyone but him as president. Police chief Augustine Chihuri also said he would not accept an opposition victory.

A day after the election, a crisis meeting of army and security chiefs was held to discuss how to prevent the opposition taking over as it became apparent that Mugabe might have lost to Tsvangirai.

Regime figures do not trust Tsvangirai, fearing that if he came to power he would prosecute senior officials for human rights abuses committed over the years.

Although the ZEC has not announced who won the presidential election, it has said that the MDC won a majority in parliament for the first time ever, defeating ZANU-PF. However, this week the commission has been conducting a recount in 23 constituencies, and there are fears this will provide an opportunity to rig the numbers and reverse the position.

The MDC has accused the security forces of embarking on a campaign of violence and intimidation in the weeks since the election.

In an interview with SW Radio Africa on April 11, Tsvangirai said, "He [Mugabe] has lost control - that is why the military is doing what it is doing, going to interfere with the work of ZEC, arresting ZEC officials, relocating the work of the verification of the presidential ballots to a secret place where our representatives are not present. They have literally overthrown the civilian authority."

David Coltart, a prominent lawyer and a member of the minority MDC faction led by Arthur Mutambara, said, "It's a coup in the guise of an election."

Security Minister Didymus Mutasa denied that the military had taken over.

"President Mugabe is still in charge, and that is a fact," he said. "Those people who are telling you that are wishing for bad things for this country. Wait until the runoff [presidential election]. We will beat them overwhelmingly, and then they will shut up."

The ZANU-PF officials said security chiefs had called several crisis meetings since the election. At one of them, top military officers gathered two weeks ago at Murombedzi, near Mugabe's rural home, and told the president they were now in charge.

The military officers, said a ZANU-PF official, laid out a plan by which Mugabe would contest a run-off vote under conditions tipped in his favour by the military taking control of polling stations and counting centres.

The official said Mugabe's speech on Independence Day on April 18 suggested that he might not be aware of the scale of violence being perpetrated by the army and pro-ZANU-PF militias.

At the independence celebrations, Mugabe paid tribute to Zimbabweans for maintaining peace before, during and after the elections. "Those who are planning violence must stop immediately, otherwise they might be in serious trouble with us," he said.

According to the MDC, ten of its members have been killed since the election, while dozens of others have been beaten, whipped and threatened by youth militias, war veterans, the military and the security service.

Huts in rural areas have been burnt down, and hundreds of people have been displaced. Victims bearing burns, bruises and serious injuries from some rural areas have been hospitalised in Harare.

The crackdown has come since the JOC took control of the ruling party's strategy, the electoral system, and internal security measures.

One ZANU-PF member of the Mashonaland Central provincial leadership told IWPR that a meeting held by these local party officials in Bindura agreed unanimously that violence was not the answer. But he added that because the military had taken over, such decisions were not being acted on.

"We have realised in ZANU-PF that things are not good. The problem is that it is now the military that has taken over," he said.

"It was agreed at that meeting that it was wrong to beat up people. It is not good for the party's image. But with the army now in charge, all they know is intimidation and violence against opposition supporters. I don't think that the president really knows what is happening – that people are being tortured and beaten up."

He said the problem with Mugabe was that he was surrounded by people who did not tell him the truth. The officials said those individuals who could give him honest advice had either died or were no longer in government.

"ZANU-PF is full of new guys or should I say mafikizolos [latecomers] who will not dare say anything. That is why the military can do what it has done," said the party official. "It is wrong to beat up people, like what is happening in the high-density and rural areas. Violence does not help anyone."

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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