

Coup de Grace: on Zimbabwe's political crisis

Zimbabwe's prolonged political crisis reached the boiling point earlier this month when President Robert Mugabe dismissed the Vice-President, Emmerson Mnangagwa. A battle to succeed the 93-year-old liberation hero-turned President had already been brewing within the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), with the old guard backing Mr. Mnangagwa, himself a freedom fighter, and 'Generation 40', a grouping of younger leaders supporting Mr. Mugabe's 52-year-old wife, Grace. Ms. Mugabe, known for her extravagant lifestyle and interfering ways, has been vocal in recent months about her political ambitions. Mr. Mugabe was seen to have endorsed her when on November 6 he dismissed Mr. Mnangagwa. But Mr. Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since its independence in 1980, erred on two counts: he underestimated the deep connections Mr. Mnangagwa has within the establishment and overestimated his own power in a system he has helped shape. In the good old days, Mr. Mugabe was able to rule with an iron grip. But those days are gone. Age and health problems have weakened his hold on power, while there is a groundswell of anger among the public over economic mismanagement. So when he turned against a man long seen by the establishment as his successor, Mr. Mugabe left little doubt that he was acting from a position of political weakness. This gave the security forces the confidence to turn against him and make it clear they didn't want a Mugabe dynasty.

Will never accept Zimbabwe coup: African Union

The military doesn't want to call its action a coup d'etat, for obvious reasons. A coup would attract international condemnation, even sanctions. But it is certain that the army chief, Gen. Constantino Chiwenga, is in charge. His plan, as it emerges, is to force Mr. Mugabe to resign and install a transitional government, perhaps under Mr. Mnangagwa, until elections are held. If Mr. Mugabe doesn't resign, it will complicate the process. He has not been seen since the army took over the capital, Harare. Any attempt to hurt him could backfire. Even if he agrees to resign, the transition may not be smooth. However inept and dictatorial Mr. Mugabe's regime had been, a coup will remain a coup irrespective of what the plotters call it, raising questions of legitimacy about the new government. Also, Mr. Mugabe can still tap into his support base among the black working class, which has provided him a buffer against public anger towards his government. Across Africa, he continues to be seen by many as an anti-colonial hero. His successor, who will be picked by the generals, will inherit huge challenges — a dysfunctional economy, massive unemployment, a broken ruling party and a united opposition. Besides, the military has shaken up the civilian supremacy over the armed forces by staging this coup. The biggest challenge for the new leader will be to make sure that the military stays in the barracks.

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