Institutional Obstacles to Power-Sharing in Zimbabwe:
Civilian-Military Relations, 2008-2013

Michael Bratton,
Michigan State University

and

Eldred Masunungure,
University of Zimbabwe

Introduction

When political adversaries in Africa find themselves locked in intractable political conflicts, power sharing sometimes offers a path to peaceful coexistence. A substantial theoretical literature points to the advantages of proportional, consociational and cooperative institutions (Lijphart 1985, 1999, 2008, Reynolds 1999, Norris 2005, Jarstad, 2008, Gates and Strom 2009). In practice, too, the formation of governments of national unity (GNUs) with top offices allotted among former rivals has proven a useful institutional device in a variety of situations. In South Africa, for example, an interim coalition government (1994-1996) provided a bridge from a divisive liberation struggle to multiracial majority rule. And in Sierra Leone, a peace agreement that temporarily incorporated rebel leaders into the formal structures of state power (1999-2002) helped to terminate one of the African continent’s most brutal civil wars.

But one size does not fit all. In recent years, international and domestic actors have tried to extend mechanisms of power sharing to cover the problem of Africa’s failed democratic elections. This inappropriate stretching of the power-sharing concept unintentionally generates negative results. When, for example, disputes over the validity of the 2007 vote in Kenya escalated into a paroxysm of ethnic fighting, international negotiators led by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan coaxed reluctant rivals into an awkward coalition government (2008-2013). Politicians who had previously been antagonists colluded in the GNU to form a new alliance, win the next election, and evade the consequences of fomenting violence. Thus the seemingly benign institutional arrangements of power sharing allowed the retention of power by leaders who had lost an election and enabled them to reorganize politically and to shield themselves from accountability.

As in Kenya, power-sharing in Zimbabwe – the subject of this paper – was triggered by a disputed election. In the country’s June 2008 presidential contest, incumbent Robert Mugabe bludgeoned his way back into office but, in the process, lost international and domestic legitimacy. Forced by neighbors in the region to cohabit with an erstwhile opponent (2008-2013), he nonetheless rode roughshod over the terms of a power-sharing agreement by refusing to surrender the coercive powers of the state. The case of Zimbabwe draws attention to civilian-military relations as a key institutional factor accounting for the success or failure of power-sharing experiments. With broader reference, Mathurin Houngnikpo observes that “military acceptance of civilian authority – the doctrine of civilian control – remains a missing piece of Africa’s democratic transition puzzle” (2013, 3). Zoltan Barany concurs: “democratizers must ensure that the army is loyal to them before they can attend to the many tasks they need to accomplish” (2012, 340).
Framework

Under which conditions, then, can power sharing resolve conflicts and facilitate democratic accountability? Certainly, any power-sharing deal must be inclusive of all major interest groups in society. It also helps if agreement arises primarily from indigenous initiatives rather than being driven from abroad by external third parties. And the credibility of leadership commitments is essential; all parties must be sincere in pledging to honor the terms of agreement and be able to convince rivals of their trustworthiness.

But institutional design matters too, of which three dimensions are emphasized here. First is the scope of the power-sharing settlement. Is it a purely political deal, or does it also comprehensively address economic and security interests? Hartzell and Hoddie (2003) suggest that the comprehensive nature of negotiated peace agreements influences the subsequent durability of order. If the participants agree to allocate power across various realms – territorial, economic, and military – peace agreements are likely to last longer than if they focus on political decision-making alone. The inclusion of assurances over multiple dimensions of power enables participants to gain a collective sense of security and guarantees against possible failure of the accord.

Second are the incentives for cooperation. Does every party to an agreement have reason to believe that they have more to gain from abiding by institutional rules than engaging in violence? Power sharing is difficult following civil conflict because military enemies and prospective governmental partners are often one and the same. Trust between political adversaries is hard to establish if each has used lethal force against the other. As Ian Spears puts it, “in civil war contexts, power sharing is equated with making a deal with the devil and thus such deals, even when they are forged, are unlikely to last” (2002, 127). Other analysts even suggest that power sharing in the name of peace actually encourages certain leaders, usually but not always insurgents, to resort to violence as an effective means of staking a claim on power (Tull and Mehler 2005, Mehler 2009).

Finally, perhaps most important is the institutional power balance. How is decision-making authority distributed among parties? In particular, who controls the armed forces and related agencies of coercion? Do a dominant set of actors enjoy other resource advantages? As George Tsebelis argues, “policy outcomes will vary depending on who controls political power as well as where the status quo is…All political institutions (consist of) a series of veto players – actors whose agreement is required for a change to the status quo” (2002, 17-18). The larger the number of veto players, the more strategic their location in the decision-making process, and the wider the ideological distance among them, the
more likely that the status quo will prevail. In the extreme, powerful veto players may act as “spoilers”, who are “leaders or factions hostile to a peace agreement and willing to use violence to undermine it…A total spoiler…sees power as indivisible, holds immutable preferences, and will take strategic advantage of any inducement” (Stedman, Rothchild and Couzens, 2002, 3, 12). Written contracts and confidence-building measures are inadequate to deter spoilers who are intent on wrecking an agreement. Absent a major or regional power with superior lethal capabilities and a vital security interest in resolving conflict, power-sharing may therefore go unimplemented.

This paper applies these propositions to an interlude of enforced coalition government in Zimbabwe (2008-2013). We argue that the institutional arrangements for Zimbabwe’s so-called “inclusive government” were undermined by a fundamental power imbalance. The power-sharing agreement never included a workable military pact to share the coercive powers of the state, which remained vested almost entirely in the hands of the incumbent executive president. Indeed, the commanders of the security sector – broadly defined to include the regular army and air force, the police and prisons service, the state intelligence agencies, and informal paramilitary and militia forces – never accepted the principle of power-sharing. They refused to recognize the authority of civilian leaders drawn from the country’s democratic movement and even on occasion reportedly challenged the leadership of the president himself. Far from being marginal, these spoilers were located at the heart of the power structure and did not hesitate to act as institutional veto players over any hints of meaningful political reform or democratic transition.

Background

In Zimbabwe, the elite coalition that led the country to national independence shared a common political culture that originated from several streams of authoritarianism (Masunungure 1998, 2004, Sachikonye 2011). First, based on pre-colonial political precedents, the new leaders gravitated towards new forms of chieftaincy and gerontocracy – the rule of elders. In searching for authentic institutions, they cultivated the convenient expectations that citizens would rally around a dominant party and that leaders would govern for life. Second, most members of the incoming elite suffered under the heavy hand of colonial repression having been detained, jailed or exiled for daring to organize nationalist resistance. These experiences imprinted in their minds an appreciation of the awesome power of the modern state, especially insofar as the law and military force could be used to stifle opposition political activity.

Third, and most importantly, Zimbabwe’s ruling coalition was forged in the crucible of national liberation war. The country’s guerrilla movements
“were not structured democratically. Authoritarian militarism was the chief and common characteristic…the movements paid scant attention to issues of individual and civic rights…and both advocated an implacable internal unity. The liberation struggle was fraught with intense intrigues, factionalism, violent purges and assassinations…there was a lot of witch-hunting, intimidation and torture, ‘enemies’ being summarily dealt with” (Masunungure 2004, 150-1).

The liberation war (1972-1979) was seminal in several respects. It gave birth to a coalition in which civilian and military elements were in periodic tension over political leadership. Indeed, at key moments in the life of Zimbabwe’s dominant party – including struggles over leadership choices, survival and successor – the military were just as likely to control civilians as vice-versa. The tense atmosphere of the liberation struggle encouraged a polarized outlook among leaders in which the political world was divided starkly between a small circle of trusted confidants and a hostile environment full of implacable “enemies.” Secrecy and loyalty were valued above all. This distrustful worldview was conducive to factionalism, splits and purges. Indeed, an inward-looking “laager” mentality – which ironically mirrored the defensive stance of the severely outnumbered white settlers of colonial Rhodesia – was not conducive to political inclusion.

In addition, the war also ensured that the ruling elite readily resorted to violence as a standard operating procedure. The logic of power politics suggested that the end (control of the state) justified the means (political violence), which in turn was justified in terms of revolutionary values. ZANU-PF drew from the guerrilla struggle the principal lesson of power politics, that is, that political power is rooted in military might. As Robert Mugabe believed:

“Our votes must go together with our guns; after all, any vote…shall have been the product of the gun. The gun, which provides the votes, should remain its security officer, its guarantor” (1980, 12, see also Meredith 2003).

Whenever the dominance of Zimbabwe’s new rulers was threatened, they defaulted to coercion – using both formal state forces and informal party militias – as a political trump card. The party inculcated a culture of violence by transmitting to young people an ideology of chimurenga (armed liberation struggle) as a just form of warfare. By encouraging violence, however, rulers exposed themselves to the risk of prosecution for rights abuses, either in national tribunals or an international criminal court. As such, repressive tactics were followed by leaders’ efforts to co-opt or emasculate institutions dedicated to legal redress. In short, elites with blood on their hands sought self-preservation by dismantling the rule of law.
Importantly, the top leaders in independent Zimbabwe used the sacrifices of the guerrilla fighters—“we died for this country”—as the ultimate justification for their own political and economic entitlement. As liberators, they claimed to own Zimbabwe in the fullest sense of the term, namely that the country belongs to them and not to anyone else. They trace political legitimacy not to universal political liberties and open elections—whose procedures, results and validity they readily dismiss—but to an armed victory in a liberation war. Thus, the leaders of a vanguard party have won not only a right to rule in perpetuity, or so goes the argument; they are also warranted to seize the nation’s wealth as they see fit. On the other side of the coin, leaders deemed not to have partaken in the liberation war, or not to have done so with sufficient vigor, are seen as permanently ineligible to enjoy the political and economic fruits of independence. In fact, by challenging the ruling coalition, they reveal themselves “sellouts,” that is, agents of imperialism (Mhanda 2011).

When confronting existential threats, leaders tend to govern by the methods they first used to ascend to power. Because ZANU-PF entered politics via a war of liberation its leaders intuitively revived the party’s civilian-military coalition from the war years and reverted to familiar techniques of strong-arm rule. Indeed, ZANU-PF never fully transformed itself from a guerrilla movement to a democratic political party. Once in power, however, a party of this sort has at its disposal the full array of state institutions inherited from colonial rule and adapted to its own defensive and extractive purposes. Especially when the regime is threatened, leaders accord special treatment to the armed forces in order to maintain their essential loyalty; even if civil servants sometimes go unpaid, every effort is made to compensate the military. But because autocrats rely heavily on repression, they inadvertently strengthen the hand of the armed forces, who, in turn, are able to claim a share, not only of economic bounty, but also of political power.

The Militarization of the State

Between 2000 and 2008 in Zimbabwe, military elements gradually inserted themselves into the governance of the state. The precipitating event was the first electoral defeat of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), when voters expressed a resounding “No” in a referendum on a government-sponsored constitution. In subsequent elections in 2000, 2002, and 2005, Robert Mugabe’s party lost votes to an emergent Movement for Democratic Change, whose largest faction was led by Morgan Tsvangirai. ZANU-PF interpreted these developments as an existential threat. In response to the rise of a popular democratic movement, the government reacted with a wave of land seizures, a takeover of the judiciary, and repressive laws to curb free expression and association. And, behind the scenes, decision-making authority that had previously resided with cabinet and
parliament was quietly shared with a national security organ known as the Joint Operations Command (JOC).

The JOC was an institutional inheritance from colonial rule. In 1977, at the height of the independence war, the Rhodesian government established a Joint Operations Command as a directorate for prosecuting counter-insurgency. Reporting directly to the prime minister, the JOC formulated national security strategy and provided coordinated command and control of military operations. Its structure was reproduced in six regional sub-JOCS defined to cover the areas where the fighting was most intense. When the Rhodesian commander of combined operations, General Peter Walls, along with the other top service chiefs, publicly vowed to defend the white-controlled military from takeover by a black government, they revealed themselves as “significant political figures” (Godwin and Hancock, 1993, 189, emphasis in original). In this regard, the JOC provided a blueprint, not only for the systematic deployment of armed forces against political opponents, but for the insertion of military commanders into the civilian policy-making process.

As adopted by ZANU-PF, the JOC became the country’s supreme, if unofficial decision-making body. Representing a small cabal of top political and military leaders, the JOC has not only routinely sidelined peak civilian institutions but at moments of crisis even rivaled the party Politburo. Its membership is composed of the top commanders of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF), Air Force of Zimbabwe (AFZ) Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and Zimbabwe Prison Service (ZPS). The ministers of defense and state security, as well as sometimes the chair of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans’ Association (ZNLWVA), also attend JOC meetings. Up until 2008, the Governor of the Reserve Bank, an ex officio member, was charged to provide JOC with revenue on demand, including for financing the security forces. Acting as a sort of war cabinet, the JOC meets regularly to develop strategic responses to national security crises, broadly defined, and reports directly to the president in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

After 2000, the JOC took de facto charge of key governance functions. It reportedly had nine task forces with responsibilities across all economic sectors, including the management of foreign exchange and monetary policy. While the minister of defense served as JOC chair, some reports suggest that the commanders of the ZDF and ZRP were the institution’s key movers and shakers. As military men gained influence over national security and related policies, the tables of civil-military relations were turned, with the military sometimes controlling civilians. This power inversion was most evident during periodic national elections: the JOC oversaw electoral campaigns by mobilizing ruling party turnout,
suppressing opposition involvement, and supervising the counting of votes and the announcement of results at the national electoral commission’s “command center.”

Central also to Zimbabwe’s “lost decade” of 2000-2008 was an escalation of political violence; by the peak crisis of mid-2008, the JOC put the party on a war footing. Abandoning any pretense of political tolerance, Mugabe and his military allies unleashed a no-holds-barred campaign against perceived threats to their permanent hold on power. The army and police provided logistical support to land invaders and a National Youth Service Program trained paramilitary hit squads known colloquially for the color of their uniforms as the “green bombers.” The Central Intelligence Organization abducted opposition activists for interrogation at secret torture sites. At the core, the regime came to rest on two interpenetrated organs of authority: the ruling party and the security forces. Political elites intentionally blurred the boundaries between party and state – both at the top, between ZANU-PF structures and the apparatus of national security, and at the bottom, between regular military forces and informal party militias. As a result, the military became politicized and the polity became militarized.

To understand the hardening of Zimbabwe’s electoral authoritarian regime during this period, it is helpful to recall how military commanders often challenged civilian leaders during the armed struggle. In other words, the military penetration of civilian politics actually started in the 1970s. These trends were subdued, however, during the 1980s and 1990s when a British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) introduced a professionalization program for the armed forces and ZANU-PF faced no credible threat. However, when a serious challenge emerged in the form of the MDC, the military leadership – most of whom still thought of themselves as Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) cadres in Zimbabwe Defence Force uniforms – reasserted an undying commitment to the party of liberation. This development coincided with – and probably also caused – the departure of BMATT in 2000 and, with it, a force for moderation.

Ever since the independence war, military commanders had sat on the party’s central policy-making bodies. Now they were seconded into strategic political posts formerly occupied by civilians. A quick count in early 2008 turned up 44 serving or retired military officers as cabinet ministers (4), permanent secretaries or directors (7), ambassadors (4), members of parliament (7) and managers or board members of parastatal corporations (22) (Zimbabwe Institute 2008). Among the penetrated ministries were foreign affairs, energy, transport, and justice, where the Attorney General – then Sobusa Gula-Ndebele – was a former director of military intelligence. Military leaders also appeared at the helm of strategic economic institutions like the National Oil Company of Zimbabwe (NOCZIM),
the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ), the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe (CBZ), and the Grain Marketing Board (GMB).

The political rise of the security elite imbued the management of the party-state with military-style “operations.” Without prior warning and with little advance planning, the regime would suddenly announce an emergency policy for implementation by army, police or armed auxiliaries. The arbitrary mode of governance that originated in the fast-track land reform program became standard operating procedure. Examples of such hierarchical JOC orders include “Operation Murambatsvina” (“Clean out the Trash”) in 2005, which was designed to stifle independent economic activity in the informal sector and punish as well as scatter the urban followers of the MDC. It was followed by “Operation Garikayi” (“Live Well”) a housing scheme directed by army commanders and ostensibly meant for displaced persons but which ended up benefiting members of the security forces and their extended families. Also in 2005, the army used “Operation Taguta” (“Eat Well”) to seize agricultural properties and equipment, effectively sidelining producers on commercial and public estates. They also took control of food distribution, forcing newly resettled farmers to plant maize at the expense of other crops and requiring delivery to the state marketing board at below-market prices, measures that proved deeply unpopular in rural areas.

The JOC and ruling party – whose roles and top personnel were deeply fused – relied upon the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) to provide surveillance of the population, on the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) to crack down on unauthorized political activity, and on the Zimbabwe Prisons Service to mete out enemy treatment to imprisoned members of the opposition and civil society. Other elements in this lethal mix included war veterans and the youth militias associated with the ruling party (Scarmecchia 2006). As these elements were incorporated into the security forces via army, prisons and police recruitment, the distinction between regular military and paramilitary functions became blurred. Because shadowy militias acted as proxies for the party-state, it was often unclear exactly who was ordering intimidation, abductions and mistreatment and who was executing these orders. Even when abuses by police or intelligence services were documented, perpetrators were rarely charged and invariably escaped penalty. In fact, not infrequently, the victims would actually be arrested at the point of reporting their ordeal. Thus, human rights violators in the political and security elites came to expect that they would be protected by a culture of impunity.

Zimbabwe’s lost decade ended in a profound economic and political crisis. By 2008, the economy had shrunk to half its previous size and inflation was so rampant as to be essentially unmeasurable. Producers and consumers alike faced extreme shortages of staple foods, motor fuels,
electricity, foreign currency, and even the country’s own worthless bank notes. Adding to this ruin were
the specters of AIDS and cholera, which contributed to plummeting life expectancy. Against this
background, it was hardly surprising that, in the first round of elections of March 2008, ZANU-PF lost
control of parliament and Mugabe polled fewer votes than Tsvangirai.

At this critical juncture, reliable accounts suggest that Zimbabwe’s hardliners –
comprising top military and political leaders – stepped in to quietly seize political control. The
commander of the ZDF, Constantine Chiwenga – backed by police chief Augustine Chihuri, air force
head Perrance Shiri, CIO director general Happyton Bonyongwe, and director of prisons, Paradzai
Zimondi—allegedly vetoed any concession of defeat. Instead, they insisted that Mugabe contest and win a
runoff election. Insiders report that the hardliners were under the command of Emmerson Mnangagwa, a
senior Politburo member and later Minister of Defence, who headed the JOC and served as the president’s
chief election agent for the duration of the subsequent presidential runoff campaign. With the party’s
military wing now in the lead, they resorted to the familiar tactics of armed struggle. The country was
divided into ten provincial command centers staffed by about two hundred serving army officers, who
were dispatched mainly to rural areas to supervise the operation of informal militias. The police complied
with orders to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to any politically motivated acts of abuse (Godwin 2010).

The rulers’ strategy for the runoff election – code-named “Operation Mavhotera Papi”
(How Did You Vote?) – was electoral cleansing. The objective was to kill MDC officials and polling
agents, displace qualified electoral officials like schoolteachers, and punish known MDC supporters, thus
eliminating the opposition as an electoral threat. The targets of intimidation were not so much the solid
MDC strongholds in the cities and the southwest, but politically contested areas in the country’s middle
belt and northeast where, in the first round of the 2008 election, voters had swung away from ZANU-PF
and towards MDC. The object of electoral cleansing was to create “no-go zones” where the ZANU-PF
monopoly could be enforced at the local level through the direct and demonstration effects of violence. In
a further sanction, the party ordered food relief withheld from opposition sympathizers.

Tsvangirai claimed that “the country has witnessed a de facto coup d’etat and is now
effectively run by a military junta.” More accurately, the resultant regime was a hybrid civilian-military
coalition. The visible leadership continued to be drawn from party ranks: Mugabe retained his position
as national president and Mnangagwa solidified his status as a leading contender for presidential
succession. In part to deflect international condemnation, the Zimbabwean generals seemingly preferred
to present a civilian political façade. But their apparent dominance in the tense 2008 period between the
first and second rounds of the presidential election pointed to the mutual interdependence of military and
civilian elements in Zimbabwe’s governing elite. And it raised the question, at least during moments of political crisis, as to which leaders – civilian or military – were in charge.

The Global Political Agreement

Power sharing was never any leader’s first choice; instead it was a last resort negotiated under international and domestic pressure. Neither Zimbabwe’s regional and continental neighbors nor the country’s hard-pressed electorate saw Mugabe’s pyrrhic victory as legitimate; he had a reported 85 percent of the vote in the second round presidential contest of June 2008. Instead, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) charged President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa to forge an accommodation between political rivals.

At a stiff ceremony at the Rainbow Towers in Harare on July 21, 2008, the leaders of ZANU-PF, MDC-Tsvangirai and MDC-Mutambara (a breakaway MDC faction) signed a memorandum of understanding about “establishing the framework of an inclusive government.” Even so, Mugabe asserted that he would not serve in a government that he did not lead. Yet the opposition refused to recognize his electoral victory or to serve under him as president. These seemingly irreconcilable positions were hashed out in on-again, off-again negotiations in Pretoria that centered on the distribution of offices in a transitional government. Tellingly, the final sticking point concerned security institutions: the parties could not agree on the disposition of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which controls the police and the registrar of voters. The impasse finally broke when the MDC-T reluctantly bowed under pressure to Mbeki’s compromise proposal that the leadership be shared between co-ministers, one from each of the two main parties.

Even so, the principals to the agreement had a hard time convincing members of their own inner circles that a temporary coalition government was the best deal they could get. On the ZANU-PF side, the security chiefs on the JOC remained dead set against granting authority to anyone without liberation war credentials. The military commanders were not present in the negotiating chamber, though they were privy to the status of the talks since JOC was regularly briefed, even before the party Politburo. Their absence from the negotiating table may help to explain why they never felt obliged to strictly observe the terms of an agreement struck by civilian leaders. On the MDC side, the party’s secretary general, Tendai Biti, and treasurer, Roy Bennett, held out until the eleventh hour against cohabitation with ZANU-PF, their perennial nemesis.

Yet on September 15, 2008 ZANU-PF and the two wings of the MDC entered into a self-styled Global Political Agreement (GPA). The main protagonists – Mugabe, who remained in office as
President, Tsvangirai, who assumed a newly created post of Prime Minister, and Mutambara as Deputy PM – ostensibly accepted a deal to divide state power and to govern cooperatively. A transitional government of national unity (GNU) – described in the GPA as the “Inclusive Government” – was sworn in on February 11, 2009.

In practice the performance of the GNU (2009-2013) featured few departures from the status quo. On the positive side, its signature economic achievements included the taming of hyperinflation, the restoration of a measure of economic recovery, and the reopening of schools and clinics. At the same time, power sharing could not prevent a fresh wave of farm invasions, kick-start the stalled manufacturing sector, or stop ZANU-PF from announcing new initiatives to nationalize private companies. The political balance sheet was yet more uneven. True, a constitution was approved by referendum in 2013 (though it left the powers of the executive branch largely intact), the parliament gained a measure of strength as an independent institution (due largely to the active presence of MDC legislators), and the level of overt political violence declined (even as ZANU-PF maintained its militias in the countryside). But President Mugabe continued to act unilaterally as if he was not required to consult the Prime Minister. And the civil service remained deeply politicized. Moreover, the political persecution of opposition activists persisted and repressive legislation was never repealed.

An Institutional Explanation

What explains the stickiness of the status quo and the limits to reform during the period of power sharing in Zimbabwe (2008-2013)? We argue that the transitional government suffered a key institutional weakness: power was never genuinely shared. ZANU-PF and MDC-T exercised power separately within exclusive and competing zones of authority.

Thanks to intransigence during power-sharing talks, ZANU-PF retained ultimate control over the coercive instruments of state. The party’s ministers were in charge of the security, intelligence and judicial services, as well as the politically strategic agencies responsible for land and agriculture, including provincial and local administration. For its part, MDC had an edge – though hardly complete ascendancy – in the representative institutions of the state, namely the House of Assembly and the chambers of local government councils. In addition, as nominal political heads of economic and social ministries, MDC ministers served as gatekeepers of international aid. But, because no party was dominant, a divided coalition of political elites was unable to push through major pieces of reform legislation. Instead, democratization and development were largely stalled as long as Zimbabwe remained one country with two competing governments.
Most important for the purposes of this paper, reform of the security sector was blocked. Because the institutions of coercion fell within the orbit of ZANU-PF, the security chiefs were able to use their veto power to ensure that reform proposals never got onto the policy agenda. In accordance with the GPA, a National Security Council (NSC) with multiparty civilian representation was intended to replace the Joint Operations Command. Chaired by the President, the NSC featured civilian leadership: alongside the five main security chiefs, its members included the two national Vice-Presidents (ZANU-PF), the Prime Minister and two deputies (MDC), ten other ministers, and two top bureaucrats. The National Security Council Act of 2009 specified that the Council would review national policies affecting security, defense, law and order – nationally, regionally and internationally. But the NSC failed to provide strong oversight and management. The Council was supposed to meet every month and – unrealistically – to make decisions by consensus. In practice, six months passed before the NSC held a pro forma introductory meeting in 2009. Even then, it transacted no serious substantive business, later met only sporadically, and was sometimes selectively boycotted by the security chiefs.

Moreover, access to diamond revenues by the party and army changed the balance of power in favor of the dominant elite. From October 2008 – after the GPA was signed but before the GNU was installed, and as the value of Zimbabwe’s currency imploded – the army launched a series of raids to secure control of the Marange diamond fields in Eastern Zimbabwe. According to eyewitness accounts, some 200 miners were killed, including those gunned down by helicopter gun-ships and bulldozed into mass graves (HRW 2009). Operation Hakudzokwi (“you will not return”) appeared to have two goals: “to ensure control of the diamond deposits for the ZANU-PF elite and to reward the army for its loyalty” (Global Witness 2010, 6; also 2012). While selected army and police units were reportedly rotated through the diamond fields, presumably each to take its share, the bulk of the proceeds accrued to predatory elites. This group allegedly included serving and retired military commanders, including those who are among the wealthiest economic tycoons in the country. As a result, the Ministry of Finance realized only a tiny fraction of potential diamond revenues (GRZ 2012).

Reformers therefore faced an uphill battle in trying to use the 2008 power-sharing settlement to discipline the security sector. The GNU was characterized instead by a yawning gulf in civil-military relations, at least between the MDC parties and the security chiefs. It soon became apparent that senior “securocrats” were implacably opposed to political concessions and that power sharing would not ensure civilian control of the military. For example, the security chiefs obstructed the prime minister’s requests to visit police posts, prisons and the army-controlled diamond fields. In reality, Tsvangirai had little choice but to tacitly resign himself to playing second fiddle to Mugabe with regard to security matters.
In reality, the civilians in the MDC lacked the expertise and authority to compel the military to reinvent itself. Unlike ZANU-PF, which had a military wing when it gained power in 1980 and could therefore bargain effectively with the generals in the Rhodesian Security Forces, the MDC has never had a formal armed structure. Its own tiny security department was oriented to the protection of party leaders and often failed to restrain the party’s unruly youth wing from using violence. As Chitiyo notes, the MDC was “an overwhelmingly civilian organization” which “will have to learn the language of the military if it is to engage with them” (2009b, Pion-Berlin 2005).

Strains in civil-military relations were symbolized by the refusal of the security chiefs to salute the prime minister. The tone for military’s disrespect of elected authority was set prior to the 2002 presidential election, when Major-General Zvinavashe (then ZDF commander) and Air Marshall Shiri (AFZ commander) publicly announced that the security forces would not answer to any political leader who had not fought in the liberation war. Other members of top uniformed brass went on national television to echo this unconstitutional declaration before the 2005 election. In 2008, prisons commissioner Zimondi openly proclaimed that,

“I will only support the leadership of President Mugabe…If the opposition wins the elections, I will be the first one to resign from my job and go back and defend my piece of land.”

After MDC won the first round of 2008 elections, ZDF commander Constantine Chiwenga refused to recognize Morgan Tsvangirai in any government capacity. And he managed to avoid saluting the PM even when the army and air force commanders broke ranks and appeared to do so on the Heroes and Defence Forces holiday in August 2009.

Thus, despite the requirements of power sharing, military commanders resisted civilian control. These old-order holdouts declined to attend milestone events in the life of the transitional government, including inauguration ceremonies for the cabinet and the rollout of the GNU’s economic strategy. In late 2010, Commissioner-General Chihuri reiterated that power holders would not step aside even if ZANU-PF lost elections: “this country came through blood and the barrel of the gun and it can never be re-colonized through a simple pen, which costs as little as five cents” (Idasa 2010, 2). In June 2011, Brigadier Douglas Nyikayaramba went so far as to publicly portray Prime Minister Tsvangirai as “major security threat (who) takes orders from foreigners.” The lack of loyalty of Zimbabwe’s politicized security establishment to elected civilian leaders was plain for all to see.

Moreover, ZANU-PF adamantly ruled out any prospect of security sector reform. A 2009 party congress, openly attended by the security chiefs, resolved that,
“as the party of revolution and the people’s vanguard, (ZANU-PF) shall not allow the security forces of Zimbabwe to be the subject of any negotiation for a so called ‘security sector reform’ that is based on patent misrepresentations of Zimbabwe’s heroic history and for the mere purpose of weakening the state so that it can be easily overthrown” (ZANU-PF 2009).

In closing remarks to the congress, Mugabe warned that the military was “the most dependable force we could ever have; it shall not be tampered with.” Faced with such intransigence, the MDC beat a tactical retreat by conceding ZANU-PF preeminence in security affairs and deferring reform efforts. Tsvangirai admitted that the MDC lacked leverage to hold security agencies accountable even where it enjoyed co-leadership:

“The Co-Ministers of Home Affairs have no power and control over the (police)…The commissioner-general reports to the president and the president can give instructions… That is the complexity of the arrangement.”

In an alternative approach, MDC attempted to open up indirect, back-channel dialogue with the security chiefs. Tsvangirai even hinted that MDC might be amenable to a pact in which the felt needs of the generals were satisfied in return for their subordination to a future elected government:

“We respect our security forces and hope that in line with the GPA, they will honour the rule of law, the GPA itself, and the constitution of Zimbabwe. Discussions are taking place to build confidence across the barriers of yesteryear …the armed forces are a pillar of the state and have to be given assurances about the future.”

But MDC’s confidence-building overtures bore little fruit because the unresponsive security chiefs stuck to their maximalist demands. ZDF commander Chiwenga denied press reports that the MDCs had held closed-door meeting with the security chiefs, retorting that, “We have no time to meet sellouts.” The journalist who reported these contacts was arrested. Instead, an unyielding reality remained: the JOC continued to operate informally as a parallel structure. This autonomy of this institution from the provisions of the GPA provided the security chiefs with the means to undermine the power-sharing project in Zimbabwe. The failure of reformists among the civilian politicians to penetrate this institution enabled military commanders to veto any negotiated political settlement or competitive election that threatened to involve a transfer of political power.

The 2013 Elections

As elections approached with the impending expiry of the GNU’s five-year term, ZANU-PF turned again to military allies to organize its 2013 campaign. As JOC chair, Minister of Defence
Emmerson Mnangagwa turned to warmongering language. Air Vice-Marshall Henry Muchena, director of the political commissariat at ZANU-PF headquarters, together with former CIO director-internal Sydney Nyanhunyo, assumed the lead in organizing the party’s campaigns for the constitutional referendum and election”. As before, the unfolding JOC plan featured the appointment of senior ZDF officers – code-named “Boys on Leave” – assisted by CIO operatives, regular troops and auxiliary militias, to head election command centers in all ten administrative provinces (Organization 2012).

The ruling party’s militarized campaign strategy was tested during public hearings for a constitutional referendum. In a rare joint expression of unity, the GNU principals called for peace and non-violence during the brief referendum campaign of March 2013. But laws inhibiting rights of assembly, association, and expression remained on the books and were selectively applied against MDC supporters. Ruling party and security personnel were infiltrated into the operations of the parliamentary committee charged with constitutional reform. Police and district administrators restricted or disrupted public education campaigns about the constitution, paving the way for Operation Vhara Muromo (“Shut Your Mouth”), which aimed to coach people to support the constitutional provisions favored by ZANU-PF. War veterans made loud claims that, as they fought for freedom, their views on the constitution must be given paramount importance. The constitutional outreach exercise ended in turmoil when party activists invaded dozens of closing meetings in Harare, assaulting participants with iron bars or chasing them away with racial slurs.

In response, the Prime Minister commented that, since the outreach program had degenerated into violence, “the ongoing constitution-making process (was) a sham.”

Thus, notwithstanding the adoption of a new constitution in May 2013, the atmosphere hardly seemed ripe for free and fair elections unilaterally scheduled by president Mugabe for July 31. The MDC-T charged that army, police and CIO operatives had effectively supplanted the civilian party structures on the ground and that militias were reopening bases in the countryside. As evidence they pointed, among other cases, to death threats issued by war veteran leader Jabulani Sibanda and his followers against voters in Masvingo Province. Youths in ZANU-PF regalia began again to move door-to-door in order to force people to buy party cards, describing these as passports for food aid. The Commissioner General of Police ordered all police officers to register as voters and Police Internal Security Intelligence (PISI) stepped up surveillance within police camps of all those perceived to favor opposition parties. The ZANU-PF Women’s League and traditional leaders announced they wanted Mugabe to become president for life, as did ad hoc parades of soldiers marching in provincial capitals.

That being said, the campaign for votes in 2013 took on a relatively peaceful hue, at least on the surface. First, all parties wished to avoid a replay of the disastrous 2008 presidential run-off, whose
illegitimacy had triggered the need for power sharing in the first place. ZANU-PF elites recognized that, given past electoral debacles, the quality of the 2013 elections was an object of intense domestic and international interest. The party therefore appeared to hold its tactics of terror in reserve, to be used only if other methods of electioneering and manipulation failed. Second, the presence of the state security apparatus served as a constant reminder to the voting population, especially in rural areas, of the consequences that might befall them if they voted the “wrong” way. In this regard, ZANU-PF had less need to display overt violence in 2013 than it did previously, precisely because the traumatic memories of the 2008 campaign, among other earlier episodes of aggression, were still alive in the minds of the electorate. Indeed, ZANU-PF stood ready to reap a harvest of fear that had been sown far earlier.

Third, the social and economic context for the 2013 elections was much different from 2008. Five years earlier, the government was on its knees, felled by economic contraction, hyperinflation, and the breakdown of health and education services. Back then, ZANU-PF and its military allies had resorted to extreme methods to thrust Mugabe back into office precisely because they had no other available means to obtain popular compliance. By 2013, however, Zimbabwe had experienced partial recovery, even if economic activity slowed somewhat as the election approached; moreover, ZANU-PF was presumed to have accumulated windfall electoral resources from the illicit sale of diamonds. The party therefore had various options in attracting support from the electorate; it could claim credit for economic growth (such as it was), selectively launch social delivery programs in its electoral strongholds, and attract votes by distributing cash, jobs, or promises of shares in nationalized companies. In short, unlike in 2008, ZANU-PF in 2013 could credibly substitute patronage for violence.

The rivals in the GNU struggled until the final hour over the rules under which the election would be conducted. A SADC “roadmap” had laid out milestones to be passed en route to a contest of “acceptable” quality (SADC 2011). It featured a series of liberalizing reforms: to the Electoral Act (for example, to revise the voters’ roll and speed up the announcement of results), to legislation affecting freedom of association and assembly (principally the repeal of POSA, which granted the police control over political meetings), and to the electronic mass media (for instance to allow the licensing of new broadcasters and to prohibit political hate speech). Other issues, such as the recruitment of non-partisan staff for the electoral commission and a public commitment by security chiefs to uphold the rule of law, were non-starters.

Due to ZANU-PF obduracy, the MDCs were defeated on every one of these preconditions for the polls, including the timing. They therefore tried to shift the focus of concern to the quality of the impending vote. They sought a political environment and electoral process that guaranteed
the security of voters, the secrecy of the ballot, the reliability of the count, and the acceptance of the election results by all parties, especially the losers. By contrast, ZANU-PF’s non-negotiable minimum requirement – its “red line” (Masunungure and Shumba, 2012, 127) – was to win the presidential election and thereby continue to control executive powers, which remained extensive even under the new constitution. Having learned to live with a legislature managed by other parties, and having retained considerable influence over the judiciary, the party of the old regime concentrated its electoral efforts on dominating the inner circle of executive authority. Indeed, as the election approached, the unspoken question hung in the air as to whether, even if defeated, ZANU-PF and its security-sector allies would ever surrender the presidency.

In the end it was not even close. In Zimbabwe’s presidential, parliamentary and local elections of July 31, 2013, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) meted out a crushing defeat to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), its erstwhile partner in the shaky power-sharing government. Robert Mugabe won the presidency for a seventh term with an official 61 percent of the vote against rival Morgan Tsvangirai’s reported 34 percent. ZANU-PF seized well over two thirds of the elected seats in Zimbabwe’s House of Assembly (160 out of 210), a supermajority that would enable the party to change the country’s newly minted constitution at will. Moreover, by effectively terminating an MDC presence in the Cabinet and its control of the lower chamber of parliament, the result called into question the very viability of opposition politics in Zimbabwe.

The Aftermath

From 2000 onwards, Zimbabwe’s civil-military relations have vibrated to the rhythm of power politics. When ZANU-PF is in electoral danger of defeat or under a mortal political threat, the military leaps to the aid of its historical political ally. When the threat has gone, the military retreats. Thus, after ZANU-PF’s comprehensive super-majority electoral victory of 2013 that brought power-sharing to an end, the security complex moved into a retraction phase, apparently calculating that it could afford to relax and even exude military professionalism. This is the context in which Air Marshall Shiri, the commander of the air force, could claim:

As the military, we have been schooled into understanding that the gun does not command the party, it’s the party that does command the gun….Whatever comes out of political deliberation by the political leadership of the country shall bind the military\textsuperscript{xiv}.

Shiri’s articulation of the military’s role as noted above tends to reveal more than it hides. The reference in the quotation to “the party” is unlikely to be to any party, but specifically to the ZANU-PF party. If so,
his explanation of the relationship between the party and the gun actually reaffirms the special bond between ZANU-PF and armed force.

Importantly, the military’s aloofness from overt national politics is *conditional* upon there being no serious political danger to the continued hold on power by ZANU-PF. Another way of putting it is that the military has two faces: the professional face and the partisan face. When things are normal, that is, when there is no potent threat to ZANU-PF, the professional face looms large but when the going gets tough for the party, the security complex comes to the fore.

For historical reasons, the symbiosis between the party and the security complex is indissoluble. Therefore, even at its most professional, it is difficult to imagine that the military would be disinterested in what goes on in ZANU-PF. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the military’s assessment, the opposition MDCs have been dealt a deadly double blow thanks to their humiliating defeat in the July 2013 elections and the subsequent turmoil and fragmentation within their ranks. Focus has thus shifted from national level politics to the dynamics taking place inside ZANU-PF especially with regard to the longstanding and unresolved succession struggle. The security sector is apparently not unified on who should succeed Mugabe with some rooting for Mujuru (presently second in the party hierarchy) while others prefer Mnangagwa (reportedly number twelve in the pecking order). There are even persistent reports that the military itself has a vested interest in having one of its own as the next president of the party and the country. Alternatively, the military may serve as a kingmaker of who succeeds President Mugabe both in the party and at state level. The bottom line is that the military is poised to be the final arbiter of who takes over.

The military’s post-2013 trajectory is likely to publicly display subordination to civilian political leadership primarily because the country, in their view, is safe under ZANU-PF. In other words, this subordination is not a result of the military’s internalization and acceptance of the ethic of civilian supremacy over the military but is because their favored party is securely ensconced in power and there is no immediate threat. In fact, because no serious opposition force is likely to emerge in the short to medium term (next 10 years), civil-military relations are likely to be stable and in favor of the civilian side of the equation. In the forthcoming period, the probability is high that some of the current military leadership will retire, civilianize and join the political fray at the apex of the party and government. In fact, the current crop of top service chiefs is likely to have left their posts by the time of the next elections in 2018, this by virtue of their age as most are in their late fifties and early sixties. They are unlikely to retire to their farms, however, since the probability is high that most will carve a second active career in politics. And from that political vantage point, they will not stand aside and watch the house that they
built being demolished. Moreover, the present security chiefs are making efforts to reproduce their generation by enlisting into the security sector graduates of the national youth training program and from party activists even when these recruits might not have the minimum education requirements.

In short, the prospects of security sector reform to subordinate the military to any civilian leadership are dim for as long as the present liberation-struggle generation is still around. This continuity persists notwithstanding Chapter 11 of Zimbabwe’s new (2013) Constitution, which creates a National Security Council chaired by the president. At the time of writing, such a Council has not been created and even when it is, it is likely to serve only a symbolic function. Equally faint are prospects for transitional justice in the lifetime of those who prosecuted the armed liberation struggle. It was a no-go area during the GNU and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

**Conclusion**

Zimbabwe’s “inclusive” government (2009-2013) was inclusive in name only. The civilian-military coalition that came to dominate political life favored an exclusive form of political settlement. A façade of power sharing concealed a persistent reality of power capture and blocked the possibility of power division via democratization. A narrow coalition of civilian and military leaders with roots in the country’s liberation struggle continued to turn the instruments of state toward controlling elections and looting the country’s wealth. Far from sharing power with a democratic opposition, ZANU-PF elites sacrificed democracy, state building and economic development at the altar of their own political survival.

This paper has argued that a negotiated settlement is only likely to stick if all parties believe that they have more to gain from abiding by its terms than by resorting to violence. The country’s democratic movement clearly had incentives to fulfill this part of the bargain. Out-gunned by ZANU-PF in the 2008 presidential run-off election, they needed an interlude of peace to rebuild their organizations and to justify their claims to leadership by delivering public services. But ZANU-PF had no such incentive. Any peace dividend would, in contrast with the depredations of the previous decade, likely accrue to the benefit of others. Instead, the old regime’s leaders conceded an awkward power-sharing arrangement only for as long as they had to. For ZANU-PF’s civil-military coalition, the GNU bought time to circle the wagons, restock the treasury (and the armory), and prepare to recapture state power.

In a related limitation, the substance of the settlement was narrow in scope. Purely and pragmatically, it was a *political* deal, in the minimal sense that politics is the art of the possible. Unlike
the Lancaster House agreement at the time of Zimbabwe’s independence, which guaranteed property rights and provided for a merger of fighting forces into a unified national army, the power-sharing settlement of 2008 contained no economic or military pact. By establishing National Councils, one for Economics and one for Security, the conferees shunted aside the interests of key economic and military actors to be dealt with later. The fact that the NEC and NSC both failed subsequently to get off the ground signaled that the agreement was insufficiently comprehensive.

Moreover, in perhaps its greatest shortcoming, the GPA failed to establish civilian control over the military. Indeed, ZANU-PF stated publicly that the future of the armed forces was non-negotiable and ensured that security sector reform was never on the agenda of mediation talks. As such, Zimbabwe entered the era of coalition government with a reserved domain of power – represented by the JOC, the regular armed forces, the police and intelligence services, the armed auxiliaries, and the private economic interests of the political and security chiefs – that was impenetrable to would-be reformers. Rather, those members of the security complex who were implicated in human rights abuses and self-enrichment were dead set against any transition to democracy or the rule of law. Their open disassociation from the GPA made it all but certain that rival political elites would have to engage in yet another round of deal making – for example over the legal culpability or immunity of wrongdoers – before Zimbabwe could arrive at a legitimate political settlement.

This biased distribution of power within the GNU provided the old regime with decisive advantages that the MDC’s jurisdiction over the legislature and development ministries could only partly offset. In Zimbabwe’s coalition, military spoilers were not marginal rebel groups who controlled outlying territories; they were political hard-liners who occupied the commanding heights of the state security apparatus. From this strategic position at the heart of the state, the “securocrats” could veto progress on any political reforms that met with their disapproval. Thus, even as Mugabe and Tsvangirai squabbled over who should chair the cabinet, much real decision-making occurred elsewhere, for instance in the Joint Operations Command. And, beyond the formal machinery of coercion, ZANU-PF continued to rely informally on an alternative shadow force of war veterans, youth militia and traditional leaders. In retrospect, it seems that ZANU-PF always kept an informal “Plan B” in reserve; whenever necessary, they could readily resort again to political violence.

In sum, an outcome of institutional deadlock was over-determined by a combination of unfavorable factors: the agreement was externally driven, internally unbalanced, and short on incentives for at least one side to eschew violence. Finally, as a quintessentially political agreement, the GPA made
no institutional provision for power sharing in the economic or security sectors. As such, power sharing failed to provide a reliable antidote to power politics.  

One lesson was clear. A government of national unity in which a dominant party clings to power after losing an election is a poor substitute for a government elected in a free and fair contest. As a device for resolving election disputes, power sharing sacrifices long-term progress towards democracy for uncertain short-term gains in political and economic stability. In the Zimbabwe instance, power sharing served mainly to defer a political crisis rather than resolve it.
References


Masunungure, Eldred. 1998. “Political Culture and Democratic Governance in Zimbabwe,” Harare: Department of Political and Administrative Studies, University of Zimbabwe, unpublished paper


Such challenges could emanated mainly from the first generation of generals (e.g. Mujuru, Zvinavashe), far less so from current incumbents (e.g. Chiwenga). The former could challenge the president because they helped elevate him to leadership, while the latter were “made” by him.


A hardliner with an intelligence background, Mnangagwa was Minister for State Security during the Matabeleland massacres of the 1980s. He was brought in to head Mugabe’s presidential runoff campaign reportedly because of his reputation for strong-arm tactics.


For an alternate reading of the Zvinavashe statement see Tendi (2013)


The Herald, June 23, 2011. Mugabe later promoted Nyikayaramba

Bernard Mpofu, “Zimbabwe: Shaky GNU – Tsvangirai Speaks Out,” Zimbabwe Independent, 11 March 2011. The individual heads of security agencies separately and directly reported to the President, even by-bypassing their ministerial political heads. Thus the co-chairship of the Police was really symbolic and of little substantive value.


Sunday Mail, May 5, 2013. The police arrested the journalists who reported on the meetings.


xv A dark horse in the presidential stakes, Sydney Sekeremai, is considered by some commentators to be Mugabe’s preferred choice. The latter’s reported tactic has been to deflect media attention from Sekeremai while encouraging the media to speculate on the Mujuru-Mnangagwa struggle. Currently Minister of Defence, Sekeremai is well respected in the security establishment, especially among military and intelligence elites. Having long served in the security ministries, Sekeremai has apparently won Mugabe’s confidence and that the latter can entrust his family’s future to him. Some say Sydney’s weaknesses are that he is a Zezuru (Mugabe’s clan, in a succession context where ethnic rotation is expected) and has no independent mass political base. But, in Mugabe's scheme of things, these shortcomings may be strengths because Sekeremai will be beholden to the man who can tap him as successor.