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Gloom over Zim coup anniversary

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THE hope that sprang eternal in November last year — when a shock military coup led to the dramatic toppling of then president Robert Mugabe whose 37-year rule had decimated the economy — is now vanishing a year later under his successor President Emmerson Mnangagwa as the expected new dawn has failed to materialise amid deepening economic problems.

Retired Lieutenant-General Sibusiso Moyo's momentous broadcast on national television in the early hours of November 15, 2017 to announce the army intervention — which he said was not a take-over — began a sequence of events that would change the course of Zimbabwean history.

There was a mixture of tension and excitement when army tanks and personnel armoured carriers rolled into the streets in a spectacle Zimbabwean had only seen in movies and read in books. The military took over key government institutions, including control of the police force and intelligence services. This followed a press conference by then Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces retired General Constantino Chiwenga warning that the expulsions in Zanu PF, including that of Mnangagwa on November 6 last year, should stop or else the military would be forced to intervene.

Mnangagwa had been sent scampering for safety across the Mozambican border by his mentor, Mugabe and his raging wife Grace.

Public excitement reached fever pitch amid popular expectations for a new democratic dispensation and prosperity when news filtered that the army had laid siege on Mugabe and was demanding he should quit.

After a few days of haggling, the military decided to bring in the people to break the deadlock as Zimbabweans came out in their hundreds of thousands or millions on November 18 in response to the call for a final push against Mugabe.

The dramatic events — triggered by Mnangagwa's dismissal on November 6, followed Chiwenga's daring return home from China on November 12 amid threats of arrest, his threatening statement on November 13 and the military manoeuvres of November 14 — culminated in the coup on November 15.

Then followed mass demonstrations on November 18 — which some even described as Freedom Day. After that there were days of uncertain negotiations with Mugabe, his "Asante Sana"

speech, Zanu PF gathering to remove him, parliamentary impeachment and his resigning on November 21, all climaxing in Mnangagwa's swearing in on November 24.

Fast-forward to November 2018. So much has changed. Mugabe is now a footnote in history. Chiwenga and Moyo are bedridden. Mnangagwa and Chiwenga are at each other's throats.

The situation on the ground has changed and is remarkably different. The mood of hope and expectation which engulfed the nation in 2017 has given way to an atmosphere of gloom and despair.

The general elections in July did not produce a clear and legitimate winner at the presidential level. The same problems of disputed election outcomes and legitimacy crisis under Mugabe are back as main opposition leader Nelson Chamisa continues to fight to delegitimise Mnangagwa.

Although the international community largely embraced Mnangagwa last November, their enthusiasm has waned, especially in the aftermath of the August 1 shooting and killings of civilians by the military, whose commanders this week worsened the situation by denying responsibility before a commission inquiry chaired by former South African president Kgalema Motlanthe.

The economy is far worse off compared to the same period last year. For instance, salaries have been halved or reduced by a third due to exchange differentials or shifts.

The markets are reeling from currency volatility, price instability and shortages of basic commodities. Individuals and companies are also in distress due to foreign currency shortages.

Analysts engaged by the Zimbabwe Independent to write this week gave different yet damning views about the state of the nation one year after the coup.

"The coup was a reminder of the risk of the tyranny of the majority. Desperate to see Mugabe go, some members of the public were also unconcerned by due process. Even those who professed to defend the rule of law and constitutionalism were ready to abandon such ideals in favour of the immediate political goal of removing Mugabe," constitutional lawyer Alex Magaisa said.

"As a constitutionalist and advocate of constitutionalism, I did not agree with that approach. It does not matter whether or not we like a person. Fundamental rights and freedoms must be upheld at all times and this is why I argued that despicable as his rule had been, Mugabe was still entitled to due process in the impeachment proceedings.

There were widespread expectations Mnangagwa would set up a transitional authority incorporating civil society and the opposition to bring about stability but, instead, he set up a roadmap to elections.

The election was conducted in a largely peaceful manner in the full glare of the world's media and large contingents of international observers. His reformist image was reinforced as he received praises for departing from past traditions of violence and intimidation.

But it would all spectacularly collapse after soldiers were deployed onto the streets to quell protestors who had gathered in Harare demanding the speedy release of election results. At least six civilians were shot dead.

The incident triggered outrage and drew widespread condemnation that reinforced the narrative that Mnangagwa would not break with the past.

Mnangagwa refused to shoulder responsibility for the actions of his troops, but, instead, blamed the opposition.

Political scientist Ibbo Mandaza says nothing has changed one year on since Mnangagwa took over.

“It is back to the future, the persistence of only the illusion that a military state can reform, politically and lead the much-needed economic recovery and growth,” he says. “As appears more likely, only mass protests on a national scale might rescue the situation and herald the beginnings of a new era; or, as remains still remote, the emergence of an enlightened leadership within the establishment itself, courageous enough to cure the coup and return Zimbabwe to constitutional and democratic governance, push for meaningful economic and social reform and re-engage the international community to rescue Zimbabwe.

“So far, Mnangagwa has failed to measure up to such a task and expectations; it is most unlikely that he will ever live up to that, although he still has a window of opportunity to redeem himself and save the nation.”

Despite optimism that the country would rise from the ashes like a phoenix, Zimbabwe’s collapse still shows up in every international rating of the economy. In the World Bank’s Doing Business 2018 index, Zimbabwe ranks 159 out of 190; in the Cato Institute’s Economic Freedom of the World listing for 2018, Zimbabwe is 127 out of 162; in the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report 2018, Zimbabwe ranks 128 out of 140; in the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom 2018, Zimbabwe is 174 out of 180; in the Cato Institute’s Human Freedom Index 2017, Zimbabwe ranks 146 out of 159; and in the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) 2018, Zimbabwe ranks 113 out of 129 countries.

Professor Steve Hanke from the Johns Hopkins University says Mnangagwa should adopt the strategy of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first late prime minister.

That strategy was based on four principles: stable money, no foreign aid, first-world competitiveness, and the protection of private property and the public’s safety.

“Lee’s near-perfect execution of the strategy was a result of the fact that he surrounded himself with first-class civil servants and paid them first-world wages. As a result, Singapore escaped the grinding poverty it faced in 1965 to become one of the world’s most affluent countries,” he says. “So far, the Mnangagwa government has not expressed interest in adopting any of the elements of the Singapore strategy. Nor have members of his government displayed the kind of competence required to tow the economy out of the abyss. Zimbabwe remains in an economic ditch and the storm clouds are gathering”.