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Bob's Out, the Croc Is In: Continuity or Change in Zimbabwe?

Roger Southall

Abstract: The military-assisted ousting of Robert Mugabe as president of Zimbabwe and his replacement by Emmerson Mnangagwa was widely welcomed by Zimbabweans. However, hopes of significant change were dashed by the nature of his cabinet appointments, which indicated greater continuity than change vis-à-vis the Mugabe era. Mnangagwa is likely to pursue an agenda of authoritarian reform: rendering the economy more attractive for foreign investment while maintaining political control from above.

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Keywords: Zimbabwe, political systems, governmental systems, changes of government, domestic political situation and development

Roger Southall is a professor emeritus from the Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, and a research associate in Political Studies at the University of Cape Town. He is the author of *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa* (James Currey; University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013). His most recent book is *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa* (Jacana; James Currey, 2016).
E-mail: <Roger.Southall@wits.ac.za>

The ousting of Robert Mugabe as president of Zimbabwe by the military in November 2017 was greeted with wild enthusiasm throughout the country. Thousands of people poured onto the streets, their celebrations conveyed to the world by a huge global media entourage that descended upon the capital, Harare. The message was clear: Ordinary Zimbabweans, including even those who counted themselves supporters of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), would back any measure that would force the departure of the 93-year-old Mugabe, whose seeming intent had been to remain as president until he died. Even more, the excited welcoming of the military signified popular antipathy to the looming prospect that the ageing dictator would anoint his wife, Grace, as his successor.

Zimbabweans were expressing a very loud “no” to any idea of dynastic politics. Many were prepared to grant Mugabe exalted status as having led the struggle for liberation from colonial rule, yet it seemed that most were agreed that he had long overstayed his welcome. Hence it was that, once the military had finally prevailed upon a highly reluctant Mugabe to resign, Zimbabweans hailed the elevation of Emmerson Mnangagwa to the presidency. Nevertheless, most had reservations about him, for Mnangagwa was not nicknamed “the Crocodile” for nothing. He was known to be cunning, ruthless, and brutal.

The military’s intervention had been sparked by Mugabe’s dismissal of Mnangagwa as one of his two vice presidents on 7 November 2017, justifying this on grounds of the latter’s alleged disloyalty. Given that Mnangagwa had been vying with Grace Mugabe for the nomination to succeed her husband as president, in a factional struggle that had severely divided ZANU-PF, this was taken as a clear sign that Mugabe was now unambiguously backing his wife. Warned that his life was in danger, Mnangagwa immediately took to his heels, fleeing to Mozambique (after a failed bid to cross the border into South Africa), but vowing that he would soon be back.

He was true to his word. The military intervened just a week later, pre-empting Mugabe’s plans to conduct a purge among senior members of the military, including dismissing General Constantino Chiwenga, head of the armed forces. It took another week to secure Mugabe’s exit before Mnangagwa, now back in the country, was elected interim president of ZANU-PF on 19 November. He was subsequently inaugurated as Zimbabwe’s new president on 22 November (ISS 2017).

Prior to this, the military had been at pains to stress that its actions did not amount to a “coup.” Indeed, a “coup” would never have done, because it would have alienated both the African Union (AU) and the

Southern African Development Community (SADC), which had both committed to refusing to recognise unconstitutional changes of government. The military was also desperate to avoid other African nations, not least neighbouring countries, perceiving that it removed Mugabe directly, for he was widely regarded as a hero of liberation.

However, once the armoured cars rolled onto the streets in Harare in the early-morning hours of 14 November, no one was left in doubt about who was now in charge. But when General Chiwenga took to the airwaves, he was insistent that the military was merely performing its constitutional obligation to maintain security. Furthermore, he gave assurances that President Mugabe and his family were safe and unharmed, and that their security was guaranteed. He went on to explain that the army was targeting “counter-revolutionaries” and the “criminals” who had infiltrated ZANU-PF, surrounded the president, and were plundering Zimbabwe. In practice, those so identified were Grace Mugabe’s chief allies within the ruling party (known as Generation 40, or G40), their distinguishing feature, in military eyes, being that they had played no part in the liberation struggle. If they had been allowed to take power, stated Chiwenga, Zimbabwe would have become a “neo-colony” (Dixon 2017).

Nonetheless, in whatever way the military’s intervention was dressed up, the unannounced intention was always to force Robert Mugabe to retire and to make way for Mnangagwa, who had long enjoyed a close association with the security forces. Once this objective had been attained, and the Grace Mugabe threat neutralised, the army chiefs were happy to withdraw to the barracks, although they had now made it explicit that they claimed the right to determine who should hold political power.

Whether they would be able to control events was less certain. Some, looking on, claimed that the military was changing nothing of substance, that their continued backing of ZANU-PF merely inaugurated an era of “Mugabe-ism without Mugabe” (Maromo 2017; Melber 2017). Certainly, Zimbabweans had few illusions that Mnangagwa was intent on launching a transition to democracy, although many had hopes that he would drive sufficient reforms to render life more tolerable than it had been during the last days of Mugabe. Even so, there were those who harboured hopes that the military had opened Pandora’s box and that, in the long run, power would slip through their fingers. However, in the short term, their hopes were to be confounded, for Mnangagwa’s first move was to provide the top military with ample reward.

Re-asserting Military Influence: Mnangagwa's First Cabinet

During the days that Mugabe was seeking to cling to power, somehow trying to stave off the reality of his humiliation, civil society activists and opposition politicians had been calling for the appointment of a transitional government to prepare the country for new elections. It was a sign of desperation – of popular weariness with ZANU-PF's woeful management of the economy and its crude authoritarianism – that ordinary people in the street looked to Mnangagwa as a harbinger of change. True, during Mugabe's latter years in power, he had indicated his support for certain economic reforms – notably, restoration of ties with international creditors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – yet his pragmatism was likely to go only so far, and it was unlikely to extend as far as deliberately inaugurating a transition to democracy.

As Zimbabweans well knew, Mnangagwa had been one of the principal architects of ZANU-PF's security state. A guerrilla leader before independence, he was minister of state security during the Gukurahundi in the early 1980s (the brutal crackdown upon ZANU-PF's rival liberation movement, the Zimbabwe African People's Union, and its support base in Matabeleland). Although Mnangagwa has always denied his involvement in the massacre of some 20,000 Ndebele, he had been organically involved in the decisions taken by a close-knit group of political leaders and military commanders who sought to eliminate the opposition (Doran 2017a, b). Thereafter, he had orchestrated ZANU-PF's militarised campaign against the opposition in the 2008 general election, which retained the presidency for Mugabe, denying victory to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and, with South Africa's backing, forcing it into a coalition with ZANU-PF. As minister of defence during the Government of National Unity (GNU), Mnangagwa played a key role in ensuring that the security apparatus remained loyal to the interests of ZANU-PF. Later, as vice president from 2014, his politicking to succeed Mugabe gained the backing not only of the most powerful elements within the military, who were determined to retain their influence, but also that of the generation of liberation fighters within ZANU-PF (Mdlongwa 2017). In short, although Mnangagwa used his inauguration speech to assert that as president he would serve "all citizens, regardless of colour, creed, religion, tribe, totem or political affiliation" (*Chronicle* 2017), there should have been little doubt that, fundamentally, he would remain loyal to the ruling party. But it was to be a ZANU-PF purged of the contamination of Grace Mugabe and the G40.

While pledging reforms to revive the economy and run a government that recognised Zimbabwe's political diversity, Mnangagwa gave short shrift to any talk of forming a new coalition. Instead, his first cabinet was designed to establish his authority within ZANU-PF, build bridges to potential opponents within the party, and re-assert the ruling party's alliance with the military. As such, it came as a major disappointment to the mass of Zimbabweans who had been hoping, against the odds, that Mnangagwa would separate the wheat from the chaff.

Rather than appointing anyone to office from outside the ZANU-PF core, Mnangagwa's appointments, totalling about half of his cabinet, came from his inner circle of friends and comrades he had known most of his life; they, in turn, would serve alongside those stayovers from Mugabe's last cabinet, most of the latter "steeped in non-delivery" (Games 2017). Obert Mpofu, who as minister of mines had been massively implicated in corruption around diamonds mined in Marange in Eastern Zimbabwe, was reappointed as minister of home affairs. Also remaining in their respective posts were David Parirenyata and Lazarus Dokora. The very best that could be said of the former was that his miserable performance in the health portfolio had been eclipsed by the even worse record of the latter in education. Both had failed to maintain the modest revivals that had taken place under the GNU in these key sectors.

Another appointment from the old guard was the reinstatement of Patrick Chinamasa as minister of finance. He had been sacked from that post by Mugabe a few weeks before the military intervention because of his alignment with Mnangagwa. He had long experience in the portfolio, having served in the post both prior to the GNU and after the 2013 election. Many held him responsible for the country's looming debt crisis, though his own efforts to control departmental budgets and ration allocations of scarce foreign currency had been constantly sabotaged by lack of support from Mugabe, who himself had incurred huge expenses with his extensive foreign travel (where he was nearly always accompanied by Grace and huge entourages). Over the years, Chinamasa, too, had engaged in numerous negotiations with international funders, and had rhetorically incorporated their demands for economic reform into his policies. Under Mnangagwa, Chinamasa could now hope that at least some of his cabinet colleagues might respect his authority and that his policies could actually be implemented.

The appointment that attracted the most criticism was that of Air Marshal Perence Shiri as minister of lands and rural settlement. He had commanded the notorious Fifth Brigade, which had been responsible for some of the worst atrocities during the Gukurahundi, and he was deeply

unpopular and widely feared as a result. He had played a hands-on role in the Command Agriculture programme, supervised by Mnangagwa in the previous government. Essentially a maize import-substitution drive, it had consumed significant government subsidies for only marginal returns. He would now be expected to boost food production at a time of renewed upsurge in violence on some of the few farms left in white hands.

Shiri's appointment was accompanied by that of Major General Sibusiso Moyo as minister of foreign affairs, whose principal claim to public fame was that it had been his face that had first appeared on television to announce the military intervention. Otherwise, he was little known outside military circles, although he had been implicated by a UN report in the looting of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's minerals following the Zimbabwean army's intervention into that country's disastrous civil war (UN 2001). It would seem that both he and Shiri were rewarded for their key roles in steering the military intervention (Thornycroft 2017; Games 2017).

Nearly three weeks after appointing his cabinet, Mnangagwa announced the appointment of his two vice presidents. The first (and undoubtedly, though unofficially, the most senior) was Chiwenga, who had paved the way for this by announcing his retirement from the army. The second vice president would be veteran ZANU-PF politician Kembo Mohadi, whose most recent posts had been as minister of state for national security in the President's Office from 2015 to 2017, and minister of defence, security and war veterans after that. Both appointments suggested that the influence of the security forces within the government would loom even larger than it had under Mugabe, an impression reinforced by Chiwenga also taking over as minister of defence from Mohadi.

The response of opposition forces to the new government was voiced by Tendai Biti, the minister of finance during the GNU. He denounced it as both a "betrayal of Zimbabwe" and a "military junta" (Thornycroft 2017). Others deplored the re-entrenchment of a failed political elite. However, what mattered most in the immediate future for the large majority of Zimbabweans was whether the new government, for all its historical baggage, could facilitate a speedy revival of the economy.

Reviving a Corpse? The Economy under Mnangagwa

The military intervention was precipitated by Mugabe's dismissal of Mnangagwa and his plans to move against the latter's supporters amongst the senior military, but the factional struggles within ZANU-PF played

out against a backdrop of economic crisis and popular fears that the country was, once again, lurching towards an uncontrollable spiral of inflation. Because the government was running out of money, it was again massively expanding the money supply. Tax revenues and exports were falling, the banking system was starved for cash, unemployment stood at over 90 per cent, poverty was rife, and public health services had largely collapsed. Meanwhile, it seemed to many that the political elite remained largely unaffected, unconcerned about the economic disaster befalling the vast majority of the population.

Popular cynicism was fuelled by memories of the runaway inflation caused by ZANU-PF incompetence and profligacy that had been responsible for incomes and savings collapsing in the years leading up to the 2008 election. Ultimately, the government had had little option but to scrap the Zimbabwe dollar in favour of a basket of other currencies. Within a short time, this came to mean the de facto reign of the US dollar.

The adoption of the US dollar as the principal medium of exchange stabilised the economy remarkably quickly. Subsequently, with Tendai Biti, then of the MDC, as minister of finance, policies became more rational, and the economy recorded remarkably high rates of growth, albeit from a low base. These were years at which Zimbabweans would later look back with nostalgia. However, having effectively lost the last election in 2008, ZANU-PF wanted to ensure it did not repeat the mistakes it had made; its retention of control over the electoral machinery ensured that it swept back to power in 2013. Within a short span of time, it had returned to its familiar policy mix of profligacy, corruption, and populist economics. Unsurprisingly, the supply of money began to dry up.

ZANU-PF had faced major problems since resuming its monopolistic control over the government. Above all, dollarisation meant that the cost of Zimbabwe's exports on international markets was high. Worse, the dramatic collapse in agricultural production since the early 2000s (following the appropriation of white farms) alongside the decimation of the country's manufacturing industries had meant that there was relatively little to export anyway. Tobacco production had recovered somewhat (although the quality of tobacco was lower than it used to be, so returns were less in relative terms). Meanwhile, the introduction of a policy by the government that mines should be 51 per cent Zimbabwean-owned had done nothing to entice inward investment or boost exports during an era in which most commodity prices had fallen anyway. In short, the capacity of the economy to earn US dollars by selling goods externally had fallen dramatically, and the supply of money circulating within the country had dried up.

Faced by a looming debt crisis, the ZANU-PF government resorted to three key strategies. One was to issue “bond notes” by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ). Officially, bond notes were designed to swell the amount of money in circulation within the country. The problem was that, being issued by a government that had presided over hyper-inflation, nobody trusted them. Accordingly, when ZANU-PF announced it would issue bond notes, there was a run on the banks, as depositors sought to withdraw dollars as fast as they could.

The RBZ had responded by limiting the amount of dollars individuals could withdraw to a trickle, forcing depositors to queue for hours to lay hands on their own money, a little bit at a time (if they were lucky). As a result, there had been a massive collapse of confidence in the banks, with nobody wanting to keep their money in them. Meanwhile, however reluctant people were to use bond notes, they were sometimes forced to accept them because of the sheer shortage of “real” money. Accordingly, when they could, they resorted to selling them to informal currency dealers, illegally, at a huge discount.

The second strategy had been to rapidly expand the real-time gross settlement (RTGS), or electronic money, system for everyday trading. Because it needed to hoard its scarce supply of dollars, the government had resorted to paying its employees in electronic form (although salaries were quite often paid late). While this had enabled employees to pay their bills electronically, they had rarely been able to convert the notional sums of dollars they held in the bank into real cash, nor had they been able to send such dollars outside the country, unless they could gain special permission from the Reserve Bank. Meanwhile, with the rate of inflation again rapidly increasing, people had begun to spend their bank balances as quickly as possible.

Yet, it was the third strategy pursued by the government that really fuelled Zimbabwe’s increasingly bizarre financial system. Since 2013, government expenditure had steadily increased year by year, despite the country earning very little internationally. The ZANU-PF government may have hoped to fund itself using its old trick of literally printing money by expanding the supply of bond notes. However, such was the negative popular reaction to these, with ordinary people fearing that they were a step towards the reintroduction of the Zimbabwean dollar, that the RBZ seems to have restricted their issuance.

Instead, the government funded its rising costs by issuing treasury bills. There were few takers for these, but – with things as they were – the banks had little option but to buy them. As inward investment into Zimbabwe had dried to a trickle, there was little else for the banks to

spend their money on, and the interest rates that the government had promised to pay were, at face value, attractively high. In any case, whatever their reluctance, the banks were also placed under considerable political pressure to lend to the government, even though they were very much aware that they might never get their money back.

Whereas the coalition GNU recorded budget surpluses for three of the four full years in which the opposition controlled the treasury, the ZANU-PF government recorded deficits of 186 million USD and 125 million USD in 2014 and 2015. Before his dismissal as minister of finance by Mugabe in October, Patrick Chinamasa had projected a deficit of 1.41 billion USD for 2017. In sum, the government was again heading for bust, and was again printing money to cover its spiralling costs and propelling the economy towards another bout of mega-inflation. However, with an election looming in 2018, ZANU-PF under Mugabe was adamant that it did not want to cut back. Far from it, it wanted to carry on spending, as fast as it could, hoping against hope that the reckoning could be postponed by yet further borrowing (Southall 2018).

Having worked so closely with Mugabe over the years, Mnangagwa was complicit in the mess he was inheriting. Nonetheless, he was known to have backed the various efforts by Chinamasa to implement the sort of reforms that would open the way to re-engaging with international creditor bodies such as the IMF, World Bank, and African Development Bank. It was therefore no great surprise that he used his inauguration speech to signal that such reforms would now take place.

Whilst declaring that the land reforms could never be reversed, he announced that the white farmers from whom the land was taken would be compensated “in terms of the law of the land.” Meanwhile, the beneficiaries of the land reform were exhorted to demonstrate commitment to national food security. However, while economic policy would be predicated on agriculture as the country’s mainstay, emphasis would be put upon creating the right conditions for foreign investment and job creation. Physical and social infrastructure would be repaired and expanded in readiness for growth and the provision of public services; enterprise would be encouraged and rewarded; corruption would be curbed; and public servants were warned that they would now have to “roll up [their] sleeves in order to deliver.” He also indicated that immediate and urgent attention would be given to the liquidity challenges that had bedeviled the nation. Export procedures would be relaxed in order to ease the earning of foreign currency; investors would be lured by the establishment of special economic zones (SEZ); and measures would be taken to stabilise the banking system and to encourage saving. Finally, with a view to sat-

isfying Zimbabwe's creditors, Mnangagwa promised that the whole of government ("including local government and state-owned enterprises") would ensure that both domestic and external debt obligations would be serviced (*Chronicle* 2017). ZANU-PF had made promises many times before and delivered worse than little. The question now was whether Mnangagwa would have the will and the capacity to deliver.

There were reasons to suggest that he would at least try. For a start, the Zimbabwean economy was in such dire straits that it was manifest to all but the most politically myopic that something drastic needed to be done, even if cynics might suggest this would only be to prevent the collapse of ZANU-PF's extensive patronage machine. Beyond that, however, there were elements of Mnangagwa's speech that indicated a break with the past. Under Mugabe, for instance, it was unlikely that a commitment would have been made to allow "elements of a market economy" to flourish and that such strong emphasis would have been placed upon attracting foreign investment. Given that foreign investors had been waiting to invest in Zimbabwe for years, attracted by the country's rich natural resources, decent (albeit run-down) infrastructure, and relatively well-educated population, there was some reasonable prospect of early and relatively easily attained gains (as had been made during the GNU).

Nonetheless, in the short term, it was obvious that if any progress was to be made, and most particularly, if the liquidity crisis was to be resolved, that Zimbabwe would need to be bailed out. There was some speculation that Mnangagwa would look to China (Pilling 2017); indeed, only days after he took office, Zimbabwe entered into a 153 million USD loan agreement to expand and refurbish Harare Airport (*Business Day* 2017). However, for all that Mnangagwa referred to the Chinese as "all-weather friends," it seemed highly unlikely that they would extend loans without demanding some very substantial concessions that might hobble the economy in the future. For the moment, therefore, the most pressing issue was to work out a deal to clear Zimbabwe's debt arrears to the World Bank and African Development Bank (so that the government could resume borrowing!). But if Zimbabwe was going to secure the help of donors and multilateral institutions, it was likely that Mnangagwa's government would need to promise both political and economic reforms.

Towards Authoritarian Reform?

There is much in the transition from Mugabe to Mnangagwa to suggest continuity rather than change. Although his succession to the presidency represents the comprehensive defeat of the G40 faction, the composition

of his first cabinet indicates Mnangagwa's care in placating the established ZANU-PF elite and assuring the military of his fidelity to its historical vision of liberation. Despite his commitments that his government would rule on behalf of all Zimbabweans, he defied pleas for the formation of an inclusive, cross-party transitional government. Above all, he went out of his way to praise Mugabe, hailing him as his "father, mentor, comrade-in-arms" and as "my leader," even assuring Mugabe that "our history will grant him his proper place and accord him his deserved stature as one of the founders and leaders of our nation" (*Chronicle* 2017).

Mnangagwa demonstrated his readiness to help solidify that stature, in both financial and legal terms: despite the country's parlous financial state, Mugabe received a handsome golden handshake of some 10 million USD, along with promises of immunity from prosecution and guarantees that his presidential salary would be paid until his death and that no action would be taken against his family's business interests. He would also have an official residence, with a staff of 20, and fully funded foreign travel up to four times a year. Grace Mugabe was assured that she would continue to receive half the presidential salary following Mugabe's death (although this was presumably conditional on her behaving herself and keeping a low profile) (Burke 2017; *The Guardian* 2017). Meanwhile, although some very rough treatment by the military had been dished out to some of Mugabe's closest allies (notably his last minister of finance, Ignatius Chombo), some of those who had fled had been assured that they could return to the country and live in freedom – including former vice president Phelekezela Mphoko, who made an early return from Botswana.

Mnangagwa's commitment to maintaining ZANU-PF's hold on power was manifest. At the same time, it was equally clear that he recognised the need for international legitimisation, and that this had to go beyond receiving the (easy) endorsement of neighbouring regimes if he was to secure the funding vital for resurrecting Zimbabwe's broken economy. To that end, he had given early assurances that the election scheduled for 2018 would take place (although it seemed it was likely to take place later in the year than had been expected). Yet his problem was that international creditors would require that it should be reasonably "free and fair," and would condemn any repeat of the shenanigans that had underpinned ZANU-PF's skewed electoral success in 2013.

For the 2018 elections to be deemed credible, the government will need to engage with the opposition and civil society and signal its commitment to the establishment of a fairer electoral playing field. This would involve, inter alia, "measures to guarantee a credible and verifiable

voters roll; the independence and capacity of, as well as parliamentary oversight over, the Zimbabwean Electoral Commission; and the removal of the Executive's ability to veto election observers" as well as the creation of a political atmosphere free of violence, coercion, and intimidation, and a curtailment of ZANU-PF's partisan manipulation of national resources for electoral purposes (ICG 2017).

Achieving such an agenda will be a tall order, and even if he himself commits to the needed electoral reforms, it is more than likely that Mnangagwa will meet strong resistance from within ZANU-PF, and very possibly from within the military as well. However, if the Zimbabwean economy is to receive the international backing it so desperately needs, some extensive re-engineering of the electoral machinery is going to be required.

Given that the international agencies are likely to withhold their support unless Mnangagwa makes firm commitments on reforms, he will have little other option but to play ball. This, in turn, will require that he live up to his reputation as the Crocodile and meet resistance to electoral reforms from within the ranks of his regime head on. Behind the scenes, he will try to convince the doubters that, come what may, ZANU-PF will stay in firm control. In this endeavour he will probably be assisted by the opposition parties, which remain extraordinarily divided and unlikely to unite behind a single presidential candidate and party formation or coalition capable of giving ZANU-PF a decent run for its money, especially if the economy begins to pick up before the election.

Rather than sustaining "Mugabe without Mugabe-ism," Mnangagwa is enough of a realist and pragmatist to recognise that there is no way out of the present Zimbabwean crisis without some substantial political and economic reform. Against that backdrop, he is a very unlikely democrat. Consequently, he will seek to meet popular pressures from below by imposing authoritarian reform from above.

Change there will be: economic improvements and greater political freedoms. Yet Mnangagwa is likely to adhere to an extremely limited notion of democracy. As he himself has stated, "ZANU-PF will continue ruling no matter what, while those who oppose it will continue barking" (cited in ICG 2017). And if the opposition barks too loud, the Crocodile won't hesitate to bite.¹

1 I would like to thank David Moore of the University of Johannesburg for valuable comments on an early draft of this paper.

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Bob's Out, the Croc Is In: Kontinuität oder Wandel in Zimbabwe?

Zusammenfassung: Die vom Militär Zimbabwes unterstützte Entfernung Robert Mugabes aus dem Präsidentenamt und seine Ersetzung durch Emmerson Mnangagwa wurde von den Bürgern des Landes weitgehend begrüßt. Durch die Zusammensetzung seines Kabinetts jedoch, die eher Kontinuität zur Mugabe-Ära als politischen Wandel signalisierte, wurden alle Hoffnungen auf einen deutlichen Wandel enttäuscht. Mnangagwa wird voraussichtlich eine Agenda autoritärer Reform verfolgen, indem er versucht, die Attraktivität des Landes für Auslandsinvestitionen zu steigern und gleichzeitig die politische Kontrolle von oben aufrechtzuerhalten.

Schlagwörter: Simbabwe, Politisches System, Regierungssystem, Regierungswechsel/Machtwechsel, Innenpolitische Lage/Entwicklung