

## A beginning, an end

Three months ago, speaking to delegates from 47 African nations, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe launched into a monologue about his old friend Muammar Gaddafi. The slain Libyan despot, Mugabe admitted, had "killed many people, innocent persons and those who opposed his rule and did it callously". But, he argued, he also "united his people, fought for free education, free health". Today, he said, Libya was worse off. The rambling speech may well have been Mugabe's epitaph for himself. The revolutionary who brought independence to his country, and sought to radically transform its society, before degenerating into a corrupt autocrat, has now been held under de-facto arrest by his own military.

Earlier this year, a shock cabinet reshuffle had led Vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, a liberation war veteran long thought to be Mugabe's likely successor, to flee to South Africa. The army and intelligence patronage networks which Mugabe built, however, turned on their nonagenarian master, seeking to ensure his plans to be succeeded by his wife, Grace Mugabe, were foiled. The president's wife — infamous for building palatial properties with embezzled funds, shopping sprees in Paris, and selling illegally-mined diamonds — had come to occupy increasing power in the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, threatening to displace a well-entrenched system of patronage and pelf with one centred around herself.

For New Delhi, the stakes are modest. Though the two countries have had trade relations since the 1500s, bilateral trade hovers around only \$250 million. There are estimated to be less than 1,000 Indian citizens in Zimbabwe, along with some 10,000 people of ethnic-Gujarati origin. There are good strategic reasons, however, for India to follow events closely.

India has begun investing seriously in Africa over the past decade, hoping to retain its historic influence in the face of a growing Chinese presence. Generals who assert their political influence rarely step back and should the coup in Zimbabwe fail to lead on to a genuine democratic transition, it could intensify authoritarianism and internal violence.

Throughout Africa, China has been the principal beneficiary of authoritarianism and corruption. New Delhi can work to facilitate a good outcome, by throwing its weight behind South Africa-led mediation efforts, and persuading Western governments who placed Zimbabwe under sanctions to hold out carrots that might compel the country's military to take this opportunity to step into the sunlight.

END

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