

Zimbabwe's Security Sector

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Introduction

Zimbabwe's economic crisis is so dire that the official inflation rate now exceeds 100,000 percent and at least one-quarter of the population has fled the country. As the economy has deteriorated, President Robert Mugabe has given security groups, including the intelligence service and the military, control over many political institutions. Experts say these groups could play a decisive role in March 29 elections and are watching closely for signs of their political allegiances. Splits within and between these groups have become more pronounced in recent months, and some observers suggest a significant portion of the security sector -- particularly in the lower ranks -- no longer supports Mugabe. Analysts are divided on whether security groups will assist or thwart a transition to a post-Mugabe government.

The Security Sector's Role in Governing

As Zimbabwe's economic crisis has deepened, Mugabe has ceded significant power to the country's security forces -- the Central Intelligence Organization, the military, and the police. Above all else, the president seeks to maintain his grip on power. "First rule of survival: You keep the security forces happy and you pay them," says [Knox Chitiyo](#), a Zimbabwean researcher who heads the Africa program at the Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies in London. The security sector reports directly to the president, and is given funding from the president's office, the budget of which does not appear in the finance minister's yearly budget statement.

Experts say that since the last presidential election in 2002, the state itself has become increasingly militarized. Military figures, or "securocrats," occupy high-level positions in civilian institutions from the Grain Marketing Board to the Electoral Supervisory Commission to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe. The cabinet's authority has been superseded by that of the Joint Operations Command, which is comprised of the heads of the intelligence agency, military, and police. The [command makes policy](#), and according to a 2007 International Crisis Group report, it also oversees the government's strategy regarding regional attempts to mediate between the ruling party, ZANU-PF, and Zimbabwe's opposition.

The president's dependence on security groups extends to the economy. In 2006, Mugabe created the Zimbabwe National Security Council, a body of high-level security officials charged with overseeing economic and food security matters. In June 2007, the

Economist Intelligence Unit reported that the "day-to-day running of the country is increasingly carried out by the National Security Council rather than the cabinet." For instance, in 2006, military officers ordered farmers to plough up their crops [to grow maize \(IWPR\)](#).

In an April 2007 speech, Mugabe lauded the security forces as "the vanguard of our revolution and national integrity" and praised their "critical role in [buttressing our economic activities](#)." Yet experts say the military's role in the economy has been destructive. Price cuts suggested by the Joint Operations Command in July 2007 led to massive hoarding and acute shortages of basic goods.

Transitioning to a Post-Mugabe Zimbabwe

Experts are divided on whether the security sector can help usher in a new government in Zimbabwe, and what role they might play in that government. Some suggest the military is too occupied with its own divisions to facilitate reform. "There is a [battle for survival](#), by fair means or foul," writes Martin Rupiya, program director at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria and a former lieutenant colonel in the Zimbabwe National Army. "There is paralysis within the security establishment," says [Sydney Masamvu](#), an analyst for the International Crisis Group who is based in South Africa. In previous elections, security groups have been instrumental in rigging the vote, and given their current divisions, it's unclear whether they will also attempt to rig the March 2008 elections. The military runs the Election Command Center and will have the opportunity to control the vote's final result.

Regardless of the election's outcome, many analysts think the current political situation is unsustainable. Because the state has become so militarized, they say security-sector reform will need to be addressed immediately. "You can talk all you want about the economy, but if the security sector people are not on board and they become spoilers, you are back to square one," says Chitiyo. CFR Adjunct Fellow Michelle D. Gavin argues that aside from a small group of Mugabe loyalists, most military officers would like their institution to become more professional and less politicized. In a Council Special Report on Zimbabwe, she suggests that in the event of a political transition, the international community should prioritize paying the security sector in a timely fashion. "Professional police and military services will be [vital to building a stable Zimbabwe](#) in the future," she writes.

Experts say international actors could help with the reform process. First, many government functions will need to be demilitarized. Youth militias and war veterans, who are concerned they will face legal retribution for acts of violence committed under Mugabe's government, will need to be demobilized. In a paper on planning for a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe, Todd Moss and Stewart Patrick of the Center for Global Development suggest international donors should assist with [restructuring the intelligence organization, military, and police](#); training officials in civilian policing; institutionalizing human rights; and vetting officials for past abuses. Gavin says parliamentarians should be trained to effectively oversee the military.

The Central Intelligence Organization

Experts say the most powerful arm of Zimbabwe's security apparatus is the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). It is the "brains behind the regime," says Masamvu, and deeply feared by Zimbabweans inside and outside the country. There is no public record of the CIO's size, but it is thought to have thousands of operatives. Many Zimbabweans think the organization has a network of informers that extends into the Zimbabwean diaspora. Within Zimbabwe, CIO agents have infiltrated the Movement for Democratic Change, the opposition party, and are believed to have [covertly taken over](#) two newspapers in 2006. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch have documented [systematic acts of violence](#) and intimidation committed by the CIO and the police against opposition members or individuals suspected of allegiance to the opposition.

Some analysts think the CIO's ability to generate fear among Zimbabweans might exceed its true power. "The extent to which they are actually predators is debatable," Chitiyo says. The demands Mugabe places on them are so substantial that it's possible they don't have sufficient resources to cope, he suggests. The CIO receives a large proportion of the security budget, but most of that money goes to the group's top officials, which means low-level operatives are subject to the economic woes the rest of the population faces.

Ahead of elections in March 2008, there are signs of a divide within the CIO, with some top officials reportedly backing Simba Makoni, a former ZANU-PF member who was expelled from the party when he announced his presidential candidacy. The long-time head of the CIO, Happyton Bonyongwe, is rumored to have links to Makoni. In an interview with Zimbabwe's Herald, Bonyongwe [denied reports](#) of such ties. Whether or not Bonyongwe remains loyal to Mugabe, the president no longer trusts the leaders of the CIO, according to a Zimbabwean reporter at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting who asked not to be named for security reasons.

The Military and Its Role in the Economy

The military's influence extends throughout the country's political and economic institutions, and it is nominally responsible for running the security sector. Analysts say that in practice, the CIO trumps the military. There is "headbutting" between the army and the CIO, says Chitiyo. Yet the military has historically been Mugabe's bedrock of support. "That is what has kept him firmly in power up to now," a senior ZANU-PF official told the International Crisis Group in 2007. The president has gone to great lengths to ensure the military's continued loyalty, including distributing land, housing, and prominent political positions to high-level military officials. The army is also responsible for the distribution and production of food.

The government does not release current defense budget figures, but news reports suggest the military receives priority in government spending. According to a 2007 Congressional Research Service report, the defense budget submitted in parliament in 2006 was [four times higher \(PDF\)](#) than that of 2005. The [SIPRI military expenditure database](#) says Zimbabwe spent \$132 million on defense in 2005, but warns that due to hyperinflation,

that figure may not be accurate. In 2006, at the suggestion of the Joint Operations Command, the government reportedly spent more than \$20 million to purchase new cars for police, military, and intelligence officers. It regularly hikes military salaries, but rampant inflation quickly makes these raises largely symbolic. In February 2008, salaries for the lowest-ranked soldiers were raised to ZW\$1.5 billion per month from ZW\$300 million.

Despite Mugabe's efforts to retain their loyalty, the military is now widely thought to be deeply divided. In February 2007, the army chief of staff told his ranks that deserters would be hanged, and any future leave requests would have to be approved by the president. The army had fifty-two thousand soldiers in 2000, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, and estimates of its current force levels range from below thirty thousand to roughly forty thousand troops. Further, there are serious questions about how much longer the government can afford to shore up the military. In March 2008, the army announced it would [reduce recruitment](#) due to budget constraints.

There are signs that the military's fissures extend to senior levels. Reports of various coup attempts led by senior military figures surfaced in 2007, and several top officials were found dead under mysterious circumstances. A March 2008 International Crisis Group report suggests that the commanders of the air force and the army are both sympathetic to presidential candidate Makoni. While some experts suggest the military could launch a coup, others believe this is unlikely. "We don't have a tradition of Praetorian politics," says Chitiyo.

Some analysts say Mugabe retains loyalty at the highest levels. As veterans of the 1970s liberation war against white rule, many top military officials are steadfast in their allegiance to ZANU-PF. The commander of the defense forces, General Constantine Chiwenga, remains loyal to the president. In March 2008 he stated that the military fully backed Mugabe, and would not acknowledge the election of any other candidate.

Police and Militias

The police execute the orders of the Joint Operations Command and are viewed by the public as an [untrustworthy, politicized body](#). "Mugabe uses the police as technicians of public order, rather than as managers or administrators," writes Alice Hill in the Journal of Modern African Studies. In 2005, the police were deployed to clear Zimbabwe's urban slum areas in [Operation Murambatsvina](#), a government-sponsored demolition that further crippled the country's economy by destroying existing marketplaces.

The intelligence organization has been known to intimidate the police into executing its orders. "The police are not strategic heavyweights within Zimbabwe," says Chitiyo. While experts believe many policemen dislike how politicized the force has become, the head of the force is loyal to Mugabe. In March 2008, the police commissioner said "Police will never treat perpetrators of political violence with kid gloves. [Please be warned](#)" ([BosGlobe](#)).

Militias of war veterans and youth also have been implicated in violence against the general population. The youth militia, also known as the Green Bombers, is part of Zimbabwe's National Youth Service, a program started in 2000. They loot land owned by white farmers, beat opposition members, and rape women and girls [linked to opposition groups \(NYT\)](#). Ahead of elections, they are charged with distributing food aid and intimidating voters.