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Negotiation Only Solution To The Zimbabwe Crisis



Opinion
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THE issue of whether the military is in control of government in Zimbabwe or not is no longer a debatable one because all the evidence points to this.

Those who have been closely following developments in Zimbabwe know that the military has been expanding and consolidating its position in both the politics and the economy of Zimbabwe since the 1990s.

The expanding role of the military and securocrats in Zimbabwe's political, economic and social life was achieved in the later 1990s when President Mugabe increasingly turned to this sector for protection against the first indications of discontent from the masses and lieutenants inside his party. Since then the military's role in Zimbabwe politics has increasingly become dominant, subordinating formal policy-making structures and processes.

The military has also become deeply entrenched in the economy where the top brass, often in partnership with political elites, have established themselves in productive sectors of the economy such as mining and farming. The military has for a number of years now become the political and economic anchor class for President Mugabe's rule and thus holds the key to any future transition.

Against this backdrop, the daunting challenge for Zimbabwe at the moment is not just about how to retire President Mugabe from politics but also how to get the military to respect the country's constitutional provisions and political outcomes emanating from these constitutional provisions. Put differently, the fundamental challenge is how to get the military to underwrite electoral outcomes or whatever political settlement is made by politicians, including a post-retirement package for Mugabe.

As in the case of the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, the security sector can help usher in a new government in Zimbabwe, and ensure its stability. At the same time, it also has the capacity to spoil the transition if not handled carefully because the military has become so

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entrenched in the state.

At the moment, the hardliners in the military and security sectors are not ready to hand over power to a civilian government, especially one led by the current MDC leadership, because of a number of factors. First, while many Zimbabweans and non-Zimbabweans view the MDC as a home-grown movement born out of disenchantment with Zanu PF, hardliners within the military top brass believe that the MDC is a proxy of the Western powers. The reasons for their belief are both real and imagined. These hardliners also understand the causes of the current crisis to be external. In their view, the Zimbabwe crisis is exclusively a result of 'Zimbabwe's siege from Britain and its allies who conspired behind former Rhodesians who had their farms repossessed.

Ideologically, the hardliners are convinced they are the "custodians of the revolution" and the country's "national sovereignty". They believe that Zimbabwe, through the exploitation of its mineral and other land resources, has the capacity to withstand economic pressure from outside, especially with the help of friendly nations like China, Iran and Malaysia.

On a more practical level, the hardliners, like Mugabe, are more concerned about their fate after the transition. They are worried about what happens to them and their accumulated wealth and privileges under a new political leadership which they cannot control or trust. There is thus a battle for political and economic survival.

The hardliners in the military are aware that a number of policies and activities that the Zimbabwe government has pursued has antagonised Western governments. These include land confiscation and the military intervention in Congo. They know that some of these governments, especially the US and the UK governments who have openly criticised Mugabe and described him as human rights violator, are going to push for the prosecution of Mugabe and his close associates when he leaves office.

For the hardliners and their supporters, the humiliating trial Saddam Hussein was subjected to after his overthrow by the US is clear evidence of British and American vindictiveness. Closer to home, they are aware of what happened to Charles Taylor when a Nigerian-brokered arrangement with the African Union for Taylor's immunity collapsed. The recent arrest of the Congolese rebel leader, Jean Pierre Bemba by the International Criminal Court for "crimes against humanity" similarly rattles them, and they are not likely to give up power when these threats are hanging over their heads.

The onus for change in Zimbabwe thus lies in reassuring the military hardliners that they have nothing to fear from a post-Mugabe government. As in the transition of 1980, when Rhodesian farmers and military hardliners resistant to change had to be won over through security guarantees inserted in the Lancaster House Constitution, hardliners need to be engaged and reassured about the security of their future and that of their leader, Mugabe.

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Just like in the 1980 transition, the transitional plan must include key legal, institutional guarantees for heads of some of these institutions who right now fear that an electoral handover will result in retribution against them or loss of some of the important material benefits they have acquired over the years. The guarantees will allow all the concerned parties, including the hundreds of thousands of peasants resettled on the government-confiscated farms who continue to support Mugabe and Zanu PF because of fears of losing their allocated pieces of land to an incoming government, to come to terms with change. Right now, such legal and institutional guarantees have not been forthcoming and this has continued to be a major source of concern for the hardliners and supporters of Zanu PF. What we have are occasional press statements by the political leadership in the opposition ranks about the need for political reconciliation and guarantees about Mugabe and his lieutenants.

However, these public statements are not reassuring to both Mugabe and his lieutenants, especially the hardliners in the military top brass, because they are not backed up by constitutional guarantees as was the case in the 1979-1980 transitional. The public reassurances from the MDC are not convincing to the hardliners because there is no consistency in the message. At one point, Mugabe and his hardliners are told that there will be no retribution. At another moment, they are told that the MDC will "punish all those responsible for the murder of its activists and supporters, once in power".

For the political transition to occur in Zimbabwe, first the military needs to be brought on board in all the political negotiations leading to political change.

Second, it needs to be reassured, along with Mugabe, in concrete terms that it will not be subjected to retributive justice and that its members' economic gains made under its current partnership with Mugabe will not be seriously undermined when it cedes power to a civilian government, especially to an MDC government which it believes has strong ties to international capital.

Once political change has been achieved, the military, especially the top brass enmeshed in current politics, will need to be persuaded either to go back to the barracks or move into civilian life through carefully crafted retirement packages and negotiations. These security guarantees will have to balance both the country's need for political and economic stability with the imperatives for justice and reform. But the bottom line is that the reforms should not appear to be guided by vengeful politics.

**James Muzondidya is a senior research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council based in Pretoria.*

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