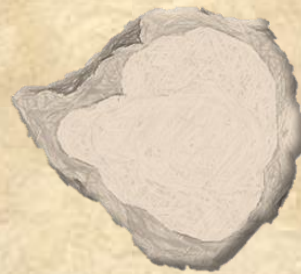


## Succession Politics in Zimbabwe: Grace Mugabe and the End of Patriotic History



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In this piece, University of Johannesburg PhD student, Tamuka Charles Chirimambowa, examines the possible permutations of the ongoing factional fights within Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party to succeed the aging party and country's leader, Robert Mugabe, who turned 92 years on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2016. Mugabe's wife, Grace Mugabe, reportedly supported by a faction known as the Generation 40 (G40) is challenging the hitherto "heir apparent", current vice-President Emmerson Mnangagwa, "Ngwena" (which means "crocodile") supported by a faction called "Team Lacoste". It is widely believed that Mnangagwa enjoys the support of the country's securocrats, who include the country's military, intelligence and the former liberation war fighters.

Zimbabwe's ruling party has thus far rode on the discourse of "liberation war credentials" as a source of political legitimacy, the so called "patriotic history", of which Grace has none. In fact the G40 and Grace herself, have questioned the claim of exclusive entitlement by former fighters. G40's affront on Team Lacoste puts to question the view that securocrats, in particular war veterans, are king makers in Zimbabwe's politics. Within this context, Chirimambowa argues that the "G40" could signal the beginning of the end of "patriotic history". This will not necessarily usher in a democratic dispensation, but may present opportunities for civil society to re-introduce constitutionalism onto the national agenda.

This reflection on current politics of transition” in Zimbabwe argues that the assault on Zimbabwe’s securocrats, war veterans and their liberation credentials-based politics by the Generation 40 (G40) bears resemblance to the moments of Perestroika and Glasnost. After becoming the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985 Gorbachev instituted the policies of Perestroika and Glasnost that resulted in fundamental reconfiguration of the Soviet Empire and led to the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev’s political and economic reform had unintended consequences such as the breaking away of some former Soviet States but it also gave a new breath to the Russian Society. Similarly, the rise of Grace Mugabe to head the Women’s League and the events that followed have managed to play a catalytic role to some kind of Perestroika and Glasnost.

Of course, the events in Zimbabwe are not an exact mirror of events in the Soviet Union but are a result of the coincidence of ambitions of the G40 and Grace Mugabe’s quest for security in a post Robert Mugabe era. In addition, the questioning of the authority of War Veterans and Securocrats as key power brokers in ZANU PF’s succession politics debunks the long held myths on their role in Zimbabwe. Key to this mystification, has been the creation of imaginary political bigwigs in both private and public media, all in the hope for a successful challenge on President Mugabe from within.

It is my contention that the media space being enjoyed by Team Lacoste and their War Veterans allies is nothing more than a bubble of the moment that will burst in contact with the combined power of the State and Youth/Women’s League(s) abrasive politics. Therefore, the power accorded to War Veterans and certain elements of the Securocrats is political speculation based more on imaginations of reality than an objective reading of the situation and its context. This moment, then, may mark the beginning of the end of Patriotic History. The assault on ZANU PF’s nationalist authoritarianism that had been built on the War Veterans, Youth Militia and Securocrats has to be viewed and analysed as a historical teleology predating the G40.

### ***The Opportunity***

Having argued elsewhere, that the discourse of transition shifted from the domination of the MDCs and their Civil Society allies to the dictates of ZANU PF’s succession politics<sup>1</sup>; I contend that the discourse of post-nationalism articulated by Civil Society and MDCs remains the driving political ideology even within ZANU PF’s wars of succession. To avoid clouding intellect on the possible opportunities for a new society there is need to shy away from the personality of President Mugabe and his wife Grace. The factional fights and political divergences in ZANU PF over its leadership succession present opportunities for democratisation rather than chaos.

I argue that despite the biblical Jezebel portrayal of Grace Mugabe by the Opposition and Civil Society (and even by some within ZANU-PF) she has managed to destabilise the War Veteran and Securocrat element that had become an Achilles’ heel to Zimbabwe’s democratisation. Therefore, proponents of democracy in Zimbabwe have to depersonalise the succession debate in ZANU PF and interrogate the policies and political practices of the protagonists. Such an approach will help to steer the debate from the trepidation of narrow nationalist authoritarianism that Zimbabwe has been reeling under during the rule of ZANU PF.

Fanatical analyses blinded by the “Mugabe Must Go” mantra without interrogating the possibility of a new order presents a danger of a fake transition to democracy. Solving Zimbabwe’s problems does not necessarily mean merely replacing Mugabe but calls for a radical shift in political culture. Civil Society thus must push back the national discourse to the basics; especially the implementation of the new constitution. The re-alignment of laws debate has been ignored and if not dead within the mainstream media and civil society. Neglecting the operationalisation of the new constitution

may prove costly a few years down. The incoherence in the ruling party presents opportunities for convergence of elite interests to develop and institutionalise a democratic legal architecture.

### ***Speculation***

The excitement with the noise by the War Veterans and Team Lacoste is nothing more than a moment of frenzy that is meant to pass. The power of the War Veterans and Securocrats has been unnecessarily over-emphasised in Zimbabwe's body politic. The same myths were peddled around the late General Solomon Mujuru and his widow, former Vice President Joice Mujuru. Similar illusions were peddled for Jabulani Sibanda (former War Veterans Chairman), and former ZANU PF party stalwarts Rugare Gumbo and Didymus Mutasa. The late Eddison Zvobgo also enjoyed the same mystification being accorded to War Veterans and Securocrats. However, a gaze into our political history has shown that the so called power brokers in ZANU PF are just a creation of media speculation that always capitulates to President Mugabe's Machiavellian tactics. President Mugabe has mastered the art of coercion and consent in extending his political rule within ZANU PF and Zimbabwe.

One key trend in all the factions trying to succeed Mugabe has been the failure to appreciate the complexity of Mugabe as a political actor. Mugabe has managed to play faction after another faction. In certain instances he has gone as far as creating conditions that strengthen weaker factions as a way of check-mating the other faction. Therefore, the failure to rein in on the G40 and while allowing the suspensions and expulsions of Team Lacoste elements shows the preferences of Mugabe at the moment. Therefore, for the War Veterans and Team Lacoste to assume that they could attack the G40 and Grace Mugabe and not invite President Mugabe's wrath is unrealistic political speculation.

War Veterans and Team Lacoste are suffering from denial syndrome of the political realities in ZANU PF by trying to rationalise on behalf of President Mugabe as if he has no agency of his own. Acknowledging Mugabe's leadership and authority whilst criticising his wife and G40 for staging a coup is akin to giving oneself a sense of false comfort that Mugabe is not the problem but the wife. From a strategic point of view, it appears that the War Veterans and Team Lacoste are weak and their demise is imminent. Indeed, the weakness of the strategies of *all* the factions in ZANU PF (from Zvobgo to Mujuru and Mnangagwa) has been the political cowardice of their Godfathers. They fight Mugabe through proxies whilst wanting to pledge political loyalty: approaches that have proved to be impotent. I argue that fighting G40 and the First Lady is as good as declaring war on Mugabe. The more VP Mnangagwa prevaricates, he is moved towards the outer edges of state power, far from the coercive instruments of the state from which his power is claimed to arise.

President Mugabe's birthday speech in Masvingo in support of his wife shows his factional preferences. In addition, the subsequent suspension and expulsion of 17 Team Lacoste members by the politburo on the 03<sup>rd</sup> of March 2016, clearly indicates the triumph of the G40. War Veterans Minister, Chris Mutsvangwa and his wife, Monica, the women's league spokespersons, one of the most vociferous Team Lacoste members were the biggest casualties of the suspensions. Team Lacoste has been momentarily weakened and lives to fight another day. However, the re-entry of Joice Mujuru and the Zimbabwe People First (ZPF) provides an opportunity for Team Lacoste to renegotiate its space within ZANU PF.

### ***The Beginning of the End of Patriotic History***

The arguments by the G40 and Grace Mugabe that now deviate from the traditional ZANU PF narrow articulation of an immortal War Veteran to a much broader articulation of the liberation

narrative that emphasises the role of the ordinary people/masses (*povo*) are informed by political expediency rather than a principled shift of ideology within ZANU PF. This presents an opportunity to end the era of the immortality of the War Veteran and 'Patriotic History', a term coined by Professor Terrence Ranger<sup>ii</sup>.

The War Veterans are in denial that G40 is a creation of President Mugabe and continuing to recognise his authority is akin to conceding to G40 by default. Therefore, the media hype on the power of War Veterans and Team Lacoste is just sheer speculation that will capitulate very soon. However, civil society needs to shy away from becoming despondent by assuming that the noise by the losing ZANU PF factions equates to the biblical Paul's Damascus moment. In addition, the tapping into post-nationalism by G40 and First Lady does not represent a shift of ideology but politics of convenience. It is in these excitable moments that Civil Society needs to introspect on its democratisation strategies and avoid being caught in the frenzy of the moment. The noises are nothing more than just the cries of jilted lovers. Therefore, there is a need to go back to the basics of the struggle, informed by the constitution debate. Constitutionalism is the next big debate in Zimbabwe. I argue, so while acknowledging the seemingly insurmountable challenges that exist. The fact that ZANU PF-although *by default and politics of convenience*-is undergoing some kind of perestroika and glasnost presents opportunities for cross-political elite convergence on the limitation of liberation credentials based politics. It seems the diminishing influence of the war veterans and securocrats in ZANU PF marks the beginning of the end of 'patriotic history'.

"The more people who know about it, the more matters can be correctly identified, reported and investigated, the more victims rescued etc," says Wilkinson.

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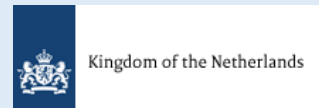
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<sup>i</sup> Chirimambowa Tamuka (2016) The Murky Transition Terrain in Zimbabwe, available at: <http://democracyworks.org.za/the-murky-transition-terrain-in-zimbabwe/>

<sup>ii</sup> Ranger, Terence. "Nationalist historiography, patriotic history and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 215-234.