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The Leadership Succession in Zimbabwe: Military Generals in the Political Arena

Godfrey Maringira

In Zimbabwe, the military has a history of determining political power struggles, from the pre- to the post-independence period. Central to Zimbabwe's problems is the leadership succession – how power is passed from one leader to the next. Although elections are held, it is the military that determines who has the power and legitimacy to rule the country. Even though there have been calls for the military to return to the barracks and desist from direct or indirect interference in the political arena, this brief argues that such a scenario will only occur if the military generals – rooted in the liberation struggle and decolonial ideas – feel that their interests are not threatened or if the liberation and its ideals are not captured by forces opposed to that. With relations between Zimbabwe and the European Union being revived in practical terms, there is a need to pay attention to the ways in which the current leadership succession unfolds, as this determines the political context for meaningful re-engagement.

Zimbabwe is in the midst of a leadership succession struggle, at the heart of which stands President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who is seeking an extension of his term from 2028 to 2030, and who is supported by a shadowy network of businessmen who, in locally prevalent discourse, have accumulated substantial wealth through corruption, inflated tenders, illicit activities and patronage practices ("*Zvigananda*"). Supporters of the president have insisted that "*2030 VaMnangagwa vanenge varipo*" ("Mnangagwa will still be around in 2030"), although his second presidential term is to end in 2028. Opposing this ambition is a group of liberation veterans sympathetic to Zimbabwe's current vice president, retired General Constantino Chiwenga. President Mnangagwa's rule has been marred by widespread protests opposing his leadership, rising poverty and unemployment, as well as political violence against perceived political competitors. There are strong indications that the military may step into the political arena to terminate the current administration and decide the power struggle, as it has done on several occasions in the country's past.

Even though civil society and opposition political parties have over the past 25 years intensified their (unsuccessful) calls for the military to return to the barracks and desist from direct or indirect interference in the political arena, this policy brief argues that such a scenario will only occur if the military generals – rooted in the liberation struggle and decolonial ideas – feel that their interests are not being threatened or if the liberation and its ideals are not captured by forces opposed to that. In the current Zimbabwean context,

the military refers both to the personnel trained in the guerrilla liberation movement, and those who served in the new post-independence Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF): the national army and air force. Hence, the army generals referred to herein are those who fought in the liberation struggle and subsequently served in and led the newly independent country's defence forces as political guardians. Following this, there is a strong relationship between the military, the state, and the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party.

A Triple Nexus: The Military, ZANU-PF, and the State

In Zimbabwe, the state, the military, and the ruling party are inextricably linked by the common history of a successful liberation struggle. Nevertheless, it is evident that, among the three institutions, the military has historically exercised supreme political power if its leaders felt that their interests were at stake. This is reflected by a series of past military interventions in the political sphere.

The first one occurred as early as 1975, when – during the country's liberation struggle – military commanders accused the civilian leaders of political failure. The commanders replaced them by appointing Robert Mugabe, a civilian nationalist, as their leader – arguably a "spokesperson" in reality, as he was supposed to relay information between the military commanders and the party, ZANU.[1]This episode, known as the "*Mgagao* memorandum", set a precedent for the post-independence era, though the script somehow varied. In 2008, the military dominated the civilian leadership and rescued the ZANU-PF party from losing the national elections. In 2017, Zimbabwe's generals ousted President Mugabe, accusing him of undermining the values of the liberation struggle, actions which they claimed threatened both ZANU-PF and Zimbabwe's national interests. In November 2017, the military selected a new "spokesman", Emmerson Mnangagwa, in a non-transparent process. In all previous instances (1975 and 2008), the military had first "neutralized" the ZANU civilian leadership to openly reassert its supremacy when its "spokespersons" – the civilian party leaders – were alleged to have failed to respect and advance the goals of the liberation struggle. Arguably, the vulnerable ZANU-PF civilian leaders – who often masqueraded as being strong and independent for political purposes – have directly or indirectly accepted this state of affairs over the years. These historical antecedents suggest that leadership successions in Zimbabwe are not determined by political competition among civilians, much less by elections. Instead, they are due to the military, which is comprised of army generals and liberation military veterans who officially and unofficially occupy positions in both ZANU-PF and the government. The ruling party ZANU-PF and the state are entangled, but the military ultimately shapes both ZANU-PF and the government.

This political history suggests that ZANU-PF and its military wing never severed the umbilical cord that tied them together, even in the post-independence period. Consequently, the state is heavily militarised, although some may argue that the military is "politicized".[2] The fact remains that senior army officers are to be found in almost all structures of government. Indeed, myriad examples suggest the existence of a revolving door between the military and state institutions. All of this happens in blatant violation of the law. Constitution-

[1] Nick Warner, "Times of Darkness: Ethnicity and the Causes of Division within the Rhodesian Guerrilla Groups" (Master's thesis, Australian National University, 1981); Wilfred Mhanda, *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* (Oxford, African Books Collective, 2011).
[2] Martin Rupiya, *The Military Factor in Zimbabwe's Political and Electoral Affairs*, 2011 (accessed 2 October 2025).

ally, the military is supposed to be apolitical. Section 208(3) of the Constitution states: "Members of the security services must not be members or office-bearers of any political party or organisation,"[3] while Section 208(4) stipulates that, "Serving members of the security services must not be employed or engaged in civilian institutions except in periods of public emergency."[4]

The Military's Self-Conception as Guardian of the Liberation

If the illusion of a separation between ZANU and the army is being maintained, this is because both institutions are locked into a mutually beneficial arrangement: It enables the army's continued influence over politics in Zimbabwe without it being accused of constituting a military dictatorship. As for the ruling party, which has battled over the past two decades to win free and fair elections, the arrangement has allowed it to retain political power and given it political legitimacy. Thus, the country's military generals produce and perpetuate a situation in which they consider themselves not merely principals of Zimbabwean politics, but actual "stockholders" entitled to take "corrective measures" whenever they deem it necessary. The notion of "stockholder" in both ZANU-PF and the state encapsulates the liberation beliefs that the country's military generals play a decisive role in political leadership and succession. During the 2017 political crisis, when President Mugabe was deposed, General Chiwenga warded off attempts by the civilians in ZANU-PF to sideline the military from internal party decision-making and succession politics. He justified the military's posture as follows:

> "It is pertinent to restate that the Zimbabwe Defence Forces remain the major stockholder in respect to the gains of the liberation struggle and when these are threatened, we are obliged to take corrective measures."[5]

This was said after already having used this metaphor in the past:

> "We are stockholders of the country. Some are stakeholders. Stakeholders will come and go, but stockholders have nowhere to go, so we stockholders, we came with it, Zimbabwe."[6]

These statements arguably reflect that the military understands itself to be the vanguard of the ideals of the liberation struggle, as well as the protector of its gains and the national interests of the country. For the military, if one is to be president of Zimbabwe, the person must uphold the values of the liberation struggle. As previously stated by the late General Vitalis Zvinavashe,

> "We wish to make it very clear to all Zimbabwean citizens that the security organizations will only stand in support of those political leaders that will pursue Zimbabwe's values, traditions, and beliefs for which thousands of lives were lost, in pursuit of Zimbabwe's hard-won independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and

[3] Constitution of Zimbabwe, Chapter 11, Part 1, sec. 208, cl. 3.
[4] Constitution of Zimbabwe, Chapter 11, Part 1, sec. 208, cl. 4.
[5] Sally Nyakanyanga, "Zimbabwe: Army Chief Calls for End to ZANU-PF Purges", *Daily Maverick*, 14 November 2017, (accessed 7 December 2025).
[6] Patrick Guramatunhu, "I Am 'Stockholder' of Zimbabwe Says Chiwenga – Echoes Mugabe Did Not Want to Hear", *Bulawayo 24 News*, 22 April 2016, (accessed 8 December 2025).

> national interests. To this end, let it be known that the highest office in the land is a straitjacket whose occupant is expected to observe the objectives of the liberation struggle. We will therefore not accept, let alone support or salute anyone with a different agenda that threatens the very existence of our sovereignty, our country, and our people."[7]

This means that "anyone" includes ZANU-PF officials, who the military has declared unfit to rule if they deviate from the values of the liberation struggle: freedom, equality, and justice, among others. Thus, the generals' doctrine, which is likely to remain the same in the years to come, was that democratic elections alone cannot determine who leads the government – a point of view that was highly contested by opposition parties, Western governments, and civil society.

The Military's Claimed Liberation "Right" and "Duty"

Conversely, it is safe to argue that the military's support for both Mugabe and/or any of his followers as president thereafter was always to be conditional. For example, on 13 November 2017, on the eve of the coup, General Chiwenga contended that the problem of political power was within ZANU-PF. Namely, he declared:

> "We will soon control the levers of power in our beautiful party and country. It is with humility and a heavy heart that we come before you to pronounce the indisputable reality that there is instability in ZANU-PF today and as a result anxiety in the country at large. We must remind those behind the current treacherous shenanigans that when it comes to matters of protecting our revolution, the military will not hesitate to step in."[8]

This statement captures the idea that the military is an arbiter of power, ultimately determining who rules Zimbabwe. In this reading, the army generals believe they have both the right and the moral obligation to intervene to correct political failures.

This was most recently echoed by General Philip Sibanda, the recently retired commander of the ZDF, who in May 2025 asserted that "it remains a challenge to us all to defend the values that the liberators stood and fought for […] Let us never lose sight of this important fact, no matter *kuti tinenge tadziigwa sei* (how comfortable we have become)."[9] The continuity of military generals' doctrine on "defending" the values of the liberation struggle is critical to political leadership succession. Hence, elections are ceremonial, with no change of the ruling political party foreseen by the military as stockholders and vanguards of Zimbabwe's polity. For the military generals, the values of the liberation struggle bind their past and present as well as their views about what the future Zimbabwe should uphold. Within this frame of mind, the civilian leadership are a mere smokescreen to accommodate local and international actors who want to see the guns being led by politics, rather than the other way around.

[7] Charles Rukuni, "Zvinavashe – We Will Not Salute Anyone….", *The Insider*, 5 November 2011, (accessed 7 December 2025).
[8] Nehanda Radio, "Full Text of Statement by General Constantino Chiwenga before Military Coup", *Nehanda Radio*, 16 November 2017, (accessed 8 December 2025).
[9] Gibson Nyikadzino, "ZDF Day: Zvinavashe Doctrine and the Construction of Zim's Strategic Culture", *The Herald*, 6 August 2025, (accessed 3 October 2025).

Poisonous Power Struggles

The post-2017 coup period has been characterised by power struggles between President Mnangagwa and Vice President General Chiwenga. Mnangagwa has been accused of being close to local "businessmen" suspected of using their allegedly illicit wealth stemming from inflated government tenders, unlawful fuel deals, gold smuggling syndicates, and other shadowy, state-linked schemes in order to buy political influence and accumulate even more wealth.[10] To some observers, Mnangagwa's proximity to these businessmen is the main driver of growing domestic dissatisfaction, which is evidenced by citizens' protests – especially from a faction of military veterans linked to General Chiwenga.[11] This has reached the point whereby a coup is brewing, and thus a scenario in which Chiwenga may seek to topple the man who he installed in 2017 as Mugabe's successor. In the view of many local observers and citizens, the power struggle is not just a conflict between two personalities – rather it revolves around a struggle between adherence to liberation values, on the one hand, and incessant illicit wealth accumulation and corruption on the other.[12] Although Chiwenga portrays himself as an opponent of corruption – calling for the arrest of members of corrupt cartels – Mnangagwa is widely perceived as an ally of these same interest groups, which are allegedly buying political influence and power. In July 2025, Kudakwashe Tagwirei, who is widely alleged to be involved in high levels of corruption, was seconded to ZANU-PF's central committee, with rumours even suggesting that Mnangagwa is grooming him to be his successor.[13] In another notorious case, Tagwirei donated 300 four-wheel-drive vehicles worth USD 21 million to members of ZANU-PF's central committee.[14] Most local observers interpret this as a move to manipulate the central committee of ZANU-PF to extend Mnangagwa's stay in office to 2030. Incidentally or not, Tagwirei was formally admitted into the ZANU-PF central committee on 15 October 2025. Other instances of lavish donations by businessmen ostensibly close to Mnangagwa have been reported in the press.[15] Again, it is widely believed that such donations were meant to guarantee endorsements for the extension of President Mnangagwa's presidential term in office at the ZANU-PF annual conference, which took place from 13–18 October 2025. This attempt was successful, as the party proposed to extend Mnangagwa's presidency without any opposing views being presented from the public at the conference.

However, a faction of disgruntled war veterans is said to have raised concerns. Members of the politburo deemed to be aligned with General Chiwenga were demoted from influential positions such as secretary general of ZANU-PF to lesser positions.[16] Many in Zimbabwe see this as evidence of a hostile takeover of the ZANU-PF politburo by the corrupt cartels to protect illicit wealth and silence dissent.

[10] Christopher Mutambirwa, "Zimbabwe: 10 Things to Know about Business Mogul Kudakwashe Tagwirei", *The Africa Report*, 28 April 2025, (accessed 8 December 2025).
[11] Thandiwe Garusa, "Zimbabwe: Police Warns Against Participation in Geza's October 17 Protests", *New Zimbabwe, All Africa*, 16 October 2025, (accessed 8 December 2025).
[12] Transparency International, "Corruption Is Blocking Progress towards a Sustainable World", (accessed 8 December 2025).
[13] NewsHawks, "Tagwirei Announced as Central Committee Member", 3 July 2025, (accessed 8 December 2025); Nehanda Radio, "Geza Accuses Mnangagwa of Grooming Kudakwashe Tagwirei for Presidency", 2 April 2025, (accessed 8 December 2025).
[14] Zim Live, "Tagwirei Splurges $21 Million on ZANU-PF Vehicles amid State Capture Storm", 22 September 2025, (accessed 5 October 2025).
[15] Timely News, "Wicknell Chivayo Donates Cars and Cash to ZANU PF", 15 September 2025, (accessed 5 October 2025).
[16] Shawn Matiashe, "Zimbabwe: Mnangagwa Closes Ranks against Chiwenga with Politburo Reshuffle", Africa Report, 24 September 2025, (accessed 5 October 2025).

Popular views that a power struggle is imminent are supported by a series of unverified rumours about the mysterious deaths or illnesses of an increasing number of military generals. These rumours claim that President Mnangagwa's regime has systematically poisoned and killed these generals as political opponents.[17] One observer has argued that "poisoning rumours are not about evidence, they are about perception and in Zimbabwean succession politics, perception is power".[18] Although the official communicated causes of death were COVID-19 or cancer and other health-related complications, those suspected to have been poisoned include: Army Commander Lt General Edzai Chimonyo; Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retired Lt General Sibusiso Moyo, Retired Air Force Commander Perrance Shiri; and Retired Prison Commissioner Paradzai Zimondi (a former Major General and Former Commander of Presidential Guard), among others.[19] The former army commander (until March 2025) is said to have been poisoned; he was also demoted to the low-profile Minister of Sports position.[20] Most important of all, General Chiwenga is said to have survived an attempt on his life, too, thanks to emergency treatment in China.[21] In addition, some senior army generals have been appointed as ambassadors as a way of weaning them from political influence.[22] The assumption is that the alleged poisoning and demotion of military commanders is meant to weaken the military network around Chiwenga, which the incumbent president is likely to perceive as the biggest threat to his power.

Military Veterans Against the President

There are signs that war veterans and army officers possibly constitute the bulk of the opposition to President Mnangagwa, and that they are gearing up for a political battle. Since 2024, Blessed Runesu Geza – a liberation veteran, a former senior intelligence officer, and a ZANU-PF central committee member – has led a faction of disgruntled liberation struggle veterans in a direct challenge to Mnangagwa. Grievances include corruption in both ZANU-PF and the government, economic problems, potential constitutional violations, which include the president's attempt to extend his stay in power, and betrayal of the values of the liberation struggle. Geza has consistently emphasised that President Mnangagwa has forgotten the roots of his power.[23] Geza's faction contends that the current president is a corrupt and incompetent dictator who has been captured by crooked local business cronies, thereby betraying the original goals of the liberation struggle.[24]Accusing Mnangagwa of nepotism and authoritarianism, veterans have also questioned President Mnangagwa's liberation struggle credentials and even called for his removal, if necessary, through the intervention of army generals.

To understand the seriousness of the challenge, it is important to point out that Blessed Geza is not just a factional symbol in the leadership succession within ZANU-PF. He represents a growing number of Zimbabweans tired of recurring economic and political crises,

[17] Karabo Ngoepe, "Inside Zimbabwe's Dark Succession Battle: Poison, Power, and Political Strife Revealed", Sunday Independent, 18 September 2025, (accessed 5 October 2025).
[18] Ibid.
[19] Zimbabwe Situation, "Mystery of Army General Deaths Deepens as ex-Air Force Commander Survives Accident", (accessed 4 October 2025).
[20] Ngoepe, "Inside Zimbabwe's Dark Succession Battle" (see note 17).
[21] Kevin Samaita, "Ailing Zimbabwean Vice-President Flown to China for Treatment", Business Day, 22 July 2019, (accessed 5 October 2025).
[22] Reuters, "Four Zimbabwe Generals Retired in Mnangagwa's First Purge of Military", 18 February 2019, (accessed 4 November 2025).
[23] Shingai Nyoka, "A Man Called Bombshell Fires Up Zimbabwe's Succession Battle", *BBC*, 13 March 2025, (accessed 16 October 2025).
[24] YouTube, "Blessed Geza Announces Names of Individuals Targeted ahead of the Planned Uprising", 2025.

whereby levels of corruption and unemployment have soared. Of note, Geza has long been an ally of General Chiwenga and was a key figure in the war veterans' opposition to Mugabe's leadership in 2017.

For his part, General Chiwenga has by and large remained silent on his intentions. But on 17 September 2025, he presented a dossier to the ZANU-PF politburo, requesting that President Mnangagwa (who is both the president of ZANU-PF and Zimbabwe) arrest all allegedly corrupt businessmen. On 14 October 2025, in the politburo meeting, the ZANU-PF secretary for legal affairs, Ziyambi Ziyambi, responded to General Chiwenga's dossier:

> "Fundamentally flawed, treasonous, and lacking appreciation of party procedures and the national constitution. At its core, the document advocates for the unlawful removal of a constitutionally elected President. Any attempt to destabilize or subvert a constitutionally elected government is treasonous. Individuals have no legal mandate to investigate their perceived competitors to satisfy personal egos. These utterances are defamatory."[25]

In short, all evidence suggests that a presidential succession struggle is imminent. However, it is not just about who succeeds President Mnangagwa, who is in his last term and of advanced age (83 years). It is also about how this succession will be managed, which is not just a contest between political factions, but a move against illicit capital. Even though the military is considered a historical arbiter of political power, an appalling development is on the horizon: illicit capital that is being wielded by local corrupt "businessmen". The rise of this type of capital in Zimbabwe controlled by unethical local elites is not a random occurrence but, in the view of many, an organised effort by political power networks within ZANU-PF. These networks, which are close to President Mnangagwa, make their money through opaque state tendering processes in agriculture, the health sector, and the energy sector, in addition to monopolising state contracts in agriculture, fuel supplies, and the mining of critical minerals for modern technologies and the energy transition. [26]

However, it is highly probable that the military opposition will prevail over the business network around President Mnangagwa. This is because the military likely has a deep-rooted sense of internal cohesion, loyalty and allegiance that has grown over a long period. To demonstrate the forging and consolidation of military loyalty, it is important to note that General Chiwenga, aged 69, is the only surviving signatory of the 1975 *Mgagao* memorandum. Entering the country's newly formed army in 1980, he rose through the ranks and was promoted to Lieutenant General (Army Commander) in 1994 before being promoted to the rank of General and appointed to the ZDF in 2003 – a post he occupied until 2017. Thus, Chiwenga has a broad network inside the army, including many serving generals and junior officers who came up under his command. To some extent, all current military generals – including brigade and battalion commanders – are in one way or the other products of General Chiwenga, including the command structure of the current military leadership. Therefore, Chiwenga does not need ZANU-PF – or an electoral advantage within ZANU-PF – to be the next president, he needs the military. Although financial capital may be important in Zimbabwean politics, it is likely less decisive than military capital, which is built on networks, loyalty, alliances in barracks, comradeship, and a sense of belonging developed over the years and solidified through the liberation struggle. As such, it is doubtful that

[25] Kudakwashe Chibvuri, "Dossiers 'War' Rocks ZANU-PF Indaba", *Business Times*, 16 October 2025, (accessed 16 October 2025).
[26] The Sentry, "Report: Zimbabwe's Tagwirei and His Companies Received Millions in Possibly Unlawful Payments under Command Agriculture", 23 March 2022, (accessed 8 December 2025); Nyashadzashe Ndoro, "Scandal Rocks Zimbabwe: Wicknell Chivayo's Half-billion Dollar Cancer Contract under Fire", 17 June 2025, (accessed 8 December 2025).

corrupt business people will succeed in buying the generals in exchange for political power or even the presidency.

Conclusion: Between Now and 2027 – Towards a Clash?

Following the ZANU-PF party congress in October 2025, the most likely scenario appears to be a major political confrontation in the period up to 2027 between incumbent President Mnangagwa and the military, led by General Chiwenga. Because the ZANU-PF party and its various structures – including the politburo and the central committee – have endorsed Mnangagwa's alleged plan to stay in office and thus extend his presidential term until 2030, Mnangagwa's opponents have no option but to challenge the president through the party's political channels. Imagining that General Chiwenga and President Mnangagwa will co-exist at the helm of state until 2027 seems far less plausible than there being a fierce clash in the near future. Although Chiwenga has left the military, his capacity to mobilise the armed forces is considerable, and he continues to enjoy significant influence across a broad network of allies, many of whom have risen through the ranks during his time in various leadership positions.

But whatever the outcome of this leadership struggle, it will not by itself resolve the fundamental question about the role of the military in Zimbabwe's politics and polity. To avoid the recurrence of toxic and disruptive cycles of conflict, Zimbabwe's political and military elites need to revisit and revise the country's political parameters. To maintain peace and stability in Zimbabwe as well as promote democracy, there is a need for the military, civil society, ZANU-PF civilian leaders, and opposition political parties to engage in a dialogue, particularly to define national interests and rules of engagement. Such a dialogue could be facilitated by local actors in politics, specifically the Catholic Church, which had long been involved in mediating national politics, especially during the military intervention in 2017.

This is easier said than done in the thoroughly divisive political climate that has prevailed in Zimbabwe for so long, and to which most actors have contributed their fair share. For example, the military has long been calling some of the factions and opposition parties of ZANU-PF "traitors", "puppets", and "sell-outs", while opposition political parties have accused the soldiers of being unprofessional and anti-democratic as well as undermining what Zimbabweans fought for during the liberation struggle. These opposing views need to be addressed. Every political actor should be ready to engage with the other's suspicions, fears, and concerns. Political party leaders inside and outside of ZANU-PF, while remaining critical, should ensure that the interests of generals – who brought freedom through great sacrifices and cooperation with civilians – that they will continue to protect the country's sovereignty and national interests. On the other hand, the military should acknowledge that civilian politicians, including the opposition parties, are not enemies of the state if they campaign for leadership positions. Like elsewhere in the world, opposition political parties can play a critical role in the nation's development and the deepening of democracy if they are allowed to participate. This can be done by respecting other voices and seeking to promote the interests of Zimbabwe while advancing the goals of the liberation struggle.

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