

# The Fetishised Role of External Actors in Zimbabwe's 2018 Elections: Implications for the Future Plebiscites

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## Introduction

This article focuses on the fetishised role of key external actors in the electoral value chain of Zimbabwe's 2018 elections. The powerful global actors namely, the UK, the EU, the U.S., China and Russia renewed their geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in Zimbabwe following the ouster of Robert Mugabe as the President of that country in November 2017. While the direct involvement of Brussels, London, Washington, Beijing and Kremlin in the military coup of 2017 in Zimbabwe is yet to be investigated, their interest in the first post-Mugabe elections was palpable as will be explained anon.

It is common knowledge that the relationship between the Mugabe regime and the key Euro-American powers especially the UK, the EU and the U.S. was acrimonious over the past two decades. Apparently these Euro-American powers accused Mugabe's regime for gross human rights violations, corruptocracy and electoral smithing among the other economic, social, and political ills (see Kurebwa, 2019; Crisis in 2018, 2019). In turn, and as a counterpoint, Mugabe routinely lashed out on the excolonisers and neoimperialists for what he considered to be their overt and covert regime change agendas. The protracted feud over these and other issues resulted in the severing of international relations between Zimbabwe and the rest of the Euro-American countries and their economic juridical institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (see for example Zimbabwe Democracy, 2001).

In the context of these frosty relations, for almost two decades, the Euro-American investors, financiers, creditors, traders, donors, corporations, and entrepreneurs watched from the terraces while their erstwhile global geopolitical competitors, particularly the Chinese and the Russians increased their footprints in Zimbabwe's economic and political spheres. Observably, Beijing and Kremlin were specifically courted by the Mugabe regime in order to spite London, Brussels and Washington together with their transAtlantic allies. Clearly, the duo of China and Russia who are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) were also invited to Zimbabwe to act as a geopolitical and geoeconomic counterweight to the alleged Euro-American regime change agendas. In this regard, Zimbabwe was by default, if not by design, entrapped in the broad global

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geopolitical competition between the Global North and the Global South interests (for a more nuanced discussion on global geopolitical competition see Freedom House, 2019; Shullman, 2019; Jones and Taussig, 2019; Ursu and Berg, 2018; National Intelligence Council, 2018; Grant, 2012).

In this context, the departure of Robert Mugabe was billed by the Euro-American powers as the turning point and significant moment for them to commercially and diplomatically re-insert themselves back into Zimbabwe after two decades of frozen relations (see Knoppert, 2019). Paradoxically, Beijing and Kremlin also welcomed Mugabe's departure and his replacement by Emmerson Mnangagwa as an opportune time for them to reconsolidate their South-South cooperation as well as protect their investment, trade, and finance interest in Zimbabwe (see for example Dube, 2019; Zwicewicz, 2019). It is hardly surprising therefore that the key global players across the North-South divide tempered their reaction to the military coup which removed Mugabe from power conveniently preferring to call it a 'military-assisted transition' (see also ICG, 2017; Pigou, 2017).

Apparently, it was in the interest of the new government of Zimbabwe to sanitise the political and military events of November 2017 by preaching the gospel of political, economic and electoral reforms as well as embracing the global juridico-economic agenda of neoliberalism, democracy, rule of law and zero-tolerance to corruption (Raftopoulos, 2019; Rupiya, 2018; Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Lewanika, 2018; Dore, 2018). It is argued here that this narrative was largely directed more at the international audiences and less at the domestic constituencies. The new authorities in Harare specifically identified the elections slated for July 2018 as the ideal platform for them to showcase their reform agenda to the rest of the world.

It is therefore not surprising that the 2018 elections were the most internationally monitored and observed elections in Africa with 46 countries and 15 regional and continental bodies involved plus a legion of international and regional media houses including the CNN, the SABC, the BBC and the Al Jazeera (see Raftopoulos, 2019; Rupiya, 2018; Zimbabwe Election Support Network, 2018). Not entirely unexpected, these landmark elections saw the beneficiary of the November 2017 military coup, Emmerson Mnangagwa of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) controversially elected President of Zimbabwe defeating his main rival Nelson Chamisa of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance.

In light of these dynamics, this article grapples with three interrelated questions. First, what role did the external actors play in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe? Second, what were their intentions and interests? Third, how did their motivations complement or compete with those of the ruling party and/or the opposition? In responding to these questions, the article seeks to make a humble contribution towards the emerging debate on the spectres of increased external influence in the future elections in Zimbabwe.

For reasons of brevity, space and time, the article does not broach the role played by major regional and international organisations such as the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the United Nations (UN), all of which continue to be powerful political and development actors in Zimbabwe. However, given my particular focus on the fetishised external actors, I chose to limit the scope of this article to the study of the key global economic governance actors namely, the UK, the EU, the U.S., China and Russia (all except the EU, are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council). But while an exhaustive account cannot be provided here, an indicative sketch of the activities, intentions, and interests of the key global powers are illuminated in the article.

For the purposes of clarity of analysis, the article is portioned into seven sections that try and shed light on the activities, intentions and interests of the key global actors in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. Section II presents the idea of global convergence that characterised Mugabe's exit from Zimbabwe's politics in 2017. Section III provides a snapshot of Zimbabwe's foreign policy realignment ahead of the elections. Section IV retraces the Euro-American footprints in the 2018 elections while Section V sketches out the contours of Beijing and Kremlin interventions in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. Section VI imagines the implications of the foreign influence to the future elections in Zimbabwe while Section VII stacks the conclusions of the article.

### **Global convergence on Mugabe's exit**

To provide a clear-eyed analysis of the role of the key global interlocutors in Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, the discussion here is premised on the discursive context of the removal of Robert Mugabe from power by the military in November 2017. This largely unexpected end of Mugabe's rule was hailed by Zimbabweans from all climes of life as well as by the international community as the end of a dark era and the beginning of a new dawn for the country (see also Chikwawawa, 2019; Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018). In this regard, the removal of Mugabe was characterised by a rare moment of global convergence.

It is striking to note that even regional, continental, and international multilateral institutions such as the SADC, the AU and the UN also conveniently chose to ignore the unconstitutional means through which Mugabe was removed. One can only surmise that this was a case of 'the end justifying the means' (for a more nuanced analysis of SADC's position on unconstitutional change of governments see Chigara, 2018; Crisis Coalition, 2018). While there was an illusion of global consensus on Mugabe's exit, it is important to note that the different actors had their different set of reasons for wanting him out.

Notably, the ousting of Mugabe was seen by some Euro-American powers, investors, corporations, financiers, creditors, donors and diplomats as offering an opportunity to recover the geoeconomic space that was lost to China and Russia during the past two decades of their tenuous relationship with the Mugabe regime (Knoppert, 2019; Raftopoulos, 2019; African Development Bank, 2019; Chikwawawa, 2019; Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018).

However, unlike the widely documented cases of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sylvanus Olympio of Togo, and Luis Cabral of Guinea-Bissau and many other luminaries across Africa where the Euro-American security institutions were the master-minders of these coups and assassinations (see Wrong, 2000; Stoleroff, 2013; Powell and Chacha, 2019), there is no evidence as yet that directly implicates the external actors in Mugabe's toppling. Nevertheless, there are some observers who posit that the involvement of the Chinese in Zimbabwe's coup cannot be ruled out without a critical inquiry. What gives credence to this claim is that the former Commander of Zimbabwe Defence Forces and now the Vice President of Zimbabwe General Constantino Chiwenga was in China barely a week before the November 2017 coup (Raftopoulos, 2019; Canvas, 2017).

However, it is not without irony that Beijing and Kremlin also did not oppose the removal of Mugabe by the military establishment. To be sure, Mugabe considered the Chinese and the Russians as his 'all-weather friends', 'strategic development partners' and bulwarks against the Euro-American neo-imperial interests in Zimbabwe and Africa. As such,

Mugabe allowed China and Russia to gain access into Zimbabwe's lucrative extractive sectors of the economy such as gold, diamond, platinum, coal, and chrome mining as well as contract farming (see Dube, 2019; Zwicewicz, 2019; Olivier and Suhkov, 2015; Chigora and Goredema, 2010). As realists have long observed, like all states, China and Russia are self-interested actors who saw Mugabe's failure to manage his succession conundrum as a threat to their national and geopolitical interests. For them, Mugabe's replacement by his long time ally (Mnangagwa) represented continuity, stability and protection of their commercial, economic and political interest in Zimbabwe (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018 and 2019).

That aside, Mugabe's exit was also received by the ordinary Zimbabweans as a vista of opportunity for the betterment of their lives (Chikwawawa, 2019; Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018). Accordingly, the majority of the people expected the post-Mugabe authorities to constitute a government of national unity charged with the responsibility of creating conditions for economic take-off, international re-engagement, and democratic elections (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018). The envisaged government of national unity was to be composed of the ruling party, the opposition, civil society, academia and business. A unity government was viewed as particularly important because public confidence in ZANU-PF government was at its nadir.

Yet, instead of capitalising on the illusion of global convergence presented by Mugabe's departure to establish a unity government, Mnangagwa and his allies opted for the electoral route slated for July 2018. Their decision was arguably informed and bolstered by the fact that the opposition was weak and divided by internal wrangles and that the main leader of the opposition Morgan Tsvangirayi was bed-ridden (he subsequently died on 14 February 2018 – before elections), (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018). Buoyed by these factors, ZANU-PF strategists believed that they could easily win the elections and then get down to the business of rehabilitating the economy with all the key global players on their side.

Thus, upon assuming power on 24 November 2017, Mnangagwa spoke of his government's commitment to free and fair elections and his willingness to re-engage with the international community (Chikwawawa, 2019; Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018). Notably, this narrative was a major departure from the Mugabe's acerbic rhetoric and anti-Western antics. To this end, the new narrative was sweet music to the Global North capitalists who were eager to have their foothold back in Zimbabwe. As a result, the global actors were almost uniform in their public support for the Mnangagwa administration. However, this optimism has now been tempered down by concerns over the post-election violence as well as the continued free fall of the economic as will be explained anon.

## Foreign policy realignment

It will be noted that in the lead up to the July 2018 elections, the Mnangagwa administration sought to realign itself directly with global powers through careful balancing and re-orienting itself towards the neo-liberal policy framework in order to appeal to the Euro-American audiences. Moreover, Mnangagwa made it his business to seek to re-engage and cultivate closer relations with the Euro-American powers while consolidating Zimbabwe's relations with its traditional allies including China, Russia and the rest of the Global South (Raftopoulos, 2019; Rupiya, 2018; Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; Lewanika, 2018; Dore, 2018).

In line with the public opinion at the time, Mnangagwa set out to distance himself from the Mugabe era by declaring his administration the 'New Dispensation' and alternatively the 'Second Republic'. In a bid to lure international investors, financiers, creditors and donors Mnangagwa adopted the slogan 'Zimbabwe is open for business'. At the same time, the new administration expressed its intentions to rejoin the Commonwealth as well as re-engage the rest of the international community (see House of Commons Library, 2019; African Development Bank, 2019; Dore, 2018). All this signalled that Mnangagwa was ready to embrace the neo-liberal policy orthodox as stipulated by the global juridico-economic programme of the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Economic Forum (WEF). In this way the Mnangagwa administration sought to portray itself as a reformist government.

Not surprisingly, Mnangagwa pledged that his administration would carry out various economic stabilisation measures including ensuring the safety of foreign direct investment, and compensation for white commercial farmers who lost their land during the Mugabe inspired Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme of the 2000s (Mnangagwa, 2018). The leitmotif of this narrative was to appeal to the Euro-American powers that had imposed targeted measures and sanctions on the Mugabe regime in the 2000s. This was also a signal to the global capitalists that Harare was abandoning the anti-Western and the radical populist policies pursued by the Mugabe regime over the last two decades.

In order to attract the much needed foreign direct investment (FDI), the new regime in Harare made changes to the Indigenisation and Empowerment Act, decreeing that in the mining sector the 51 percent local ownership requirement would only apply to diamonds and platinum (Raftopoulos, 2019; African Development Bank, 2019; Rupiya, 2018). It is important at this point to note that the Mnangagwa government has recently removed the requirements on diamond and platinum subsectors. To its credit, FDI improved following the ousting of Mugabe, with US\$1 billion in investment projects approved by the Zimbabwe Investment Authority in the first quarter of 2018, compared to just US\$150 million for the same period in 2017 (European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018). Clearly, the initial Mnangagwa's economic thrust resonated with some global capitalists, investors, financiers and creditors alike.

Besides, the new government emphasised that it will guarantee adequate investments in people, establish a competitive environment for private enterprises, open the economy to international trade and sustain macroeconomic stability (Mnangagwa, 2019; African Development Bank, 2018). It also promised to repay its sovereignty debt thereby portraying itself as a responsible member of the international community deserving trust and respect (Mnangagwa, 2018). In this regard, the new government was inviting the juridical economic institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the Davos Forum to become partners of Zimbabwe in its bid to rebuild the battered economy.

Additionally, the Mnangagwa administration committed itself to combating corruption which is now endemic in Zimbabwe. The Transparency International places Zimbabwe high (Number 157 of 180 countries) in its Corruption Perception Index in 2017 and estimates the country's losses inflicted by corruption at US\$1 billion annually, making it one of the most important threats to the country's social and economic development (Mnangagwa, 2019; African Development Bank, 2018; European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018). The rhetoric on combating corruption also came against a backdrop where Mugabe had lamented about the disappearance of US\$15 billion.

On the electoral front, Mnangagwa publicly and repeatedly committed to holding free, fair and credible elections in 2018. In order to concretise his rhetoric Mnangagwa signed

the AU Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance which Mugabe had refused to sign over the years. To further enhance his reformist agenda, Mnangagwa ended the ban on the Euro-Western observation of Zimbabwean elections introduced by Mugabe in 2002 (Knoppert, 2019; European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, 2018).

At the same time a battery of electoral reforms were implemented including, creating a fresh voters roll based on the Biometric Voter Registration process; an enhancement of citizen access to the inspection process; ZEC Outreach and Communications; barring traditional leaders from partisan politics; and enacting a Political Party Code of Conduct as well as improving the Integrity of Assisted Voting (also Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; Raftopoulos, 2019; European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, 2018). These represented important departures from the past and the conduct of the former president Mugabe.

Predictably, the 2018 elections were won by Mnangagwa and his ZANU-PF. The election process received endorsement from several Election Observation Missions including the AU, SADC, the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) as well as the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) among others. These bodies described the 2018 elections as orderly, relatively free, fair, and credible. Although the international observers and monitors from the U.S. and the EU observer missions also expressed contentment on the election processes, they however pointed out some worrying electoral flaws such as the use of state resources and intimidation, manipulation of traditional leaders, and partial coverage in the state media in favour of ZANU-PF (European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; IPSS, 2018; IRI/NDI, 2018).

Whereas, the Heads of Mission of the UK, the EU, the U.S., Canada, and Switzerland noted with concern the eruption of post-election violence which left at least six protestors dead, they fell short of outright censure of Harare. This was because these actors had hoped for democratic transition and they did not want to antagonise themselves with Mnangagwa and his associates. However, there was a palpable sense of anger on the streets of Harare, Bulawayo and other major towns and cities in Zimbabwe. There was also a sense of disenchantment among Zimbabwean diaspora communities across the globe. To manage the unfortunate events of 1 August 2018 and to placate both the general populace of Zimbabwe which was shocked by the killings and the external players including SADC and the AU, Mnangagwa constituted an Independent Inquiry led by the former president of South Africa, Kgalema Montlante (Rupiya, 2018; Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018; Raftopoulos, 2019).

Not entirely unexpected, Montlante Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2018 was well received by the Euro-American powers. For example, during her visit to South Africa in September 2018 the then British Prime Minister Teresa May stated that she was pleased with Mnangagwa's Commission of Inquiry into the election violence viewing it as 'an important step for Zimbabwe' (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018).

## The Euro-American Footprints

The discussion here subscribes to the oft-proved proposition that states often intervene in the affairs of other states in order to balance or hedge their own interests and ideally, to gain power and influence with that state. It is widely documented that the UK, the EU and the U.S. and other transAtlantic powers have devoted much diplomatic resources,

financial resources, and political pressure over the last two decades purportedly to promote democratic transition in Zimbabwe. There are also claims that the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to persuade the former President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki to support a British led military action against Mugabe in the 2000s (see *The Guardian*, Wednesday 27 November 2013).

Notably, the Euro-American powers ratcheted up their technologies of democracy promotion in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s against a backdrop of serious human rights violations by the Mugabe regime. Their strategy consisted of sanctions and targeted measures (Kurebwa, 2019). This included embargo on arms trading, restrictions of entry and freezing of personal assets of high-ranking members of the Mugabe regime, and suspension of development cooperation with the central government (see *Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act*, 2001). By the same token, the Global North powers, creditors, and donors supported the democracy campaigners including the civil society and the opposition ranged against Zimbabwe's tyrannical rulers. Revealingly, all these methodologies of intervention fell short of delivering the much desired regime change in Zimbabwe. Instead, this failure created political and economic opportunities for China and Russia to reinsert themselves in Zimbabwe's economic curvatures.

Still, it should be noted that at this crucial geopolitical juncture, the Euro-American actors are under increasing strain from an interconnected set of internal challenges including the residues of the 2008/9 global financial crisis, international terrorism and extremism, uncontrolled immigration into Europe, Euroscepticism, the difficult Brexit, the potential Grexit, populism and the rise of ultra-right wing political parties in France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and Czech Republic (Freedom House, 2019; Galston, 2018: 8). With all these domestic problems, the UK, the EU and the U.S are currently unable even if they were willing to directly intervene, interfere or influence in a profound way the political and electoral landscape in Zimbabwe and the rest of Africa.

Some critics argue that the global influence of the Euro-American actors has further been lobotomised by the weakening bonds between Europe and the U.S. partly as a result of President Donald Trump's populism, isolationism, protectionism, economic nationalism, jingoism and nativism (Freedom House, 2019; Magsame *et al.*, 2018; Stremmler, 2017). Arguably, Trump has very little regard for his transAtlantic allies. Instead, he admires some illiberal leaders including Kim Jong Un of North Korea, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Viktor Orban of Hungary, Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines and other democracy backsliders and authoritarians (Freedom House, 2019; Magsame *et al.*, 2018). Coupled with many other factors, this has led to the reification of autocratisation processes across the globe and serious democratic deconsolidation in the North transAtlantic region.

Given these Euro-American existential challenges, Zimbabwe, has been sporadically appearing, disappearing, and reappearing on the geopolitical radar of the transAtlantic powers. Viewed as a whole, Zimbabwe is only a sideshow in the Euro-America's strategic thinking, albeit one that should not be underestimated. For the UK in particular, the problems in Zimbabwe were putting an extra weight to its difficult Brexit. It is therefore scarcely surprising that the removal of Mugabe from power was expressly welcomed by the British as well as the EU (House of Commons Library, 2019).

For example, Boris Johnson the then UK's Foreign Secretary (and now the Prime Minister) described Mugabe in the House of Commons as a power hungry despot who would not be missed (House of Commons Library, 2019). Thus, following Mugabe's departure from power, the UK was very quick to respond positively to the Mnangagwa regime by sending the Minister of African Affairs Roy Stewart as envoy to his inauguration as the

new President of Zimbabwe on 24 November 2017 (House of Commons Library, 2019; Knoppert, 2019). This gesture provided the much needed endorsement of the new rulers of Zimbabwe which they needed to shrug off the coup tag and signal Zimbabwe as entering a new era of change and reforms.

At the same time, the EU showed its willingness to re-engage and assist Zimbabwe under the leadership of Mnangagwa. It noted that the Mnangagwa administration had the potential to open the way to a full return to the rule of law within the constitutional framework, and under civilian rule, allowing for a preparation of the much-needed political and economic reforms (Knoppert, 2019; Raftopoulos, 2019). As such, the EU committed itself to supporting the Mnangagwa's re-engagement programme based on a clear and time-bound economic and political reform programme (European Union, 2018). It is therefore reasonable to argue that both the EU and the UK tacitly supported the Mnangagwa presidency ahead of the elections. Presumably the British were looking for new markets and investment frontiers in the event of Brexit. This has somewhat changed as a result of the embarrassing post-election violence of 1 August 2018 which left six people dead and millions of dollars lost as a result of arson and looting of retail shops and supermarkets (Raftopoulos, 2019; Knoppert, 2019; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018).

Interestingly, the EU and the UK began flirting with Harare after the 2013 elections which were overwhelmingly won by ZANU-PF. The extent of victory, the nature and size of the parliamentary opposition and the ability of the then Mugabe regime to stay in power meant that the regime change agenda was in doubt. For these reasons, both London and Brussels warmed up to the re-engagement overtures led by the former Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Patrick Chinamasa through the Lima process of 2015 (see Knoppert, 2019; Kurebwa, 2019; Chigumira, Mupunga and Chipumho, 2018). Since then the UK government has been doling out huge amounts of funds to Zimbabwe (also see Chitiyo and Kibble, 2014). For example, between 2014 and 2019 UK committed to spend 24 million pounds on civil society in support for transparency, accountability, human rights and citizen engagement in Zimbabwe. This included 5 million pounds announced in February 2018 specifically directed to international and local election monitoring initiatives (House of Commons Library, 2019).

More importantly, in May 2018, the Commonwealth Development Group—the UK government's development finance institution—announced an investment facility, in partnership with Standard Chartered Bank, that would lend up to US\$100 million to growing businesses in Zimbabwe (this was reportedly the first commercial loan by a British entity to Zimbabwe in over 20 years) (House of Commons Library, 2019; Knoppert, 2019). Similarly, the EU provided financial support to Zimbabwe to the tune of Euros 234 million under the II<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund with priority being health, food security and governance for the period between 2014 and 2020. It also committed to provide Euros 2 986 169 for a pre-election study of the political environment (House of Commons Library, 2019; Knoppert, 2019; Kurebwa, 2019).

Some opposition leaders such as Tendai Biti and Vincent Musewe were furious with the UK and the EU claiming through their routine Tweets that these two were bent on bailing out the repressive regime of ZANU-PF. The former ambassador to Zimbabwe Catriona Liang was particularly criticised for allegedly being too close and supportive of Mnangagwa and his associates in ZANU-PF (see Knoppert, 2019). To make the matters worse, the EU funded the strategic planning workshop of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) as well as insisted that Civil Society and the Opposition parties should engage with ZEC. Conversely, compared to the previous elections very little funding was availed by the EU and other traditional donors for voter education in the 2018. This was interpreted by some observers as the West's tacit support for the Mnangagwa administration.



Additionally, the role of the U.S. in Zimbabwe's 2018 elections was less clear. This discussion mentions the role of the U.S., but only insofar as it remained ambivalent actor. With Trump at the helm and with confusion over his administration's priorities, the U.S. policies and strategies in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe remained unknown and unpredictable. It should however be noted that the U.S. set out some benchmarks for the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. These included the independent, nonpartisan administration of the vote by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC); voter roll transparency; freedom to campaign and equal access to state media for all parties; and an absence of security force participation in voter intimidation or election administration (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

In spite of the conditions above, the ambivalence of the U.S. towards Zimbabwe was evident when a few days before the elections, the U.S. Senate and House passed a Bill to amend the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001 (Congressional Research Service, 2018). Apparently the amendments sought to foster improved Zimbabwe-America bilateral relations in the event that the 2018 elections passed the test of integrity among the other conditions. To some observers this signalled the U.S. receptivity to the possibility of a ZANU-PF victory which a number of surveys had predicted at the time including the Afrobarometer.

More curiously, just before the 2018 elections, the U.S. and the UK officials suspended funding for Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (Zimrights), Grace to Heal, and the Election Resource Centre (ERC) all of which were on the forefront of voter education in 2018 (Reuters, 5 July 2018). This withdrawal of financial support to strategic organisations just before the elections sparked speculations that the UK and the U.S. were tacitly crippling civic education. It is generally believed that a well conscientised electorate has some capacity to exercise their right to vote even against intimidation.

It is an open secret that in the past the opposition election campaigns were supported by the Euro-American financiers but since the removal of Mugabe from power these financiers were no longer willing to support the opposition which they saw as unable to unseat the military anchored government of Mnangagwa. To be clear, the death of Morgan Tsvangirayi a colossal opposition figure in Zimbabwe created some further fault-lines in the main opposition MDC Alliance creating doubts on the capacity of the opposition to unite against the ruling party ZANU-PF (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018). Given these factors, the Euro-American actors were not averse to a ZANU-PF victory in the 2018 elections.

Be that as it may, the Euro-American observer missions were both appreciative and critical of the electoral processes. For example, the U.S. observer mission under the joint banner of the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute was critical of the 2018 elections. It noted that even though it found notable improvements in the political environment and electoral preparations for 2018 as compared to the previous elections, a number of significant opportunities to break with the past and restore confidence in advance of the polls were missed (IRI/NDI, 2018; Raftopoulos, 2019: 19). Their joint statement further noted that Zimbabwe has not yet established a tolerant, democratic culture that enables the conduct of democratic elections (Shekhovtsov, 2018). This was corroborated by the report of the EU Observer Mission (European Union Parliamentary Research Service, 2018; European Union, 2018).

Given these dynamics, it is perhaps reasonable to argue that the Euro-American powers went into the 2018 elections with a non-coherent strategy. Clearly they departed from their previous approach whose import was regime change in favour of the opposition. Presumably, this was necessitated by the changed political landscape in the country which

included the removal of Mugabe, the death of Morgan Tsvangirai, the divided opposition, and the reformist narrative of the Mnangagwa administration.

Whatever, intentions and interests of the UK, the EU and the U.S., it is the argument of this article that these powers were keen to mend their relations with Zimbabwe in order for them to recapture their geopolitical space that had slipped off their hands in the last 20 years.

## The Chinese and Russian Influence

It is argued here that the geostrategic agendas of the key global actors who have strategic investments in Zimbabwe like the Chinese and the Russians compel these powerful countries to have interest in the political and electoral affairs of the country as a means of safeguarding their investment, trade, and finance. It is the argument of this article that both Beijing and Kremlin used their soft-power to advance their interests in Zimbabwe, particularly through no-strings attached, mutual respect, and win-win principles of South-South cooperation.

To begin with, it will be noted that as relations with the Euro-American powers strained in the 2000s, the then government of Zimbabwe adopted a Look East Policy which led to the deepening of political and diplomatic relations with China, Russia, and the other Asian and Euro-Asian economies. Dating back to the liberation struggle era, Beijing and Moscow supported Zimbabwe's liberation fighters financially, materially, diplomatically and politically (see Mhanda, 2011). It is therefore by no means superfluous to assert that the Mugabe administration embraced both Beijing and Moscow as anti-imperialist partners in its fight against the Euro-American designs.

To be clear, Mugabe's Look East Policy was launched at a time when both Beijing and Kremlin were strongly opposed to the unilateral tendencies of the U.S. across the globe. As a consequent, both Russia and China supported Mugabe as they deployed their veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to block the Euro-American alliance from taking decisive action against the autocratic regime in Harare (Moyo, in press). Even after Mugabe's departure, both China and Russia have continued to invest in several important sectors of the economy including energy, transport, telecommunications and mining, and agriculture as will be explained anon.

To be sure, under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has extended its global reach, increasing its efforts to influence political and economic elites, media, public opinion, civil society and academia globally (Czirjak, 2019; Shullman, 2019; Were, 2018). By many measures, China's current engagement blitz with Zimbabwe has made it the most significant foreign actor in the country's economic spheres in recent years. It's lending, trade, investment, and commercial diplomacy in Zimbabwe have dramatically increased over the past two decades thereby outstripping the major global powers such as UK, the U.S. and the EU. According to the AidData center for Global Development, Zimbabwe was one of the top ten recipients of Chinese finance between 2000 and 2011 (see API, 2018). As a result Zimbabwe is currently saddled with a high debt burden to China whose actual quantum has curiously remained a matter of guess work for the public and this has left Harare exposed to the Chinese geopolitical agenda.

It is evident that the Chinese diffusion into Zimbabwe has been phenomenal. Apart from investments in the agriculture, infrastructure, telecommunications and mining sector, China has also invested in vanity projects such as the National Defense College, a residential home for Mugabe, and a conference facility for the ruling ZANU-PF party (Moyo, 2018). To some observers, it did not come as a surprise that the government of

Zimbabwe announced a battery of Chinese funded projects during the pre-election period. These included funding for the expansion of Kariba Hydro-power Station, Hwange Thermal Power Station (US\$1 billion), and the new Parliament Building (US\$77 million), and Robert Mugabe International Airport (US\$153 million) (Moyo, in press). All in all, the pledges of Chinese funding to Zimbabwe during the pre-election season stood at US\$2.5 billion (Dailynews, February 2019). Arguably, these pledges aimed at presenting ZANU PF under Mnangagwa as the party that has the capacity to mobilise massive resources for social and economic development of the country. Writing just before Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, David Gadiel was probably correct when he noted that:

*subject to the outcome of the next election China will remain the main source of funding for future reconstruction of Zimbabwe's infrastructure, its agricultural rehabilitation and continuing investment in mining (Gadiel, 2018: 42).*

Furthermore, press reports were (during the campaign period) awash with claims that China was responsible for the financing of ZANU-PF campaign machineries in the run-up to the 2018 elections (see for example Zimbabwe Independent, 4 March 2018). Allegedly, the Chinese electoral assistance to ZANU-PF included vehicles for its 210 parliamentary candidates; vehicles for women and youth wings of the party in all the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe; and vehicles for the senior Politburo members of ZANU-PF. The Press also reported that China provided ZANU-PF with regalia and other party paraphernalia for the 2018 election campaign (Zimbabwe Independent, 4 March 2018).

In response to the alleged Beijing's electoral interference, the opposition candidate Nelson Chamisa of the MDC alliance used strong anti-Chinese rhetoric in his campaign speeches. Like the late Michael Chilufya Sata of the Patriotic Front in Zambia, Chamisa promised to expel Chinese businesses upon winning the election. Unfortunately for him, the impact of his pronouncement may have strengthened the resolve of Beijing to ensure the victory of its preferred candidate-Emmerson Mnangagwa and ZANU-PF party (Aidoo, 2018).

Some of what I have said about China can be said about Russia. To be clear, Zimbabwe and Russia share some common interests. As noted, Zimbabwe is on the drive to seek investments to revive the disarticulated economy after her fall out with the Euro-Western powers in the 2000s. This plays out very well for President Vladimir Putin who is pushing to raise Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic profile globally (also see Jones and Taussig, 2019; Polyakova and Boyer, 2018; Shekhovtsov, 2018; Brattberg and Maurer, 2018; Narayanan, Howard, Kollanyi, and Elswah, 2017).

In Zimbabwe, Kremlin is interested in economic investment in the mining, agricultural, power, and telecommunication sectors as well as defence industries (also see Ndimande and Moyo, 2018; Chigora and Goredema, 2010). It also maintains close ties with the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. In return, Harare is hoping to enhance its food security, agricultural technology, military and defence cooperation. As such, the two countries have signed mega investment agreements ranging from platinum exploration, agricultural as well as industrial revitalisation support (see Ndimande and Moyo, 2018: 15). However, in absolute terms and relative to other actors such as the China, South Africa, and India, the volume of trade is still small, but there is note-worthy trend of increasing Zimbabwe-Russia cooperation.

That said, it is important to state at this moment that Kremlin is alleged to have been interfering with politics and elections in a number of countries globally (see Spalkova, 2018; Brattberg and Maurer 2018; Nolan 2017; Narayanan, Howard, Kollanyi and Elswah, 2017). In their seminal paper titled '*The future of political Warfare: Russia, the West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition*', Polyakova and Boyer (2018) provide some

details on the alleged Russian political interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, attempts to influence the Brexit referendum and the ongoing financing and tactical support for ultra-right wing parties in France, Germany, and Italy as well as meddling in the elections of many other countries including, Ukraine, Cambodia, Central Africa Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, and Zambia (also see Jones and Taussig, 2019: 27). However, it should be noted that the Kremlin through its ambassadors across the globe has strongly protested these claims describing them as baseless, unfounded and provocative (see McCarthy, 2018).

While there is no evidence that Kremlin directly deployed technologies of electoral manipulation such as cyberattacks/cyberespionage and disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing electoral outcomes as it is claimed to have been the case in the U.S. Presidential elections in 2016 (see Muller, 2019), some observers note that Kremlin was involved in Zimbabwe's 2018 elections in more indirect, subtle, and insidious ways to help achieve an outcome that is in line with its geostrategic interest (Zwiczewicz, 2019). For instance, media reports claimed that up to 64 Russian political advisors were operating in Harare during the election season presumably to assist in Mnangagwa's electoral campaign (BBC News, 3 August 2018). However, this claim was dismissed by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who visited Zimbabwe in March 2018. Lavrov stated that:

*We insist that African problems need African solutions, and the international community should respect the Africans choice of resolving a conflict, and support them morally, politically and financially in training staff which Russia has been actively doing (cited in Frey, 2018).*

Even though the Russian Foreign Minister repudiated the electoral influence claims, the opposition continued to lash out on Mnangagwa's perceived cosy relationship with the Russians, throughout the campaign period thereby creating a negative impression about Russia in Zimbabwe (Hayward, 2018).

In short, it is probably correct to argue here that the actions of both Kremlin and Beijing may have directly or indirectly affected Zimbabwe's 2018 elections. If so, Beijing's and Kremlin's support for Mnangagwa may have emanated less from an affinity for the man and more from their wish for continuity and stability as well as for their geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Interestingly, after winning the 2018 elections, President Mnangagwa prioritised a bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping which was held on 5 September 2018 during the Beijing Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and also visited President Vladimir Putin in Russia on 15 January 2019. These bilateral meetings were important because they symbolised the acceptance of President Mnangagwa by these two world leaders at a time when the Zimbabwean leader was still smarting from the post-election violence of 1 August 2018.

## **Implications for Zimbabwe's future elections**

In the opening pages of this article it was noted that the current global world order is characterised by shifting geographies of power and economy from the Global North to the Global South (Freedom House, 2019; Shullman, 2019; Jones and Taussig, 2019; Ursu and Berg, 2018; National Intelligence Council, 2018). As part of this global geopolitical competition, it was shown that all the key global actors have at least attempted in one form or another to influence the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe for their own national and geoeconomic agendas. This penultimate section argues that the ambitions of these key global actors will have huge implications for the future elections in Zimbabwe as explained below.

First, the fetishised global actors in the 2018 elections may have strengthened the spectre of militarised competitive authoritarianism in Zimbabwe. The fact that out of political expediency the key global players endorsed the military induced transition in November 2017 means that these players tacitly supported coup leaders yet evidence has shown that coup leaders have little if any credentials of administering free, fair and credible elections (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2018 and 2019; Raftopoulos, 2019). If the recent electoral history of Zimbabwe is anything to go by, then, it is likely that in future elections the military establishment will continue to underwrite the electoral victories for its preferred party and candidates (see also Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2019; Moyo, 2015; Rupiya, 2011; Masunugure, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2007).

Second, it is noteworthy recalling here that the post-election violence which led to loss of life and property was 'covered up' through a Commission of Inquiry which was supported by the Euro-American powers. Apparently 1 August 2018, etched a bad birthmark to the Mnangagwa regime and to Zimbabwe's electoral futures. The failure by Mnangagwa to punish the perpetrators of violence, arson and murder may mean that Zimbabwe's future elections will likely continue to be characterised by fear and intimidation (Amnesty International, 2019; Raftopoulos, 2019; Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2019; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2018), one is inclined to be sceptical about the future elections in Zimbabwe unless fundamental reforms take place before the next elections are held.

Third and final, given the current weakening of the Euro-American powers, it is likely that the influence of the UK, the EU, and the U.S. in elections will be further eroded in Zimbabwe. This is likely to consolidate the rise of neoliberal authoritarianism anchored on the emerging Beijing Model of development and governance. In fact, given the determination of both Beijing and Kremlin to expand their geopolitical influence in Africa and around the globe in general, (see Jones and Taussig, 2019; Shullman, 2019; Zwicewicz, 2019; International Republican Institute, 2019; Polyakova and Boyer, 2018; Shekhovtsov, 2018; Brattberg, and Maurer, 2018; Narayanan, Howard, Kollanyi, and Elswah, 2017), it is the argument of this article that these countries will continue to consolidate their bilateral relations with Zimbabwe in the future. In the end, as mentioned earlier, the global geopolitical competition between the traditional powers and the re-emerging economies is likely to continue holding sway in the future elections in Zimbabwe.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to examine the activities, interests and intentions of key external actors in Zimbabwe's 2018 elections. It was argued here that the geopolitics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, marked by the strengthening of Russia and China, and the weakening of the Euro-Western powers has created a complicated environment for Zimbabwe's futures. The overall observation is that all the key global actors have developed their individual foreign policies towards Zimbabwe in order to fulfil their own national and geopolitical interests. While the 2018 elections constituted a turning point and a critical juncture that could have allowed Zimbabwe to look forward to social and economic development, instead, those elections entrenched the practice of electoral authoritarianism in the country. The article concludes that the global geopolitical competition between the traditional powers and the re-emerging economies is likely to hold sway in the future elections in Zimbabwe, Africa and globally.

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1 UNITA

2 Aliança Popular Nacional

3 Partido da Frente Social

4 MPLA

5 Frente Nacional Libertação de

6 Convergência de Angola

UNITA

Abel Lourenço

Gas Benghi  
Banda

Abel Epalanga  
Chivukuvuku