

Zimbabwe Military Seizes Power, Claims to Be Targeting 'Criminals' in Dictator's Entourage

Zimbabwe's military seized power on Wednesday saying it was holding President Robert Mugabe and his family safe while targeting "criminals" in the entourage of the only ruler the country has known in its 37 years of independence.

Soldiers seized the state broadcaster and a general appeared on television to announce the takeover. Armored vehicles blocked roads to the main government offices, Parliament and the courts in central Harare, while taxis ferried commuters to work nearby. The atmosphere in the capital remained calm.

In his first contact with the outside world since the takeover, Mugabe spoke by telephone to the president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma and told him he was confined to his home but fine, the South African presidency said in a statement.

It was not clear whether the apparent military coup would bring a formal end to the 93-year-old Mugabe's rule; the main goal of the generals appeared to be preventing Mugabe's wife Grace, 41 years his junior, from succeeding him.

But whether or not he remains in office, it is likely to mark the end of the total dominance of the country by Mugabe, the last of Africa's generation of anti-colonial state founders still in power and one of the continent's most polarizing figures.

Mugabe, still seen by many Africans as an anti-colonial hero, is reviled in the West as a despot whose disastrous handling of the economy and willingness to resort to violence to

maintain power destroyed one of Africa's most promising states.

He plunged Zimbabwe into a fresh political crisis last week by firing his vice president and presumed successor. The generals believed that move was aimed at clearing a path for Grace Mugabe to take over and announced on Monday they were prepared to "step in" if purges of their allies did not end.

"We are only targeting criminals around him (Mugabe) who are committing crimes that are causing social and economic suffering in the country in order to bring them to justice," Major General SB Moyo, Chief of Staff Logistics, said on television.

"As soon as we have accomplished our mission, we expect that the situation will return to normalcy."

Western countries mostly called for calm.

"We cannot tell how developments in Zimbabwe will play out in the days ahead and we do not know whether this marks the downfall of Mugabe or not," British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson told parliament. "We will do all we can, with our international partners, to ensure this provides a genuine opportunity for all Zimbabweans to decide their future."

Finance Minister Ignatius Chombo, a leading member of the ruling party's 'G40' faction, led by Grace Mugabe, had been detained by the military, a government source said.

CAREENING OFF A CLIFF

By Wednesday afternoon it was business as usual in Harare's suburbs while there was less traffic than normal in the city center. Soldiers continued to man armored cars but had relaxed searches on vehicles on some checkpoints. Residents spoke in awe of events that had previously seemed unthinkable.

"I don't support the army but I am happy to see Mugabe gone,

maybe this country can start to develop again,” said Rumbi Katepfu, preparing to shut her mobile phone shop early in downtown Harare. “I did not think this would ever happen... We used to think Mugabe and Grace were invincible.”

Mugabe supporters seemed disinclined to fight to defend him. Tinashe Murisi, washing a car emblazoned with a picture of Mugabe in the poor township of Mbare a few minutes from the city center, said: “All I need is peace in the country and the rest we don’t have to get involved in that what does not concern us.”

Whatever the final outcome, the events could signal a once-in-a-generation change for the southern African nation, once a regional bread-basket, reduced to poverty by an economic crisis Mugabe’s opponents have long blamed on him.

Even many of Mugabe’s most loyal supporters over the decades had come to oppose the rise of his wife, who courted the powerful youth wing of the ruling party but alienated the military, led by Mugabe’s former guerrilla comrades from the 1970s independence struggle.

“This is a correction of a state that was careening off the cliff,” Chris Mutsvangwa, the leader of the liberation war veterans, told Reuters. “It’s the end of a very painful and sad chapter in the history of a young nation, in which a dictator, as he became old, surrendered his court to a gang of thieves around his wife.”

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change called for a peaceful return to constitutional democracy, adding it hoped the military intervention would lead to the “establishment of a stable, democratic and progressive nation state.”

Zuma – speaking on behalf of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) – expressed hope there would be no unconstitutional changes, and urged Zimbabwe’s government and the military “to resolve the political impasse amicably.”

ECONOMIC IMPLOSION

While most African states gained independence by the end of the 1960s, Zimbabwe remained one of the last European colonies on the continent, ruled by white settlers as Rhodesia until 1980. Mugabe took power after a long guerrilla struggle, and two decades later ordered the forcible seizure of white-owned farms.

The fall in output that followed was one of the worst economic depressions of modern times. By 2007-2008 inflation topped out at 500 billion percent. Mugabe blamed Britain and the United States for sabotaging the country to bring it to heel. His followers used violence to suppress a growing domestic opposition he branded lackeys of former colonial powers.

The economy briefly stabilized from 2010-2014 when Mugabe was forced to accept a power-sharing government with the opposition, but since then the recovery has unraveled. In the last year, a chronic shortage of dollars has led to long queues outside banks. Imported goods are running out and economists say that by some measures inflation is now at 50 percent a month.

The economic implosion has destabilised the region, sending millions of poor laborers streaming out of the country, mostly to neighboring South Africa.

The political crisis came to a head last week when Mugabe sacked his presumed heir, Vice President Emerson Mnangagwa, a long-serving former leader of the security forces nicknamed "the Crocodile" for his role as Mugabe's enforcer over the decades.

The head of the military held a news conference with top brass on Monday threatening to "step in" if the purge of veterans continued. Soldiers deployed across Harare on Tuesday and seized the state broadcaster after Mugabe's ruling party accused the military chief of treason.

Aggressive soldiers told passing cars to keep moving through the darkness. “Don’t try anything funny. Just go,” one barked at Reuters on Harare Drive.

According to a trove of intelligence documents reviewed by Reuters this year, Mnangagwa has been planning to revitalize the economy by bringing back white farmers kicked off their land and patching up relations with the World Bank and IMF.
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