Mugabe Succession Scramble

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Senior Zanu-PF officials seek to outmanoeuvre each other in race to take over from president. The struggle over President Robert Mugabe's succession is gaining momentum ahead of the crucial congress of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, Zanu-PF, scheduled for December.

Mugabe publicly opened the previously taboo succession debate in an interview with state television last year. This April, in another TV interview, he announced he would retire in 2008. Since then, he has outlined the necessary criteria for his successor, indicating that only a candidate with liberation struggle credentials who adhered to Zanu-PF's principles would be considered.

As a consequence, the scramble to take over from the 81-year-old president has escalated dramatically, widening divisions in the ruling party as a result.

Reformers and diehard, unconditional supporters of Mugabe within Zanu-PF have been at loggerheads with each other for some time. The former want the party to repackage itself and move forward under a new generation of leadership, while the latter want the president to rule in perpetuity. Now that Mugabe himself has broken his silence on the succession issue, the diehards have been forced to throw their hats into the ring.

"Mugabe now wants out because he has successfully completed the land reform programme. But the problem is that he's in a difficult position on the issue of succession," said a Zanu-PF official, who wished to remain anonymous. "If he goes with things as they are, there would be chaos in the party which would engulf the country. So he has to sort things out before 2008, otherwise, Zanu-PF could go down with him."

The Zanu-PF way of life began in 1980 when Mugabe came to power after Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain following a 14-year armed struggle against Rhodesian forces and their backers. Mugabe, then prime minister, immediately embarked on a ruthless campaign to consolidate power. He began by crushing the then main opposition party and liberation war ally, the Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People Union, PF-Zapu, which posed a threat to his one-party state agenda.

Mugabe deployed the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade to deal with PF-Zapu and its supporters, concentrating on the organisation's stronghold, Matabeleland. The massacres that followed in the southwestern part of the country claimed the lives of between 10,000 to 20,000 ethnic Ndebeles. After the bloody military campaign that aimed at quashing any resistance to Mugabe's plans, Zanu annexed Zapu, creating Zanu-PF in 1987. Two years later, he introduced the post of executive president and tried to establish a de jure one-party state.

However, his plan met with resistance from civic groups, increasingly disgruntled with his leadership. Faced with a deteriorating command economy following his dabbling in policies which stunted growth and choked job creation, the avowed Marxist Mugabe reluctantly began economic reforms in 1991. Backed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the reforms initially helped to create a competitive economy and improved growth.

But they too failed to deliver on promised job creation and poverty reduction because of poor implementation and lack of flexibility. In part, this was due to the fact that Mugabe tried to reshape the economic system in line with his political agenda, inspired by East European communism.
The tactic failed because Zimbabwe's economy is inextricably linked with western economies through decades of trade and commerce. The economic system thus remained largely capitalist, while the political state was socialist.

Opposition to Mugabe's faltering rule rapidly grew towards the end of the 1990s, forcing him to adopt desperate survival measures. In 1997, the president launched a limited land acquisition programme which degenerated into wholesale land seizures in 2000. Two years later Mugabe gave in to sustained pressure for constitutional reform and appointed a constitutional commission. Once again, the president tried to manipulate the reform process for his own political gain.

In the event, he was defeated in the constitutional referendum in February 2000 in a vote that ended up being far less about proposed changes than it was about Mugabe himself.

Later that year, in a bitterly contested parliamentary election characterised by widespread intimidation and violent attacks on opposition supporters by roving bands of Zanu-PF supporters, the government secured a narrow victory against the newly-formed Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

As part of the campaigns for both parliament and presidential office, Mugabe embarked on his controversial land reform programme, involving land invasions and seizures, in a bid for votes. The move signalled the beginning of a precipitous economic descent. Intensified political repression and human rights abuses followed in its wake.

Opposition to Mugabe's rule also spread. As the country lurched into crisis, Mugabe, whose health was reportedly failing, further came under pressure from within his ruling Zanu-PF to abandon unworkable policies that undermine the party's liberation struggle objectives.

"Many of us have argued within [Zanu-PF] that it is not helpful for us to drift from our initially noble objectives [to pursue] power because this will destroy our legacy. We don't want to end on the wrong side of history," said a senior Zanu-PF official.

"As a result, we have struggled within to push for change but we have only made glacial progress so far. The truth is while most of us largely depend on Mugabe for political survival, it is also true to say that he created that situation through a wide patronage network."

Recently, senior party officials have been trying to outmanoeuvre each other by engaging in a withering war of words in the media, particularly over seized farms. These public clashes are seen to be linked to the succession debate. The Land Reform and Resettlement Minister John Nkomo, who is also the party's chairperson and one of the frontrunners in the succession race, has been exchanging fire with combative Information Minister Jonathan Moyo, who is not considered a serious challenger.

Nkomo was attacked in the state-run daily newspaper The Herald, after he sent various ministers, including Moyo, letters in July, withdrawing those farms which he said were grabbed in violation of government's "one household, one farm" policy. Moyo called Nkomo's letter "preposterous and annoying". Nkomo has also been attacked in anonymous columns in other state papers which are thought to have been written by or with Moyo's approval.
Moyo has also clashed with Vice-President Joseph Msika over farms, party spokesman Nathan Shamuyarira over the control of information and other senior officials over Mugabe's succession. The clashes have twice been discussed in meetings of Zanu-PF's decision-making body, the politburo. Moyo has come under fire from the old guard in these politburo gatherings, especially retired general Solomon Mujuru, Thenjiwe Lesabe, Msika, Nkomo and Shamuyarira. Nkomo has warned rivals that Zanu-PF would soon flush out "infiltrators and saboteurs".

Consequently, Zanu-PF is divided into sometimes overlapping camps that are vying for power. These include those of the Nationalists, those who fought in the struggle for independence, as well as the Intellectuals and the Young Turks. The Nationalists, or the old guard, represented by the likes of Mugabe's perceived heir apparent Emmerson Mnangagwa, Dumiso Dabengwa and retired general Solomon Mujuru, all believe Mugabe should retire for the sake of the party.

Zanu-PF insiders say Mujuru is leading another camp that is opposed to Mnangagwa, while Moyo is heading a group of intellectuals styling themselves as the power brokers trying to influence the course of events.

Mujuru's camp supports Defence Minister Sydney Sekeramayi or alternatively Nkomo as future president. But Nkomo's main backer is Shamuyarira. Mnangagwa is the presidential contender in his camp which also includes Zanu-PF's provincial chairpersons. Young Turks such as Philip Chiyangwa, David Chapfika, Victor Chitongo, Saviour Kasukuwere and Kindness Paradza, are aligned to various groups.

Other senior officials like Didymus Mutasa, Zanu-PF's secretary for foreign relations and the anti-corruption minister, former finance minister Simba Makoni (who was fired in 2003 for pushing economic reforms) and retired general Vitalis Zvinavashe are seen as dark horses in the succession race. Zvinavashe is also Mnangagwa's ally.

According to party insiders, those candidates who command the support of the security agencies - the army, intelligence and police - would have a head start in the succession race. Army generals played a significant role in Zanu-PF's military-political establishment during the liberation struggle and after independence. As a result, retired soldiers, including liberation war veterans, are an important factor in Zanu-PF power relations.

Ultimately, infighting in the ruling party threatens to undermine the party's foundations. Mugabe has publicly confirmed on several occasions that his lieutenants are fighting for power - even claiming that some are going to traditional doctors to get power-enhancing charms. The jostling has been fuelled by speculation that Mugabe will clarify his political future at Zanu-PF's upcoming congress in December.

Mugabe's choices are traditionally given blanket endorsement and as a result, no seismic changes are expected at the upcoming congress, despite the groundswell of opposition within Zanu-PF ranks to his continued presidency.

This reflects the internal opposition to Mugabe caused by the succession debate. Some Zanu-PF officials say that Mugabe should go to prevent chaos. "It's difficult at the moment to say whether or not Mugabe has become an electoral liability, but if he goes the party can be rejuvenated before its too late," a senior politburo member said.

"Mugabe's presence is now acting as a catalyst for division because people will continue to fight for political supremacy at the expense of the party. If he spells out his plans clearly and allows the issue to be
settled the infighting will stop."

Internal opposition to Mugabe has so far failed to boil over because most of the party officials depend on his patronage for political survival. But there are those who want him to go because they see him as an obstacle to their own rise to power. The younger generation of Zanu-PF members are particularly exasperated by his clinging to power.

Mugabe's declaration that his party would only consider "honest" candidates with liberation struggle credentials as potential successors effectively ruled out any of the Young Turks with an eye on the presidency.

Mugabe has also tried to impose limits on the debate. He has said no one should mobilise clandestinely or along regional or ethnic lines. He has also lambasted those trying to use their money to exert influence in politics. His party would not accept a "stupid fool" or those with money who try to buy their way into power, he said.

Analysts believe the real problem is that Mugabe has not identified one individual that he is completely convinced should be his successor. He wanted Mnangagwa, his personal assistant during the struggle, but Mnangagwa has been linked to several cases of corruption and is highly unpopular at grassroots level. Mnangagwa's link to the Matabeleland killings when he was state security minister during the 1980s also disadvantages him.

Mugabe therefore has probably little choice but to consider Nkomo as his successor. Nkomo, a former PF-Zapu official, is now widely regarded within the ruling party as the frontrunner in the succession race. In an interview with in April this year, Zanu-PF spokesman Shamuyarira confirmed that Nkomo and Mnangagwa are current favourites to succeed Mugabe after he retires. But in the end nobody - not even Mugabe, it appears - seems to know what the outcome of the succession battle will be.

The names of some contributors in this package of stories have been withheld out of concern for their safety.

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