

DÉJÀ VU WITH DIFFERENCE  
*A Gramscian Interpretation of  
Zimbabwe's 2023 Elections and their Pasts*

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ABSTRACT

*Violence – ranging from barely detectable to genocidal to coups and post-coup mêlées – has marred most if not all of Zimbabwe's elections since its 1980 birth. Electoral brutality has been almost normalised since Zimbabwe's first meaningful opposition, coupled with the 'fast track' land reform-inspired crises, accompanied the millennium's turn. This article suggests that elections are signposts of what Antonio Gramsci might have considered the balance of coercion and consent during the long interregna between colonialism and an uncertain end. Evidence from Zimbabwe's 2023 election and its predecessors illustrates the changing techniques between the coercion/consent poles as ZANU-PF's leaders gain and maintain power along the rocky road to an unknown destination.*

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, democracy, African elections, ZANU-PF, Citizens' Coalition for Change, Gramsci, interregnum, hegemony

INTRODUCTION : ZIMBABWE'S INTERREGNA

In Zimbabwe's 2023 harmonised general elections, President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa gained 52.6% of the presidential tally, his primary opposing candidate received 44%, and his party's MPs 136 of Parliament's 210 seats. On 21 September, he announced to the 78<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly that he was 'pleased to highlight that our country enjoyed peace before, during and after our free, fair, transparent and credible elections' and that his country's sovereignty had not been sullied (United Nations 2023). The size of the audience was unclear, although reports of sparse attendance were denounced by a Zimbabwean 'fact checking' website (Factcheckzw 2023). When

the UN's TV cameras turned to the audience, they showed only the Zimbabwean delegates' applause.

Many election observers' reports, including the Southern African Development Community's (SADC 2023a), seminars and much media coverage (SAPES Trust 2022; Ndebele 2023a&b) disagreed with Mnangagwa. But they failed to notice the lines stirring him out of his noctambulation. He raised the right refrain with sovereignty discourse, a key component of a legitimacy campaign pointed at his peers in similarly uncomfortable 'quasi-states' (Jackson 1989; Hopkins 2000).

Zimbabwe's newly re-elected president recalled his country's suffering 'under the illegal, unilateral economic sanctions ... imposed by some Western countries ... designed to subjugate the sovereign will of the Zimbabwean people' since 2000 (United Nations 2023). '*We* (italics mine), therefore, demand that the unjustified unilateral sanctions be unconditionally lifted, including those imposed on countries like Cuba.' With the Cuba cue, he emphasised his distance from the imperialists, and 'remain[ed] grateful for the support and solidarity of progressive countries in the comity of nations'. With their help, he continued:

in spite of these debilitating sanctions the people of Zimbabwe have become masters of their own destiny. This is anchored on a philosophy that as a people, we have the duty and responsibility of developing our country, using our own domestic resources. Partners and investors are welcome, guided by our own vision and national priority areas.

This self-reliance has been a key theme of Zimbabwean political discourse since the early days of the nationalist movement. Then, a new party split off from the first one, citing adherence to that code as opposed to its ostensibly more multi-racial and moderate predecessor, the Zimbabwe African People's Union. That splinter group (then the Zimbabwe African National Union with the suffix 'Patriotic Front' appended) eventually ruled Zimbabwe. It proceeded to do as much as possible to wipe out ZAPU, its main post-colonial opponent (Cameron 2023a&b; Doran 2017), thus cementing a truncated version of 'the people'. At the United Nations about four decades later, Mnangagwa – an architect and engineer of this genocidal attempt and its legacy – sang the sovereignty chorus with more passion than he did the shibboleths of good governance and electoral transparency. It is the foundation of ZANU-PF's consciousness of its moral and intellectual leadership. Crafted over decades of struggles for majority rule, Zimbabwe's nationalist 'organic intellectuals' have created the cornerstone of ZANU-PF's interpretation of ideological hegemony. They have blended the Westphalian rectitude of non-interference with a strident anti-colonial / imperialist line and a mythical collective

will of its people's mastery over their destiny.<sup>1</sup> Such almost divinely ordained unity seems a feudal conceit, but it runs regularly through Zimbabwe's leaders' incantations. As past-President Robert Mugabe suggested to one of his bothersome peers in 2002 at a global environmental summit in Johannesburg: 'So Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe' (*Guardian* 2 September 2002; Moore 2022a, p. 28).

But elections shatter this certainty. They test ruling party assertions of consensual leadership as no other barometer. When electoral contests threaten the rulers' constructions of consent, they turn to coercion. This paper will attempt to argue – and illustrate with the empirics of Zimbabwean elections past and (mostly) present – that some of Antonio Gramsci's ideas (following many of Machiavelli's) of the consent/coercion spectrum that runs through every polity can supplement prevailing liberal ones. Elections play the most important legitimacy test for liberal and parliamentary modes of representation, and the most acceptable mode of substituting one group of that institutions' management by another. Parliaments, as Perry Anderson (1976) argued soon after Gramsci's works entered the English political lexicon, are in turn the leading component of how ruling groups and their representatives gain and maintain intellectual and moral leadership. Elections are, for most people, the only way to participate in how they are ruled (or rule), and by whom: sometimes they can extend to be part of efforts to change wider and deeper ways by which power is articulated. But when rulers and ruled do not agree that elections are a valid means of change – even at the minimal level of alterations within an otherwise cohesive ruling elite and its relations to the subaltern classes – this generally considered rule-bound, well-trod, peaceful and as representative as possible way to parliament and its institutions will be supplemented by force (Moore 2014).

Elections, parliaments, and many of the other colonial and post-colonial accoutrements accompanying capitalism's (and Soviet-style socialism's ineffective) spread to Africa did not arise spontaneously from its modes of production and reproduction. Thus it should not be surprising that the slide between coercion and consent bears only slight resemblance to their relationships where liberal (and social) democracy grew organically, if not smoothly. As Gramsci argued

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1 Joost Fontein reminded me that this anti-colonial/imperialist sovereignty discourse is a pillar of ZANU-PF hegemony, thus deserving more attention. Phimister and Raftopoulos (2004) emphasise that this is especially the case regarding support from ZANU-PF's African peers. The purchase of this on Zimbabweans at home remains to be seen, although Gallagher's (2017) exploration of how Zimbabweans relate to 'the international' is an important effort along these lines. ZANU-PF's construction of its singular role in the people's struggle against 'the West' emerges directly from this discourse, as Terry Ranger's 'patriotic history' (2004) noticed, albeit late-in-the-day, and is interrogated in Fontein's (2006) exploration of interactions between war veterans and spirit mediums.

early in the twentieth century, when the ideologies and politics of colonialism and its aftermaths move from their birthplaces in 'highly developed' countries to their imperial conquests and 'intertwine with [their] internal relations', they create 'new, unique, and historically concrete combinations' (1971, p. 182). These concatenations rarely blend well. If the 'historically organic ideologies ... necessary to a given structure' do not match with the imported 'arbitrary, rationalistic, or "willed"' ones and they only create 'individual movements [and] polemics' they might at best 'function like an error which by contrasting with the truth, demonstrates it' (Gramsci 1971, p. 367). Harold Wolpe's mismatched 'articulations' and Peter Ekeh's contending 'two publics' within African social formations suggest the universality of such a perspective (Ekeh 1975; Wolpe 1972, 1988; Moore 2019). The development trinity of primitive accumulation (Marx the father), nation-state construction (Gramscian and Weberian sons), and democracy (with scores of ghostly parents) drips with blood – usually, not always, and not always to the same degree (Moore 2015a). I have also suggested that 2015 signalled the end of a quarter-century of post-Cold War-inspired euphoria about the prospects of liberal democracy in Africa (Moore 2015b).

Given the uncertainty of democracy's progress (not only in Africa) after the eventually dampened hopes occasioned by the fall of Berlin's wall, it is no coincidence that Gramsci's ideas about 'interregna' – the uncertain times between modes of reign and rule (Achcar 2021) – have taken hold around the world. Rune Møller Stahl's analysis focuses on the post-2008 financial crash period, but one can extend it to the 'uncertainty, confusion, and disagreement among the dominant elite[s] as capitalism's post-WWII golden age stalled'. In this era of 'sustained political crisis and confusion' there is 'no new hegemonic project able to take over from the old hegemonic equilibrium' (Stahl 2019, pp. 334-5). Achcar and Stahl, along with Francesca Antonini (2019) situate Gramsci's morbid symptoms alongside Marx's Bonapartism, an authoritarian solution carried out through dictatorships in all but name. As Anderson notes, 'corruption/fraud' is one of the indications Gramsci includes among the maleficent array. 'Characteristic of certain situations when it is hard to exercise the hegemonic function, and when the use of force is too risky,' it 'stand[s] between consent and force' (Anderson 1976, p. 41).

Africa is a good candidate for interregnum status. Its halted developmental condition suggests it is far from following modernisation's teleology. If Africa's flawed elections and successful coups (York 2023) are just some of this interregna's morbid symptoms, and they all look the same, why examine them? Precisely because they are symptoms. They indicate which pole in the dialectical dance joining the coercive and consensual aspects of Africa's impasse is moving faster and gaining strength, or the to-and-fro as they change places and intensity. And Africa is not a country: its many nation-state formations hold significant variations

on the electoral theme. What are the parts of a particular election that portend more or less transparency or cheating? What strategies and tactics of incumbents and challengers indicate significant new ideological and organisational alterations? What is the 'threat' component of propagandistic 'advertising' and rousing rallies? Can one perceive clear movement toward restrictive authoritarianism or participatory openings? How do elections influence the construction of an active citizenry and civil society, and reduce dependence on donors' aid? Or are they only worth cynical ticks in the boxes presented by myriad international agencies (Cheeseman & Klaas 2019; Cheeseman 2023)?

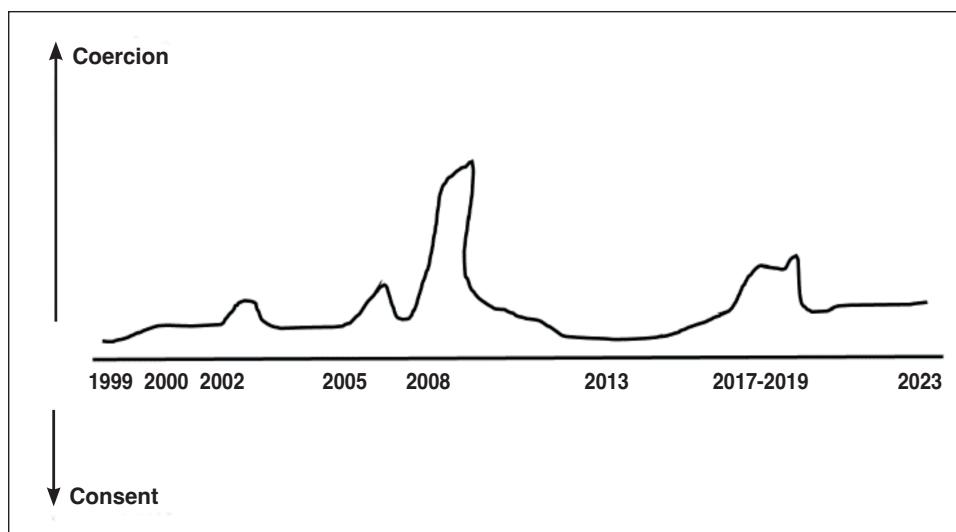
More fundamentally, how do all these electoral signposts relate to the political economy of the social formations to which they are supposed to anoint leaders and the public managers/civil servants they hire? If 'hustling' is emerging as the dominant means of production, consumption and culture (Thieme, Ference & Van Stapele 2021) among crony capitalists and subaltern groups (be they mired in the muck of ages or linked to the celestial spaces of the fourth industrial revolution), how do elections follow suit?

Tinashe Chimedza reminds us that Zimbabwe's economy has been altered irrevocably by 'informality, diaspora and agrarian change': how do these new activities in the socio-economic realm affect electoral politics (2023a)? As Brian Raftopoulos' (2023) pre-election warning invokes (and critiques) the interregna motif, Zimbabwe's long experience with authoritarian forms of nationalism means a hiatus is closer to an eternity. Roger Southall's *Liberation Movements in Power* (2013b) situates such analyses within a long-term view regarding southern Africa's leadership. The late John Saul's (Lawrence 2023) caveats about the class nature of Zimbabwe's nationalist leaders bear remembering as well: they were especially prone to the 'wasting internecine battles of petty-bourgeois politics' during Zimbabwe's liberation war (Saul 1977; cf Ranger 1980). The fate (three years' in Mozambique's prisons) of the 'Young Turks' that inspired Saul to deviate from his theory of class determination exemplifies what happened to whoever Mugabe thought were pretenders to his precarious throne. It serves as a warning to today's young generation (Mhanda 2011; Moore 2014b; Saul 2016) in an interregnum of a different type. The petty-bourgeois leaders of past nationalisms are now well on their way to ruling class status. There is little chance that those pretending to better Mugabe's legacy after disposing of him in 2017's coup will act differently (Moore 2018a, 2023a). Their ideologies are no more than opportunistic, but their internal battles are yet to be slaked.

How do these battles reflect and influence Zimbabwe's coercion/consent continuum, following the emergence of an effective opposition party in 2000? Violence accompanied the elections from 1980 (Sachikonye 2011). They were clouded by *Gukurahundi* in the early to mid-1980s, distorted by a de-facto one-

party condition for a few years after ZAPU's absorption, and marred by defections in the early 1990s leading to the faltering, and violence inducing, attempt at the Zimbabwe Unity Movement as the continent and its donors began to abandon the mirage of one-party state-led developmentalism for a post-Cold War resurgence of liberalism. 'Neo-liberal' structural adjustments, war veterans' disaffection, and civil society activism led to and compounded the MDC's formation. ZANU-PF's always precarious hold on hegemony began to slip (Moore 2008), so it would have to calculate its measures of coercion more carefully than before.

So far, no analysis has entered the 'interregna' terrain, veering as it does between teleology and the eternal purgatory where the 'neo-patrimonialism' trope ends (Hoffmann 2018) – or a completely new mode of production begins (Hamilton & Moore 2023). The rough chart below suggests how such an investigation might appear.



**Figure 1: Impressions of Zimbabwe's Electoral Hegemony Balance during Elections: 2000-2023**

A persisting element in this period is the claim that every election since 2000 has been 'stolen', either by overt violence or chicanery. These critics are usually privy to information buttressing their claims' veracity and are quite public with them. But although they and the party and processes they support have come close to winning elections, and even entered a 'transitional inclusive government' when regional and continental organisations despaired of ZANU-PF 'mid-election' (before a run-off) violence in 2008, they made little headway during the last quarter



of a century. They have not constructed a counter-hegemony, which involves a careful blend of the political strategies and tactics with ideological content coherent and strong enough to compete with – let alone supersede – the ruling party's combination of force and persuasion, even as life chances for the vast majority of Zimbabweans have fallen precipitously. Part of that process would be a subtle measure of the ebbs and flows of the past coercion-consent quotients to see when and calculate how effective interventions could have been better made, during election times and after.

The graph indicates a very rough measure of that ratio.<sup>2</sup> Factors to be included range wider than the cold numbers of murder of highly placed politicians to death's quotidian (Fontein 2022) and bodily harm. They should include rallies – a crowded combination of coerced bus rides, forced conversions, corruption by chicken and chips, and religious incantations (Gonda 2023; Lewanika 2023). The state media's positive propaganda and negative warnings also go beyond physical altercations: when the rhetoric is laced with ferocity where does that fit on a chart such as this? Public opinion surveys measure widespread perceptions of fear, often by proxy (Booyesen 2014). A key element, as Musekiwa (2021) charts, is how states mete coercion to human rights organisations using legal and financial roadblocks to abduction and more.

Such a many-faceted chart could be augmented by analysis of ZANU-PF's vulnerability to challenges, that relation to violence, and when the most opportune counter-hegemonic moments faced the MDC or its successor, the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC). Crude coercion does not always indicate strength, but challengers and their allies must confront rulers with careful calculation. Were the Democratic Resistance Committees (DRCs) the MDC set up in the late 2000s, for example, effective? Or did they give the party-state the opportunity to label the MDC and its 'imperialist sponsors' as violent democracy disrupters (Fielding 2015; Xinhua 2020). Probably the most obvious time when that challenge presented itself was in 2008; faced with the loss of its run-off presidential challenge ZANU-PF chose a campaign of terror. The MDC pulled out of the election, and the SADC (read Thabo Mbeki) negotiated transitional inclusive government (aka Government of National Unity) was born (Raftopoulos 2013b). All elections since, even the coup's pretence of a united government on the horizon, have been cast in that shadow. Were the opposition's choices to exit the election and then to join the GNU correct?

In brief, the chart indicates that election periods emphasise the coercive end of Zimbabwe's hegemonic spectrum. That plane is high in any case: consider,

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2 Far more sophisticated representations are in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project's site (ACLEED 2018, 2023), but there are problems with the collection of data in such places as Zimbabwe.

for example, the necessity to buy a ZANU-PF card to get food aid, the common practice of bribery at roadblocks (increasing again since a marked decline after the coup and the police lost their monopoly on that: now soldiers seem to be taking that space), and the proliferation of ZANU-PF affiliated war-lords and their gangs in the 'high density suburbs'. However, even this preliminary effort makes it clear that violence increases with elections and other moments of political change such as a coup (which in the Zimbabwean case did not take many lives).

The new millennium failed to introduce free, fair, and peaceful elections to Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF's February 2000 constitutional referendum failed. War veteran-inspired land invasions accelerated as the mid-year elections neared. The Zimbabwean army, mired in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's war, stripped the fiscus while enriching many high-ranking soldiers and their relatives. Two journalists were jailed and tortured for reporting the body count and a rumoured coup. A new party full of enthusiasm was ready to take over. Inflation rose; the local dollar fell. This journal's first edition published an article by the leader of the EISA election observers to the June parliamentary contest: David Pottie (2001, p. 64) counted 'over thirty persons ... killed and many more reportedly harassed, beaten and forced to engage in partisan activities (some 5,000 according to human rights organisations)'. The MDC scored just four seats less than a majority of the 120 while ZANU-PF gained 51.7% of the vote – and chose thirty more members. Official counters admitted to friends that their job description included cheating (Fieldwork 2000).

ZANU-PF had to work quickly to avert the previously unthinkable. Enroute to the 2002 election – this one for presidents alone – the 'opposition' *Daily News* offices were bombed in April 2000 and nine months later so were its presses, while 'war vets' beat up the paper's vendors (Meldrum 2001). The party-state's newspaper cartoons veered to violence: a series of eight in *The Herald* (6 March 2002) started with a sketch of one man aiming an AK-47-like rifle toward a horizon and another below it ploughing happily: 'plots to kill or plots to till' hinted at the voters' choice. Two more illustrated Morgan Tsvangirai's subservience to 'Tony Bliar', while more compared the colonialists' 'sellouts' to Judas Iscariot: 'ZIMBABWE WILL NEVER BE A COLONY AGAIN'.

More worrisome, the Public Order and Security Act criminalised gatherings of more than five people and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act required journalists' registration and promised to prosecute 'false information'. ZANU-PF's 'Green Bombers' trashed MDC offices and homes in the cities. While sealing off rural areas they killed white farmers and high school headmasters (Kwashirai 2023, pp. 161-174; Solidarity Peace Trust 2003). A couple of weeks before election day public television broadcast a doctored video showing MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai plotting to kill Robert Mugabe. It became the main evidence in Tsvangirai's treason trial. The number of polling stations in urban areas was



reduced significantly while rural ones popped up like mushrooms: thus urban MDC supporters waited in long queues, even during the two further days ordered by the courts. A Congress of South African Trade Unions observation mission was sent packing. Later, another, led by two South African High Court judges, criticised the election and recorded 107 political killings since 2000. It was kept under wraps for more than a decade, until the *Mail and Guardian* won its court case in 2014. Only 56% of the 5 049 815 registered voters marked their ballots: Mugabe took home 1 685 212 votes while Tsvangirai was left with 1 258 401.

The parliamentary election at the end of March 2005 was notable mainly for the near introduction of V-11 forms and for the post-election violence of *Operation Murambatsvoina*. The latter, smashing (informal) houses and kiosks and displacing around 700 000 people, demonstrated the propensity of ZANU-PF to vicious vengeance at the end of a humiliating experience (Raftopoulos 2006). The former began a long process of electoral transparency unfolding for two decades – in 2023 still the unresolved thorn in ZANU-PF's side. Also notable was the election of the former information minister and campaign manager Jonathan Moyo as an independent: he had been expelled from the ruling party for his involvement in ZANU-PF's internal ethnic competition as Mugabe's retirement became a possibility. This showed the factional fissures that would fester until the 2017 coup (Moore 2022a, pp. 133-139).

SADC passed fairly comprehensive election protocols in 2004. The V-11 rule, perhaps most important among them, was incorporated in Zimbabwe's 14 February 2005 Electoral Act (Veritas 2018, 2023 &b). Under it, the presiding officer of every polling station must record the station's results on the V-11 form. All the parties' agents, the candidates, election observers and officials have the right to check it and make copies. The form must also be posted for the public to inspect and photograph. It must record all the ballot papers and their serial numbers received before the polling started. Those unused, cancelled, and unaccounted for must be recorded along with each candidate's votes and the spoilt papers. However, during the election at the end of March only a few of these forms were posted on the polling station walls before being sent to regional centres; many were never posted (US Embassy in Zimbabwe 2005).

In August 2004 the MDC stated that it would boycott the 2005 elections due to ZANU-PF's continued intimidation, restricted media access, corruption, and propensity to stall registration and rig voters' rolls. It demanded full adherence to the new SADC guidelines (Matlosa 2005). However, incumbent and aspiring MPs registered dissent. Contests for the primaries in such a void were vicious. Just a few weeks before the poll, Tsvangirai announced that the MDC would join. That did not give much time for a 'real' campaign to ensue. The MDC split soon after over the question of whether or not to participate in elections for the Senate:

more would follow. The 'quitting conundrum' would be repeated in some of the succeeding elections, most importantly in 2013.

The March 2008 election – the first to 'harmonise' municipal, parliamentary, and presidential contests – indicated electoral horror most clearly (Moore 2022a, pp. 31-33, 145-146). Visible violence started with extreme beatings, including Morgan Tsvangirai, at a 'prayer meeting'. V-11s were allowed. Their indications encouraged MDC secretary-general Tendai Biti to announce victory with a couple of points over 50%: this was treasonable so he was jailed. A hurried meeting of the election NGOs announced Tsvangirai's presidential victory of just under 48% to Mugabe's 43 plus. Six weeks later, the Zimbabwe Election Commission reached the same tally, thus confirming a run-off. Thabo Mbeki (appointed mediator after the prayer meeting melee) and his advisors took some time to decide whether to avoid the predictable violence by forcing a temporary government with the two main parties or to let the constitution stay its course. The latter choice led to Zimbabwe's Joint Operations Command killing nearly 500 people and beating many hundreds more, including those who had voted for ZANU-PF MPs but not Mugabe. Norma Kriger (2008, p. 4) noted the irony of the V-11s: they 'enabled the ruling party to target those villages or farms or resettlement areas which had voted for the opposition'. The GNU – in itself, an indication of hegemonic disarray within a 'Caesarist' interregnum (Antonini 2019) – cast a cloud over Zimbabwean politics, not so much in and of itself, but because the MDC worked it poorly. Its most pronounced achievement was to reduce Zimbabwe's astronomical hyperinflation by introducing a 'multi-currency' regime, over which the American dollar presided, thus negating ZANU-PF's sovereignty.

The 2013 contest was notable for the extra million or so ballots and tricks provided by Nikuv, an Israeli election management firm (Matyszak 2017). It also demonstrated the difficulties with which even determined regional actors could change ZANU-PF's propensity to rule by any necessary means. Lindiwe Zulu was the most visible member of SADC's three-strong committee established to oversee the GNU's progress to decent elections. At a June 2013 SADC meeting in Maputo she opined that Zimbabwe might hold off its elections because the ZEC had yet to follow the route prescribed on the electoral roadmap. Less publicly, Zulu offered to help the MDC if they boycotted the election, as they had done a decade before. Mugabe told the then South African president Zuma to call off his 'street-woman': the leader of the supposed regional hegemon agreed.

The July 2018 election was carried out in the shadow of the previous year's coup (Moore 2018a; Tendi 2020) and stillborn hopes for a new GNU. November 2017's presidential adieu saw relatively few killings, though, perhaps the violence inherent in this mode of succession simmered until the election climaxed.

If ZANU-PF's old guard changed its ruler with a coup, with Morgan Tsvangirai's death in February 2018 the MDC's Nelson Chamisa also side-

stepped the party's constitution to slip into the leader's position (Marszyk 2018). His combination of religiosity, populism, and a certain stubbornness may have introduced a new mode of hegemonic construction. ZANU-PF's consistent threat of violence was only realised, however, when on the day after the election soldiers shot demonstrators and bystanders during the counting. The 155 to 53 seat parliamentary victory for ZANU-PF had been counted quickly, but the presidential tally was taking longer than expected. Before the 50.8% victory could be announced, soldiers shot and killed at least six demonstrators and bystanders. Mnangagwa invited former South African president Kgalema Motlanthe to chair an investigative commission, but its recommendations have been ignored.

The (probably partially) planned chaos in January 2019's *jambanja* (chaotic violence) confirmed the ruling party's coercive continuity. A stayaway protesting about increasing fuel prices erupted into days of riots amidst crude military / police action. It signalled the conclusion of post-election warnings. At least 17 people were shot, 17 women raped, and countless more hit, battered, and marched en masse to jail and trials (Moore 2022b). Uncertainty reigned – and still does – over who started and finished it. Mnangagwa's midnight flight to Belarus and Davos (Davos cancelled at the last minute) added doubts to the 'Second Republic' pronouncements of peace, harmony, and business openness. The MDC-Alliance's successor, the Citizens' Coalition for Change, was constantly bothered by ZANU-PF's attempts to dismember it: on one occasion a ZANU-PF-supported splinter persuaded the courts of its right to the MDC-A moniker and its headquarters. The police helped the takeover. However, by-elections in March 2022 confirmed the CCC's ability to persuade voters of its lineage (Moore 2022a, pp. 201-207).

What then could be new about the 2023 iteration of Zimbabwe's electoral interregna?

### ELECTION 2023: A DIFFERENT DÉJÀ VU

As indicated at this article's beginning, Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa announced his party's electoral *fait accompli* to the world's highest political assembly.<sup>3</sup> But within a few weeks of his return, an apparently self-proclaimed and suspected ZANU-PF proxy CCC secretary-general advised parliament's clerk to remove 14 CCC MPs, because they had been 'imposed' during primaries. Mnangagwa slated the by-elections for 7 December (Ndebele 2023c). The CCC (or its leader) may have realised too late that it should have clearly defined structures

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3 Thabo Leshilo of *The Conversation* commissioned my article on the election (Moore 2023a) and helped develop the categories of intimidation, judicial and electoral management, regional responses, and opposition strategies. They can be seen implicitly and retrospectively in this paper's earlier sections. They are more explicit in this one.

in a 'movement' on the way to institutionalisation, and to run tight primaries. More immediately, if the CCC lost even four of its 73 seats to ZANU-PF the ruling party would have 140 – enough to reach the 2/3 needed to start constitutional changes. That could in the long run gain more terms for the current president and give ZANU-PF more time to plan for that future.

### *Intimidation*

Since the 2017 coup and its post-election and 'stayaway' warning in early 2019, ZANU-PF administered more sticks than carrots as a deterrent to engagement in opposition politics. Glanis Changachirere (2020) has informed us of Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimhiri, and Netsai Marova's mid-2020 abduction and trials, emphasising their gendered nature. They are not the only ones by far and these are not restricted to women: male journalists and research assistants fill the enforcers' rosters (SABC & Reuters 2020; York 2021). Moreover the ZANU-PF regime often accuses the victims of arranging their own kidnappings and beatings.

It is hard to draw time-lines between this violence and pre-election warnings. A month after the August 2023 election, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum released a study of pre-election violence in Zimbabwe from January 2021 to mid-July 2023 (ZHRF 2023). It records 1 463 cases, 63% of which are serious, ranging from abduction to arson and murder to rape. If intimidation is added the percentage rises to 75%. The report charts a clear linear progression up to mid-2023, thus approaching election time. It also notes that particular forms of public violence – like the nightly *pungwes* during the liberation war – have a mass effect. This would factor into measurements of hegemonic construction.

The study might include the murder on 24 May 2022 of Moreblessing Ali,<sup>4</sup> a CCC activist in Nyatsimbe, outside Chitungwiza, the second largest city in Zimbabwe albeit considered a large township. The 'audience' for this brutal murder and its aftermath would have been psychologically injured in many ways. This most horrific murder indicates a number of contributing factors to ZANU-PF's systemic and long-evolving coercive forms: the imbrication of township warlords linked to the ruling party; the supercilious, dismissive and deceitful discursive style of journalists working for the party-state; the politics of the police in such cases; how voices for justice are silenced; and the entanglement of these factors with elections. If ZANU-PF had intended to keep the murder silent as a warning to CCC activists alone, they did not know that Ms Ali's London-based brother Washington was still an active CCC member. When he realised that she was missing after a severe beating he moved his Zimbabwean comrades to public

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4 Elaborated in Moore 2023b (pending).

action. He asked lawyer Job Sikhala, then a CCC MP and the party's Deputy National Chairman, to assist finding his sister.

Sikhala is a long-time, oft-tortured and imprisoned activist and contrarian on-again/off-again MDC, then CCC MP until the 2023 election. When Ms Ali's body was found more than two weeks later – in three pieces in the well of a local ZANU-PF warlord's mother – he took the case further, with all its political overtones. As soon as the case was thus publicised, the ZANU-PF press claimed the CCC was politicising an otherwise ordinary but sad example of gender violence. Given the crafting of Zimbabwean law, Sikhala's speechmaking verged too easily toward incitement.

Justice in Sikhala's case has meant, at the time of writing, nearly 16 months in prison. Arriving in Chikurubi prison in June 2022, as of May 2023 he was indicted on charges of obstructing justice, only to face further charges for inciting violence and disorderly conduct and thus rest in remand without bail. Prisoners are not allowed to contest parliament. His party's reluctance to support him enthusiastically – and its long history of division – gave the state media and other political commentators room to suggest he leads a faction readying to depose CCC leader Nelson Chamisa (*Herald* 2023a), and for him to fear betrayal (*Newshawks* 2023). Thus murder and intrigue appear to merge in pre-electoral politics, combining gangsters' criminality, judicial bias, calculated police negligence, and the state media's 'fake news'.

Closer to election time, a CCC activist marching to a rally in Glen Norah, one of Harare's townships, was stoned to death by ten ZANU-PF youths. Their leader, a well-known activist, was videoed declaring that the police dared not arrest him. The ten were arrested, but as of this writing there are no media reports of a trial (Ndoro 2023).

After the election, there were no encounters or shootings between demonstrators and soldiers as in 2018. However, visitors to township pubs were subjected to rough treatment from unidentified people with guns and brand-new uniforms. On 3 September Womberaishe Nhende, a CCC councillor in Glen Norah, and fellow activist Sonele Mukuhlani, were abducted, whipped, injected with poison, and left naked. Douglas Coltart and Tapiwa Muchineripi, their lawyers, were arrested when visiting them in hospital.

The Forever Associates of Zimbabwe (FAZ) indicate a new, or more sophisticated twist to Zimbabwean pre-election politics, blending the Mnangagwa cult's networking politics with intra- and inter-party intimidation. FAZ has been around for a while but found new strength and possibilities with ZANU-PF's need for a polished version of the Green Bombers, a Hitleresque 'national service' for youth in the 2000s (*Newsday* 2022). Now reconfigured in the NGO mould, albeit with rough edges, it's a true-blue ZANU-PF mix of young semi-intellectuals and aspirant entrepreneurs needing connections to the ZANU-PF

state (Doran 2023). A plethora of professional and charity organisations replicate this path, presumably without the intimidation quotient (Gonda 2023). Funds from the Central Intelligence Organisation helped the start-up, led by a retired CIO director (Matiashe 2023a; *Nehanda Radio* 2023). Its website promises to ‘dominate and saturate the environment while denying the same to opponents’ (Faztrust 2023). Some of those adversaries included elements of the ‘Generation 40’ faction that lost the coup, as they tried to re-join the ZANU-PF fray during the primaries (Matiashe 2023b).

During the contest for the nation, observers were quite aware of FAZ intimidation, often with chiefs’ help in the rural areas and perhaps with access to data available from the voters’ roll in the cities (Matiashe 2023b). By 11 July, Healing Zimbabwe Trust recorded ‘at least 40 cases of intimidation, threats and coercion in the past week’ targeting CCC supporters, with the ‘shadowy FAZ, heading its list of traditional leaders and war veterans’ (Munhende 2023). Sixty-eight of the 200 respondents questioned by the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute spread across ten districts had seen FAZ – ‘a shadowy and quasi-securocratic body composed of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA), War Veterans, Zanu-PF Youth Militia and vigilante groups’ – in action: 65% of the 200 said FAZ was intimidatory and 68% of them said they would be uncomfortable ‘associating and voting for the opposition’ (ZDI 2023, pp. iv, 21, 22, 24).

During polling time the FAZ members operated ‘illegal entrance and exit polls’ (Ndebele 2023a). This inspired a violent reaction as CCC people took umbrage and turned over a few FAZ tables at one station. CCC activists asked the police to remove the FAZ tabulators at another – successfully (Fieldwork 2023). Whether such openness ‘backfired’ on Mnangagwa, as one journalist opined (Buwerimwe 2023) is debatable. Further reports implicate FAZ’s tampering with the actual operations of polling stations in order to forestall the V-11 process (see section on V-11s).

No matter the exposure of the media and human rights organisations and observer missions, very little happens when the regime can use force to negate consequence.

### *Corruption and the Courts*

Many carrots have been offered throughout ZANU-PF’s history of electioneering. According to a ZDI report (2023, p. 40), ‘food aid, agricultural inputs, cash handouts, bicycles, and fishing boats’ wooed their way into the ruling party’s mode of agricultural accumulation. While farmers were offered maize seed in time for planting, those higher up the persuasion pole received immediate recognition for past services and evidence of more to come. Judges received ‘“housing loans”



of US\$400,000 in June 2023, CIO chiefs got US\$350,000, MPs received \$40,000 while cabinet ministers pocketed 12.5 times that' (ZDI 2023, p. 40).

Such offerings do build up a modicum of consent, but it's in that nether zone of which Gramsci spoke. Judges thus encouraged are likely to take a serious view of the state's account of the transgressions of those spreading opposition talk to imperialists – recently criminalised in the 'Patriotic Act' (Sithole 2023). Whether that reaches the 'treasonous' charge remains to be seen, as indeed is the presidential signing of the NGO Bill, remaining a Damocles sword as the 2023 parliament begins. These bribes bridge the consent-coercion gap: the bigwigs' loyalty is purchased, they participate in coercion. As Gramsci warned, even at this elite level they bear little resemblance to the 'moral leadership' that plays a leading role in active hegemony. It's a measure of hegemony's absence.

### *Electoral Manipulation*

The previous year's delimitation exercise – the first in nearly a decade and a half – was primary among 'technical' issues such as ZEC's clearly non-independent makeup, sloppy voters' rolls and many names missing at the polling stations. As is common across the world, the redrawing of constituency boundaries gives incumbent regimes the chance to gerrymander in their favour, and is bound to upset a myriad of other actors (for example chiefs in Zimbabwe). Unsurprisingly, given urbanites' history of voting against ZANU-PF while their rural cousins face many pressures to follow the incumbent's line, the ruling party (to be precise, its appointees in ZEC) took the opportunity to expand city constituencies into peri-urban areas or the country (*Bulawayo24* 2023). This tactic coincided with a shortage of ballot papers at up to 75 urban polling stations: waits of over 12 hours were not unusual. In some cases voting was extended for another day. Not all those voters would return. Furthermore, the hasty delimitation exercise had left many in the wrong constituency, forced to walk long distances to see if they were registered elsewhere.

However, the ultimate test is the final vote. In the SADC countries following their 'development community's' 2004 electoral guidelines, that vote can be tabulated independently of their election commissions. Perhaps the V-11 forms are the best electoral signifier of collective endorsement that constitutes a good part of political hegemony.

### *The V-11 Forms*

As outlined above, the V-11 forms arose out of one of the more liberal moments of SADC. In 2008 their counting led to much discussion by election watchers, more counting by ZEC, and killing fields; but they did not seem to matter much

in the debates about the 2013 election. In 2018, the MDC claimed to have them in hand, but never showed them. MDC leader Chamisa spoke of a 'saver' that held the evidence, but it was never revealed. No one seems to know what a 'saver' is, or if it has anything to do with storing images. Some said that the 'saver' was a person, or a person who had it. Revealing the saver would lead to his or her death. Thus the 2018 legal challenge amounted to nothing. Election 2023 saw more hullabaloo about the magical process of retrieving and revealing these sheets of paper – except for the ZEC, which keeps them hidden or can't find them all. If ZEC wanted its elections to be considered legitimate, it would put them on its website immediately they arrive. But it does not, so the whole election remains suspicious.

If history reveals lessons to the opposition, getting a grip on V-11s is one of them. But this time, neither the CCC nor its civil society compatriots prepared for the task timeously. Zimbabwe's *gendarmes* raided two NGO election offices (they were working in the same hotel as the European Union election observers, all watched carefully by the CIO), took their equipment, and arrested over 40 of their members late on election night. It was thought that they had the results and would release them before ZEC did. It is unlikely that if they did have them they had enough time to save them.

There were other V-11 collectors who also lacked the time to gather and consolidate the approximately 12 000 V-11 forms. One group's App malfunctioned. At the end of August Freeman Chari (based in the USA) broadcast on his Twitter (or 'X') account that he had 11 500 V-11 images and would show them by the first of September, challenging ZEC to release its stash (Chari 2023). ZEC did not release its account and neither did he. But a few weeks later – too late to beat ZEC's announcement and the president's inauguration – he and other V-11 gatherers managed to collect nearly 89% of the forms. However, even with projections from the remaining stations the margin of error was too large to determine whether Chamisa or Mnangagwa gained more or less than 50%, although it is certain that Chamisa gained more than the 44% he was granted in the official count. Thus it cannot be determined if a run-off would have been necessitated. The CCC (or Nelson Chamisa himself, since the decision-making structure in the 'movement' is unclear) decided not to release this information although some advisers thought those numbers would contribute to CCC's credibility (Pigou 2023). ZANU-PF acted quickly enough, without the V-11s but within the week allowed for any challenges, to capture the prize.

There was also a coercive side to the immediate V-11 process this time. Reports are that FAZ cadres visited a significant number of rural polling stations early on election day and told the officials to give up their V-11 forms. These stations recorded upwards of 90% victories for ZANU-PF (Fieldwork 2023). Perhaps that is why not even ZEC can reveal an accurate count. Further reports say that

Nhende and Mukuhlani, the men abducted just after the election, were too close for comfort to the offices holding the opposition's V-11s.

In future the V-11s may be considered the most important part of the election process, overlaying the hegemony's dialectic of coercion and consent. This will be apparent to all parties interested in the final measure of transparency.

### *The Observers and the Opposition*

Preliminary reports of most of the Western observers were announced at a press conference on the afternoon of the 25 August. George Charamba – once the state's information chief, when he penned sardonic columns under the name of Nathaniel Manheru, and now deputy chief secretary to the president and cabinet – warned *The Herald's* readers more than a month previously to be aware of observers 'audaciously interfering' by 'openly hobnobbing with some presidential candidates' and to expect their quick deportation if they strayed from their neutral remit. The 'presence of people who have worked against elected governments across the continent' in the 'huge' western delegations had 'raised eyebrows', Charamba's report suggested. He warned them 'not to stray from their mandate of observing elections'. If they did, 'Government will not hesitate to kick them out ... they are skating on very thin ice' (*Herald* 2023b). Charamba took special note of the European Union and the Carter Center's delegation (two members of the latter having been denied entry; thirty were later 'un'-accredited) even listing many of the latter's members and their alleged democracy-destabilising activities on the continent. Such rhetoric and action inspired UK-based professor of democracy Nic Cheeseman (2023) to question the worth of such missions. As if taking their cue, most of the observers listed his observations of what would go wrong, and more.

Given the long list of quite visible lacunae in Zimbabwe's electoral probity, Charamba's implied predictions, and the problems that even a professor from afar could foresee, most of the 'western' reports were critical (the Commonwealth seemed friendlier, perhaps because its Secretariat had yet to decide to re-admit Zimbabwe to the post-Empire club). Various among them added the issues of late ballots; ill-trained party agents at the voting stations (some did not know what party they represented); some officials too eager to 'help' elderly or physically challenged voters; Tinashe Chitsunge's murder and other intimidation; gender representation issues; FAZ; and the excessively high registration fees for entry (US\$20,000 for the presidency for example, up from \$1,000 in 2018) (Carter Center 2023; EU 2023; The Commonwealth 2023).

SADC's unequivocal condemnation, joining the usual critics, was the biggest surprise (SADC 2023a&b). The following *Sunday Mail* pictured a jovial Joaquim

Chissano, former Mozambican president and currently leading a commission advising on Zimbabwe's debt restructuring, with Mnangagwa. 'I never heard of an observer mission criticising a sovereign country's legislative framework', he said, referring to the mission head's attacks on ZEC, the Patriotic Bill, and the judiciary. He then repeated his account of advising Mnangagwa on some of the missions' issues and had been assured that 'he will study this and see how this can be helpful for the improvement of our governance'. These promises are required for the arrears and debt clearance programme, so that promise should be made, but not raise hopes on its realisation (Matabvu & Kafe 2023; Ndlovu 2023).

Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ziyambi Ziyambi attempted to dampen fears about the mission's effect. He claimed that others in the mission whose 'thinking is totally divorced from that of the head' had 'disowned' the report and they might 'put the head of mission to task to say that let's do this professionally without deviating from our mandate'. If not, he reminded readers that the SADC Troika (the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation) would review the report's 'accuracy and objectivity', recommend changes to the mission, which would then revise it accordingly 'before the final report is published'. Other media and analysts were quick to note that these interventions revealed a SADC split between the liberationists and the liberals. Mission head Dr Nevers Mumba was in the latter camp, having been the Zambian vice-president under Levi Mwanawasa, no friend of Zimbabwe's brand of governance.

Barely a month later, *The Herald's* anonymous journalists uncovered nefarious plots supposedly implicating Mumba, the EU, and the Carter Center in a plethora of conspiratorial efforts to 'provide a basis for the denouncement of the polls'. The EU in particular was accused of being 'both a referee and player during the elections as they nicodemously funded Mr Chamisa's election campaign, while at the same time claimed the role of an unbiased umpire' (*Herald* 2023c).<sup>5</sup> Not much is done with such reports, given the long delay between the preliminary and final versions and SADC leaders tend not to listen to anyone but themselves. But the reports do stay on the record, singing well in unison. The SADC report may be ranked as one of the most important markers of change in this election. Its final rendition, cleared by the chair of SADC's politics, defence and security organ, is the same as the preliminary one (SADCb), thus nullifying Ziyambi's hopes. The 'liberationist' legacy may be losing its hegemonic shine. Even though this may be nothing more than a generational change as the warriors and those in the 'old guard' pretending to be so lose their lustre too, it's important.

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5 Nicodemus is often referred to in Zimbabwean politics when factionalism arises. Joshua Nkomo employed it in 1963, referring to those splitting from his party to form ZANU (Lewanika 2019, p. 107). More recent usage in the faction context includes ZANU-PF actors such as George Charamba (Gumbo 2016) and Christopher Mutsvangwa (Zindoga 2014).

The opposition thought that the SADC commission report would galvanise the region into a new and united defence of democracy. A committee of the region's wise elders might fly in and declare the election null and void (*eNCA* 2023), perhaps resurrecting a government of national unity melding the nation's political class into something like the transitional regime advocated for some years by the Platform for Concerned Citizens (Mandaza & Reeler 2023). A petition they circulated proposed setting up an eminent persons group that would negotiate the establishment of a transitional government comprising political parties and various civil society groups; this garnered 30 012 signatures at the time of writing (GGA 2023).<sup>6</sup> The CCC decided not to go to court to challenge the election, reversing 2018's decision. It decided to let its MPs go to parliament, although they boycotted its first post-election sitting— and a few weeks later had to deal with its recalled members.

#### SO WHAT'S NEW?

To many intents and purposes, this election was *plus ça change...la meme chose* and *déjà vu*. But as Lewanika (2019) asserts, ZANU-PF never remains the same. It learns lessons from every election, although it may not apply them consistently or with linearity. ZANU-PF appears to have made its coercion and corruption work more smoothly and efficiently than in the past. The coercive plane is higher on average, without the peaks. But it is too soon after the coup to say, and intra-party ructions may still implode with violence.

The Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum report and others like it should be able to examine these moves carefully and attune their constituency to alter the coercion-consent spectrum in the latter direction.

The opposition learns too. It has a new name, and its loss of strong trade unions as a base may have rendered it to more populism than in its past. Perhaps the V-11 lesson has been learned: grasping that opportunity for transparency can spread to other aspects of the electoral process and society at large. But more importantly, the CCC's organisational structures must emerge through visible democratic processes at the next congress. They are essential in their own right, to mitigate against one-man rule. But without them, the party is also drawn too easily into crises such as recalling hastily nominated candidates.

More broadly, and in line with Gramsci's analytical mode, does election 2023 offer empirical means of judging the balance of coercion and consent? On

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<sup>6</sup> I signed it –perhaps thinking I am part of the 'international community' entreated to support the initiative – with a caveat. The only group of 'eminent people' I recall managing a transition to a transition in Africa was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1960 Mobutu co-opted a group of university students to the General Commissioners' Council, which lasted until the end of January 1961 (Monavale 2010).

the coercive side, the long history of murder and intimidation continues. Urban gangsters' links to the leading ZANU-PF emerged in the early 2000s but are more visible than ever (Oosterom & Gukurume 2022), adding to the hustling side of economy and polity. If economic suffering continues, so will this – and if ZANU-PF feels it necessary to repeat 2005's 'clean-up' or 2019's unleashing it will have plenty of human ammunition. Adding this to the legalised restrictions on civil liberties brings more coercive elements to the ZANU-PF package. Gerrymandering is more like sly cheating than coercive, but the inconvenience of shifting boundaries, the slow arrival of ballots, and incomplete voter rolls dampen the freedom that elections should bring.

The two-sided FAZ – one like an NGO and the other like the Green Bombers – indicated a new style of election preparation and 'management' as well as a way to co-opt youthful entrants to the political and economic world of its elders. So far it suggests more force than gentle persuasion.

The SADC report should strengthen the consent pole. Yet this perception could be teleological and Panglossian. As Chimedza (2023b) observes, the accumulating classes in the region have close links that may overcome 'liberal' political pretence: ZANU-PF may just have to lubricate them better.

All in all the V-11 lessons should add the most weight to the poles of persuasion.

Zimbabwe's interregna among parties, generations, and rural and urban modes of belonging (though integrated in many ways) will take a long time to coalesce coherently and consensually. Elections will be nodal points of all these contradictions, exacerbated as they are by the shifting global political economy beyond such a small country's control. These elections will signpost modes characterised by 'low intensity democracy' or conflict sufficiently under international and regional radar to register meaningful intervention, or 'autocratisation' in which an active and consensual hegemony will simmer in perpetual contention instead of cooking up a new brew (Beardsworth, Siachiwena & Sishuwa 2022).

At a more theoretical level, does this Gramscian analytical mode offer a wider, more contextual – and less teleological – way of judging elections and their effects than current analyses of electoral means to a representative end? And will this lead to greater possibilities for the emergence of less coercion and chicanery as Africa, and indeed the world, search for a stronger participatory mode of power than we see today? If equipped with more sophisticated means of measurement, it might. As for what Gramsci would have hoped to emerge from these uncertain interregna, that remains to be told.



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