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# ZIMBABWE

# POLITICAL ECONOMY

# REVIEW

ENTERING THE FOGGY ZONE:  
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE TRANSITION IN ZIMBABWE



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## ENTERING THE FOGGY ZONE: POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE TRANSITION IN ZIMBABWE

### Introduction

This paper reflects on the political economy of the transition in Zimbabwe for the past years and most significantly in 2016. It discusses and interrogates the interaction between socioeconomic transformation and political change, that is, how the economy has and is affecting political stability and how the nature of political processes has contributed to shaping the current economic policy.

To clearly reflect on the transition and highlight the interaction between politics and the economy and the contradictions therein, the paper examines the roles of structures, institutions and agents that constitute the political economy with particular emphasis on how they have shaped the transition and its implications on governance and democratization trajectory.

The paper examines the state of the transition from a theoretical point of view, assesses the type of regime in Zimbabwe and its implications on the transition and deduces how this may shape the transition in 2016. It expounds the lessons learnt in the transition and proffers recommendations for stakeholders indissolubly linked to the transition in Zimbabwe.

The year 2016 can be marked as one tumultuous year in Zimbabwe's political and economic transition owing to a number of reasons. Zimbabwe is witnessing an abstruse, capricious and very convoluted dual transition manifest in the coalescing of both the political and economic transition simultaneously. The

economic regression characterised by successive quarters of negative economic growth; plummeting industrial capacity utilisation; increasing levels of poverty and deprivation exacerbated by the *el-Niño* induced drought leaving close to 4.1 million according to the World Food Programme (WFP) in need of food aid; the biting liquidity crisis and the impending introduction of bond notes; and the rising costs of food.

Politically, the main element on the menu of politics since 2014 has been the question of Zanu PF succession. The succession power struggles have permeated all levels and sectors of society both the private and public sectors and primarily all the organs and levels of Zanu PF. Contestation on who will succeed President Mugabe has allegedly pit two antagonistic factions namely *Lacoste* allegedly linked to Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa and *Generation 40* allegedly linked to First lady Grace Mugabe.



Zanu PF leaders, Kasukuwere, Sekeramai, First Lady Grace Mugabe and Ednah Madzongwe at a rally © bulawayo24.com

The complication around the succession issue in Zanu PF has led to the emergence and deepening of conflicts involving critical groups such as the war veterans who for long have been a critical pillar for Zanu PF. Also and most importantly, the succession issue has seen the military covertly taking a preferred side as to who should assume the number one office

in the land. As a result of these economic and political contestations, it appears that Zanu PF as both a party and government is at its weakest and this may result in authoritarian erosion and subsequently breakdown.

### **Explaining the Transition: The Contingent Approach**

Zimbabwean politics usually present a fluid, perplexing and multifarious case for researchers as they try to deduce meanings of political processes and their implications on broader society. In this regard, decoding meanings of political processes can be best understood in the context of the contingent approach advanced by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986).



First Lady Grace Mugabe, President Robert Mugabe and VP Emmerson Mnangagwa © nehandaradio.com

It is submitted that transitions are abnormal periods of undetermined political change in which there are insufficient structural or behavioral parameters to guide and predict the outcome. Bratton and van de Walle (1994) reinforce this notion arguing that compared with orderliness of authoritarian rule, transitions are marked by unruly and chaotic struggles and by uncertainty about the nature of resultant regimes.

Analysts cannot assume that the transition process is shaped by preexisting constellations of macroeconomic conditions, social classes or political institutions. Instead,

formerly cohesive social classes and political organisations tend to splinter in the heat of political combat, making it impossible to deduce alignments and actions of any protagonist. Political outcomes are driven by short term calculations and the immediate reactions of strategic actors to unfolding events.

The ongoing political and policy discord in both party and state under President Mugabe's regime suggest that the political transition in the country is hazy and forge and could be potentially disastrous if due processes of the law and not followed in crafting the escapable and inevitable post Mugabe era. Lack of elite consensus playing out in the media among warring Zanu PF faction leaders suggest that a breakdown of law and order is a huge possibility should an undesirable exit from the throne by the president happens.

### **Zimbabwe Regime Type and Implications on the Transition**

The unfolding transition in Zimbabwe cannot be fully understood outside the context of the type of regime as this has implications on the pace, nature and ultimately the direction of the transition. The type of regime at play also has a bearing on the relationship between agents, institutions and structures that constitute the political economy.

Zimbabwe has nuances of a neopatrimonial, personalistic, military oligarchy but in a nutshell one can conclude that overallly Zimbabwe is a hybrid regime which as Levitsky and Way (2010) define as a regime that has acquired some of the characteristic institutions and procedures of democracy, but not others, and, at the same time, has either retained some authoritarian or traditional features, or

lost some elements of democracy and acquired some authoritarian ones.

These kind of regimes as noted by van de Walle (1994),

*outwardly the state has all the trappings of a Weberian rational-legal system, with a clear distinction between the public and the private realm, with written laws and a constitutional order. However, this official order is often subverted by a patrimonial logic, in which office-holders almost systematically appropriate public resources for their own uses and political authority is largely based on clientelist practices, including patronage, various forms of rent-seeking and prebendalism. These regimes are highly presidential, in the sense that power is centralized around a single individual, with ultimate control over most clientelist networks. The president personally exerts discretionary power over a big share of the state's resources.*

Transitions in neopatrimonial regimes such as Zimbabwe, those in which the leader treats the state as his private fiefdom and gives only rhetorical attention to formal political institutions— according to Bratton and van de Walle (1994) are usually triggered by economic crisis as neopatrimonialism *creates chronic fiscal crisis and make economic growth highly problematic....* as leaders construct networks of personal loyalty that grant favours and this together with a shrinking economic base is a recipe for social unrest.

They go further to assert that

*endemic fiscal crisis also undercuts the capacity of the ruler to manage the process of political change. When public resources dwindle to the point where the incumbent government can no longer pay civil servants, the latter join the anti-regime protesters in the streets. Shorn of the ability to maintain political stability through the distribution of material rewards, neopatrimonial leaders resort erratically to coercion which, in turn, further undermines the regime's legitimacy. The showdown occurs when the government is unable to pay the military.*

As a result, Bratton and van de Walle boldly assert that in a scenario such as above,

*a result of twin political and economic crises, political transitions are more likely to originate in society than in the corridors of elite power.*

Thus a transition in a neopatrimonial regime is more bottom-up than a top-down initiative. Incentives that come with holding political office militate against elite driven transitions as the elites have so much to lose; access to state resources, political power, fear of reprisals such as prosecution on corruption and human rights abuses.

By reinforcing the point on bottom-up approach to initiating transitions in neopatrimonial regimes, this paper does not intend to belittle the centrality of elite dis cohesion as a trigger but is cautious that the incentives of patronage available to elites versus the need for reform, the former sounds more appealing. Taking Zimbabwe

into context, the elite's access to farms, government inputs, mining claims, fuel, government financial resources, and insulation from prosecution are more compelling grounds for elites to hold on to power than the appetite for reform.



VP Mnangagwa, Saviour Kasukuwere, VP Mphoko and President Mugabe © nehandaradio.com

### **Economic Crisis and Elite Discohesion**

The economic regression of since 1997 and increasing levels of poverty coupled with infighting within Zanu PF has ignited debate around the possibility of waning power on the part of the ruling party which may ultimately result in an electoral loss in 2018. Some have contended that the economy is Zanu PF's Achilles and may be the decisive factor during elections.

An economic crisis according to Wright (2010:5) can disrupt the equilibrium of power in an authoritarian regime in three ways namely; one, the crisis can provide a focal point for opposition protests; two, it can create divisions within the regime on how to respond to the economic crisis and mitigate regression; and three, it can deplete the resources available to the regime to create avenues of patronage or repress potential opponents leading to defections by key institutions that have always supported the regime.

Similarly, elite dis cohesion within Zanu PF primarily over the succession issue has also led to conclusions that the ruling party maybe at its weakest since 2008 when it suffered an embarrassing electoral loss. Due to the succession challenges attendant in Zanu PF, the eminence of internal fissures, elite fragmentation and splits appear to be a noteworthy feature in democratic transition in Zimbabwe as elite rifts in the regime breakdown.

As discussed earlier, a critical element that has kept the Zanu PF regime solid has been its capacity to thwart internal dissent and the central role President Mugabe has played as the glue holding the party together. Contributing to this paper's analysis, is O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986:16) contribution which highlights the significance of elite defection, splits and internal fissures, considering them essential in most transitions from authoritarianism to democratisation.



War Veterans Information Secretary Douglas Mahiya, being escorted by detectives after his arrest on undermining the authority of the President. © Reuters

They assert that in cases of elite disintegration in transitions, there is usually an aperture between 'hard-liners' and 'soft-liners' that arise between the authoritarian regime elites. Usually, there is a struggle between defenders of the status quo (hard-liners) and those turned reformers (soft-liners) because soft-liners develop an "increasing awareness that the regime they helped to implant, and

in which they usually occupy important positions, will have to make use... of some degree or some form of electoral legitimation.”

This notion is also supported by Linberg (2009) who developed the following causal chain:

*the more internal party fragmentation, the higher the costs of repression and the higher the chances of defection (exit) and the more probable the possibility of defeat of the hegemonic political party.*

O'Donnell, Schmitter and Lindberg's analysis can be aptly employed to explain the outcome of the 2008 election. In the run-up to the 2008 March general election, Zanu PF was engulfed in factionalism and elite fragmentation culminating in a debilitating campaign called “*bhora musango*.”



Temba Mliswa and Kasukuwere after the Norton by-election © nehandaradio.com

However, as argued in this paper, elite dis cohesion alone cannot lead to authoritarian breakdown. Political elites have so much to lose by relinquishing power; it is highly likely that they will close ranks particularly if the opposition is in a position to threaten the elite's power base. More so, due to the economic benefits exposed to elites, internal dissenting voices that are expelled from both the party and government are likely to

seek avenues of accommodation back into the ruling party.

Numerous cases could be pointed out in this regard; ministers such as Webster Shamu, Nicholas Goche, Flora Buka, Francis Nhema, Tendai Savanhu who were expelled from cabinet in 2014 but have remained loyal to the ruling party and have been readmitted.

### **The Rise of Everyday Forms of Resistance**

Due to the correlation between politics and economics, economic conditions have a causal effect on political stability and consequently the transition. In authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe, regimes shape economic policy, the distribution and management of public goods and resources in accordance with the elite's political and economic objectives and in this case the central strategic objective is power retention.

Thus economic policy and distribution of resources is not done to encourage a wider distribution of wealth, the regulation does not protect individual rights or a culture of service delivery. In the current Zimbabwe transitional setting, the economic alternatives of elites and the demands of the people seem not to be harmonized, and these differences have deepened as economic and political conditions worsened.

Aggravating the current scenario is the fact that the economic policies being enunciated by government are at risk of not working owing to a lack of fundamental change in power structures. Addressing economic challenges without attending to the political and structural underlying causes of challenges will result in policy failure.

The year 2016 has clearly demonstrated the regimes obsession with power and its preoccupation with power retention even at the expense of economic development. Zanu PF has maintained power by suppressing the opposition and the organization of agents of political representation. New and innovative ways have emerged fill the gap in representation, although the question lingers with respect to their sustainability. The demand for participation in decision-making, when it has failed to be channeled through opposition political parties, has led to innovation in some contexts.



#Tajamuka demonstration © zimnews.net

2016 witnessed the emergency of social movements such as #Tajamuka, #ThisFlag, #ThisFlower to name but a few. In response, statutory instruments, which are tantamount to a state of emergency, have been used to curtail any efforts of dissent. However, a democratic transition requires the development of sound democratic structures, institutions, and parties. Most importantly, it needs the participation of grassroot citizens to ensure the transition is not controlled by elites who are unrepresentative of the majority and often times insufficiently accountable.

For the past four years, opposition politics appeared to be completely dominated by state power. However, not much recognition has been given to the formal and informal coalition of forces that arose to effectively

challenge the erosion of democratic freedoms by the ruling forces since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 especially the rise online activism and protest groups since 2015.

In this regard Willems (2010:1) has, for example, usefully argued that the absence of physical protests in the streets of Zimbabwe should not be equated with the absence of resistance. This approach replaces the narrow focus on the forms of resistance associated with dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions, often used by journalists and scholars, with a profound assessment of everyday forms of resistance, such as popular culture used by Zimbabweans to challenge the increasingly undemocratic state (Willems, 2010:1). It is, therefore, persuasive and significant to also interrogate the role of the informal and formal forces that teamed up to challenge undemocratic state practices.

As is stated by Chabal (2014: xiii):

*The salience of civil society in Africa thus arose from the idea that it embodied the productive resistance of ordinary people against the authoritarian state, which monopolized power and exploited the populace.*

In the context of a changing and shifting political economy of the state marked by monumental informalisation of the economy, the role of citizen agency in matters related to their livelihoods require analysis in political literature of transitions in Zimbabwe. How citizens shape state policies and behavior of the ruling elites to address social problems without mass protests require special attention and critical analysis.

## **Conclusion**

As indicated to earlier in the paper, a critical and pervasive feature in the Zimbabwe transition is the muddled lines between military and civilian political leadership due to the politico-military nexus. In Zimbabwe like in most contexts, military institutions hold power over many layers of political and economic decision-making, and have subverted the rule of law in various ways.

In this foggy zone of the transition, the influence of the military appears to be ubiquitous in both the private and public sectors also due to the military business complex especially given their public pronouncements in the political affairs of the ruling party and the state in matters of corruption and succession politics. The vice-like-grip of the military on the political affairs is likely, if not certainly going to continue in 2016.

In this regard, the role of the military in the transition, given their power, economic influence, and their monopoly of coercive force, is sustentative to enabling, shaping or breaking this transition. It is thus essential to ensure the military is not a

bystander but involved in all transitional processes. This is especially crucial given the mental and physical mortality of President Mugabe as a result of his advanced age.

The role and duty of civil society in this political interregnum and moving forward cannot be overemphasized. As the burgeoning social movements mentioned earlier struggle to find their footing against the powerful interests and as power holders continue to affect political decision-making, civil society has a duty to encourage broad public participation in policy-making.

Civil society has an obligation to ensure citizens are engaged with the current political and economic transition discourse through support for public policy dialogue, as well as all-encompassing models of policy development applicable for the Zimbabwean context. Dialogue in the current transitional processes can breeds debate and ultimately emboldens a reformulation of the social contract, which is critical but nonexistent in the current political and economic setting.



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