



The military in Zimbabwean politics

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ABSTRACT

The military remains active in Zimbabwean politics, yet military practices within and outside the barracks have received scant attention, especially regarding how the military sustains political parties in power. This article argues that the military is the power behind the survival of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) as a political party. Understanding the Zimbabwe military requires a detailed understanding of its relationship with ZANU-PF, but also of the ways in which the military's economic interests inform its deep involvement in politics. The Zimbabwe military produces a political threat and then seeks to protect against the same threat it created within and beyond ZANU-PF. However, the relationship between ZANU-PF and the military is deeply rooted in history and determines the political path of the party. There has never been a period in which the military has been the apolitical and professional organisation which orthodox theories of its role would suggest.

KEYWORDS

Military; soldiers; military professionalism; barracks; violence

Introduction

In post-independence Zimbabwe, the military continues to be deeply involved in politics. The Zimbabwean military is based on its economic interests, as the power behind the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). It is thus a politicised institution because of its need to sustain the party as its political wing. Importantly, the relationships between the Zimbabwe military and ZANU-PF date back to the liberation struggle. It is crucial to understand that the survival of ZANU-PF in politics and its continued existence as the governing party guarantee the military's economic interests. To sustain ZANU-PF in politics, the military uses gun violence and other threatening behaviour against those who oppose and protest ZANU-PF rule. The Zimbabwean military not only threatens civilians, but also remobilises its junior soldiers to understand the political ideology of ZANU-PF, borne out of violence and intimidation.

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In this article, I first discuss the ways in which the military's involvement in politics has been theorised. I then explore the formation of the Zimbabwe National Army, revealing how the military, through army commanders in the barracks, politicised junior soldiers. Finally, I use evidence from interviews with soldiers to outline how the army generals ensured that ZANU-PF stayed in power.

Theorising the military in politics

In post-colonial Africa, states with leaders who lack political legitimacy rely solely on the military to keep them in political office (Honwana 1999). In such contexts, politicians survive by deploying the military to deal with any perceived or imagined domestic political threat (Honwana 1999). But why is the military involved in politics? For Finer, there is no reason to ask this question: he suggests that 'instead of asking why the military engage in politics, we ought to surely ask why they ever do otherwise' (Finer 1962, 30). In the African context, post-independence ruling political groups were seen as somewhat feeble, unlike the army which was cohesive and disciplined (First 1970, 412). Thus the military intervened in politics according to the level of political culture, which was determined by the strength and weakness of civilian institutions (First 1970, 13). The higher the level of the political culture, the fewer the opportunities that would be available for the military and the less the support the army would receive. However, the lower the level, the more the military would likely intervene in politics, and the more support it would get (First 1970, 13). Thus, the military justified its interventions in politics by arguing that it restored order from civilian misrule (Agbese and Kieh 1992). When the political system was overwhelmed by political crisis, it resorted to a reserve authority, which was the military (First 1970, 412). In such circumstances, the gun led politics (First 1970). While, for example, the expectation in Ethiopia on the fall of Haile Selassie's empire was that the military would in some way fulfil the political aspirations of ordinary civilians (Markakis 1981), this has never happened to this day as the military is identified with war, sabotage and violence (Gebresenbet 2014; Gebregziabher 2019).

For Finer (1974, 15), military intervention in politics is based on its disposition, capacity, volition to intervene and societal conditions. These invite or, conversely, prohibit military intervention in politics (Finer 1962, 22, 185). Where the political system is strong, the military has a low propensity to intervene (First 1970, 413). In the aftermath of civil war, for example, the military were able to keep their social connections, embedded within networks between junior and senior soldiers (Wiegink 2015). This was the case in Mozambique, where former soldiers remained militarised even during political transition (Honwana 1999). First (1970, 22) argues that the network of African armies is likely to be a source of contagion for military intervention in politics, as some army officers will have trained and been deployed together in wars. The relationships forged in the military thus continue to the present. Such relationships, which Wiegink (2015) viewed as sources of military-political mobilisation, are not only habituated in the present but are a product of the past that tends to reproduce itself. This is what scholars such as Bourdieu (1990) refer to as 'habitus', which is learned, inculcated, durable and transposable over time and space. The military learns politics, and once learned, that politics is embedded in the military. As First (1970, 19) argues, military intervention in politics is undertaken by officers already

participating in the existing political system and who possess an institutional power base within it.

Hence, it is the civilian politicians who turn to the military for political support (Perlmutter 1969), and therefore military disengagement from politics is ‘hardly ever final or complete’ (Harb 2003, 274). Politicians keep military elites happy by rewarding them with privileges and incentives (Tachau and Heper 1983). Harb (2003, 289) asserts that a state of mutual accommodation, an unspoken agreement between the military and the government, exists: military interests and privileges will be met in exchange for army discipline and loyalty. However, the military is not always interested to return and retire to the barracks, even when they have ‘restored’ public order (Baynham 2021). Yet, the military is not necessarily competent to rule and so teams up with the civilian bureaucracy, ultimately failing to rule in a system of more democratic governance and democratic spaces (Welch 1992; Kandeh 1996).

The military becomes involved in politics at least at three levels: as moderators, in which the military supports the government behind the scenes; as guardians, in which it protects the government but can seize power if it is threatened; and as rulers, having the ambition to rule (Perlmutter 1969). The second and third levels, as guardians and rulers, describe the Zimbabwean military. Thus, given its history, in which the current Zimbabwean military was born of political parties, it is often difficult to separate it from political participation in Zimbabwe: military disengagement from politics is ‘hardly ever final or complete’ (Harb 2003, 274). Historical participation in the liberation struggle continues to tie the military to politics in and beyond the barracks, for the survival of ZANU-PF in politics.

Post-independence army: integration

After a liberation war lasting 15 years (1964 to 1979), in 1980 Zimbabwe became independent under majority rule. One of the fundamental features of the political transition was to merge the former Rhodesian army and the two guerrilla armies, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the armed wing of ZANU-PF, and the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), an armed wing of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), into the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA). The new Zimbabwe army inherited the British military structure in terms of ranks, uniforms, training, administration and housing. The idea was that the armed wings needed to be depoliticised (Tendi 2020a) and become ‘professional’. However, ZIPRA and ZANLA had historical differences based on their ethnically-based recruitment, with the former recruiting more Ndebele people from Matabeleland and the latter recruiting mainly Shona people. Such differences persisted even in the aftermath of the integration process. According to Alexander (1998), former ZIPRA guerrillas in the new ZNA were persecuted and victimised by former ZANLA guerrillas in the military barracks. Thus, ZIPRA guerrillas integrated into the ZNA were forced to desert and were consequently labelled as ‘dissidents’ by Mugabe’s regime.

While the British Military Advisory Training Team (BMATT) was driven by standardising the new ZNA along professional lines (Alexander 1998; Alao 2012), the armed guerrilla wings continued to be heavily politicised through ZANU-PF and ZAPU (Alexander 1998). During the period of integration, the then-commander of the ZNA, General Mujuru

(also known by his *nom de guerre* Rex Nhongo), marginalised the former Rhodesian soldiers as well as ZIPRA guerrillas, while favouring ZANLA guerrillas (Tendi 2020b, 173). For Tendi (*ibid.*), BMATT was complicit in how this was effected.

Despite the presence of BMATT in the integration process, political differences within the new army continued to exist (Alexander 1998). The presence of BMATT did not mean that the military was not supportive of ZANU-PF. For Tendi (2020a), the appointment of Major General Bob Hodges as the inaugural commandant of the Zimbabwe Army Staff College from 1985 to 1987 is testimony that the commander of the ZNA, General Mujuru, was professional. This is a misconception. Working with and listening to white army commanders does not mean that Mujuru was not conscious of his support of ZANU-PF or that he and other army commanders had abandoned their liberation political beliefs and ideologies. Nor does it mean that Mujuru was and had become a professional soldier before his retirement in 1992, as Tendi (2020a) suggests: ‘unlike his successors in the army, Nhongo never sought political leadership when he was a serving army general. Nhongo saw himself essentially as a soldier ... and unsuited for high political office.’

Tendi’s account presents Mujuru as the odd one out in a system where the military is rooted in politics and wrongly represents Mujuru as a professional and apolitical soldier. This is not borne out by the 1983 *Gukurahundi* campaign, which saw the Zimbabwe army commanded by Mujuru involved in the massacre of civilians (Alexander 1998). The operation was named *Gukurahundi*, a Shona word meaning the first rain that washes away the chaff, in which the rain was perceived as the deployed soldiers while the chaff was the Ndebele people (Alexander 1998). It was justified by the alleged discovery of arms caches in Matabeleland, where the majority of the ZIPRA forces had resided and operated during the liberation war (CCJPZ 1999). Prime Minister Mugabe responded by deploying soldiers trained by the North Korean army in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ 1999).

Various reports indicated that during *Gukurahundi* the army harassed and brutally killed civilians as it went about pursuing alleged dissidents and others who backed some former ZIPRA members (CCJPZ 1999). At least 20,000 civilians were reportedly killed in the operation (CCJPZ 1999). President Mugabe later described that period as a ‘moment of madness’ (Siziba and Ncube 2015). All the incidences of the *Gukurahundi* brutality towards civilians happened under the command of General Mujuru. No action was subsequently taken against those involved in the massacres in Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Bulawayo and Midlands provinces, supporting the argument that the Zimbabwe military has never been apolitical, nor have the commanders such as General Mujuru within it, since 1980 until the present day.

Tendi (2020a, 202) notes that ‘Nhongo was unwilling to be involved in 5 Brigade¹ when it started’. If so, this does not explain how he continued to command the military involved in the massacre of civilians in *Gukurahundi* in Matabeleland and Midlands. Again, the fact that during the BMATT’s time with the Zimbabwe army some senior black Zimbabwe army officers were trained at the British Army Staff College does not mean that their liberation politics were eradicated. Instead, in the early and later years of independence the army remained deeply embedded in politics.

In 1998, the ZNA was deployed to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) war in support of Laurent Kabila’s government, a war characterised by looting by both the government and the rebel movements (Tangri and Mwenda 2003). The war was called

The Great War of Africa or even the African World War (Prunier 2008) for a variety of reasons: more than five African countries deployed to the DRC to either support and or fight against the government. However, the Zimbabwe army was heavily criticised for intervening because the rebels did not pose any threat to Zimbabwe, with the two countries not even sharing a border. The involvement of Zimbabwe soldiers in the DRC was meant to serve both the political and economic interests of the military (Maringira 2016). A UN Security Council report (UN Security Council 2002) indicated that the Zimbabwe military was deeply involved in looting diamonds as well as timber from the DRC. Such economic interests saw politicians and the military working together to extract resources (Maringira 2017). The DRC war provided a space in which the military and elite civilian politicians in ZANU-PF cemented their post-independence political and economic relationship.

According to the UN report on the plunder of DRC natural resources (UN Security Council 2002), the current Zimbabwe President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was Speaker of the Parliament during the DRC war, worked in a close-knit elite network with the late Commander of Zimbabwe Defence Forces, General Vitalis Zvinavashe (chairman of COSLEG,² a company responsible for diamond trading in the Congo) and other senior military officers in illicit diamond trading. Brigadier General Sibusiso Moyo (who announced the 2017 Zimbabwe coup), was Director General of COSLEG, adviser to both Tremalt and Oryx Natural Resources,³ covert companies of Zimbabwean military financial interests in negotiations with DRC state mining companies. Zimbabwe's military, through COSLEG, owned 49% of Sengamines (UN Security Council 2002). Air Commodore Mike Karakadzai was Deputy Secretary of COSLEG, involved in procurement and trading after the Tremalt cobalt and copper deals (*ibid.*).⁴ Colonel Simpson Nyathi was Director of Defence Policy for COSLEG. The Minister of Defence, Sidney Sekeramayi, was a shareholder in COSLEG (*ibid.*). The Zimbabwean army officers were to be trained in diamond valuation in Johannesburg, while the 2000 parliamentary election was deemed to have been funded by diamond companies in the DRC linked to the Zimbabwe military (*ibid.*). These military economic interests enabled senior army officers to get rich and influence ZANU-PF politics.

The view from the barracks

In order to understand the role of the post-independent Zimbabwe military in politics and the political economy of the country, this article draws on life story interviews, informal conversations and close personal contact with soldiers who either deserted or resigned from the Zimbabwe military between 2003 and 2008. This period is critical to our understanding of the military in politics because in 2003, Zimbabwe had just withdrawn from the DRC war, while in 2008, the Zimbabwe army barracks were at their peak in terms of campaigning and as spaces of political mobilisation for President Robert Mugabe. However, despite this military support, President Mugabe lost his first-ever presidential election to the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

To gather information about the politicisation of army recruits, I interviewed deserters and those who resigned from the army. I have been a Zimbabwean soldier and was deployed at the war front in the Congo between 2000 and 2002. In the first year, I spent nine months at the front without leave. Following the DRC war, I continued to serve in the

ZNA, and was present in the army barracks in the years following 2008 in which the military continued its active remobilising of soldiers in politics.

In my post-army life, I reconnected with the junior soldiers whose stories inform the empirical basis of this article. Each former soldier would lead me to others. I met some in Harare and others in Johannesburg, recording and then transcribing the interviews. Interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2019 at different intervals and follow-ups. I utilised thematic analysis, with the themes emerging from the interviews informed by the data I interviewed 44 participants in total. While they shared their stories in differing detail, participants mainly left the military because of its deep involvement in politics, and in some cases the junior soldiers became victims of the same regime they served. So the characterisation of the military in politics is not one which is drawn from online news, rather the men whose voices are presented in this paper speak on the issues which affected them in barracks, and more widely on how the involvement of the military in politics also affected civilians.

I interviewed former soldiers who spent time in the DRC war and the Zimbabwe military barracks. Within the barracks the former soldiers attended army commanders' and generals' parades. The ethnographic approach of being in the barracks helped me to get a deeper understanding of, and intimacy with, the stories told by the former soldiers on how they think about their lives entangled in barracks politics, which were embedded in political education and reorientation to ZANU-PF politics.

Barracks reorientation politics

The military not only focuses on mobilising and threatening civilians to support ZANU-PF, it also intimidates and victimises junior soldiers who do not publicly support ZANU-PF. In the aftermath of the DRC war, from 2003, army commanders politicised junior soldiers on the centrality of the military to ZANU-PF politics. The existence of politics within army barracks is crucial to our understanding of the ways in which the military continues to produce spaces for the political mobilisation of soldiers. It is never easy to ensure the loyalty of junior soldiers to political and military elites. Army commanders and generals had to work in and beyond the barracks to politicise junior soldiers. In this regard, the politics of the barracks determines how the army acts at election times and beyond. Hence, barracks are not only spaces of work but of politics as well, with army commanders the custodians of such politics.

In 1986, the new Zimbabwe army engaged in the mass recruitment of soldiers, especially those who had no experience of the liberation war (Young 1997). The idea was partly to integrate a new generation of soldiers with no political allegiances into the military and for these soldiers to work alongside and later replace an old generation of former guerrillas (*ibid.*). The latter is yet to happen (Maringira 2017). Importantly, the newly recruited soldiers formed what was popularly known as the 6th Brigade, which was later deployed to Mozambique to fight against RENAMO between 1986 and 1992. In the early 1990s, the ZNA became involved in peace operations in Angola and Somalia, which legitimised its recruitment drive. Involvement in the DRC war also saw the mass recruitment of soldiers. Afterwards, Zimbabwe was in a political and economic crisis due to the fast-track land reform programme, in which the army was also involved (Chaumba,

Scoones, and Woolmer 2003), perpetrating violence against white commercial farmers (Sachikonye 2011).

From 2003, the Zimbabwe army commanders worked hard to politicise junior soldiers, particularly those who did not participate in the liberation struggle. It was never a given for all soldiers to understand or be interested in politics. In response, junior soldiers began to desert in large numbers, citing an increase in political victimisation by the war veterans who were still serving in the army (Maringira 2017). Senior army officers led the programme to re-educate soldiers on politics. The Military Intelligence Director, then Lieutenant Colonel, now Brigadier Morgan Mzilikazi, the adviser on defence to the Zimbabwe Embassy in China, and Military Police Director, then Lieutenant Colonel, now Brigadier and Presidential Brigade Commander Fidelis Mhonda, embarked on a barracks tour and visited every battalion and squadron to reorient soldiers to ZANU-PF politics and what the politics of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai, meant to the army. In his address, which was held in the troops' canteen at one of the infantry battalions, Brigadier Mzilikazi asked soldiers to relax. He greeted them with a song, *Zimbabwe Nyika yedu yaBaba ... Zimbabwe Nyika yedu yeMadzitateguru* ('Zimbabwe is our country which belongs to our Fathers ... Zimbabwe is for our Ancestors'). This was about the entitlement of Zimbabwe and belonging to Zimbabwe. It was about exclusion of the 'Other' in politics. Those who were not born of our *Madzitateguru* (ancestors) were simply not deemed to belong to Zimbabwe.

Mzilikazi went on to state that 'there was nothing wrong with the MDC and Morgan Tsvangirai, but what they do, conniving with the West is what is wrong'. The room was quiet; he tried unsuccessfully to crack some jokes. It was a tense moment for soldiers who were being addressed by the Military Intelligence Director for the first time. Brigadier Mzilikazi further noted that, 'we know those who support the MDC here'. Soldiers looked at each other in horror. In the barracks, it was generally considered subversion for soldiers to support an opposition political party, in particular the MDC and its leaders. The former soldiers interviewed suggested that if the military intelligence just suspected that a soldier supported or sympathised with the MDC or Morgan Tsvangirai, that was enough to dismiss the soldier with ignominy, and without pension and service benefits. From the interviews, many soldiers faced such consequences. In one election, two second lieutenants were dismissed after it was thought that they were happy in the officers' mess when the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission was announcing election results in which ZANU-PF was losing by a wider margin in some constituencies. Dismissal from the military was in itself a political weapon used by the army generals in sustaining ZANU-PF and President Mugabe in power.

Most junior ranked soldiers were affected by what they referred to as 'barrack politics' which victimises soldiers. They were intimidated when it was time to vote in national elections. As noted by Sierra Tango,⁵ if 'you voted otherwise [than ZANU-PF] you would find yourself in prison, so you cannot say that soldiers were expressing their wishes'. Senior army officers, those aligned with ZANU-PF, ordered the arrest and detention of soldiers. What was interesting is that soldiers were imprisoned in detention barracks, and not civilian prisons. Detention barracks are politicised spaces characterised by military punishment, which is meant to reform soldiers to understand that politics was all about supporting ZANU-PF. During these exercises, detained soldiers are reminded that punishment is for those who support opposition political parties.

While junior soldiers were arrested and detained within the barracks, war veterans, especially those who had fought in the liberation struggle against British colonialism, were promoted despite not having taken any military courses according to their regiment files. This was noted by Bravo Charlie: ‘For war veterans there were rampant promotions. There was a signal that all war veterans in the army must be promoted one rank ... with immediate effect. This was despite that they were not skilled in that [higher] rank.’

The issue here is that war veterans who were still serving in the military were supporters of ZANU-PF. Their promotion was a political reward. Most war veterans even became commissioned officers. They were made to attend the Basic Officers’ Cadet course after a few weeks of training. The professionalism of military was undermined by the ZANU-PF politics of rewarding ZANLA veterans.

While some soldiers resigned from the military, interestingly, others deserted. In both cases, the reasons were mainly because of the party politics which had infiltrated the barracks. Soldiers could not bear it anymore.

I deserted because of politics. I was viewed as an MDC ... party supporter. I was then targeted on military parades. I was always punished for an offence I had not committed. I tried to resign, but every day I was punished and sometimes detained in the barracks by the regimental police.

These desertions were centred on the politicisation of the barracks spaces and the military. In an ideal military camp, military parades are professional spaces, where soldiers practice drills to enhance discipline and institute social cohesiveness (Hockey 2002). It is also a space where military briefings are held. However, the use of military parades as centres of political power reveals how the military had been politicised and how ZANU-PF’s support base has been dwindling in and beyond the barracks. The military generals employed and utilised political resources to sustain ZANU-PF in power.

Sustaining ZANU-PF beyond the barracks: army generals

Outside the barracks, army generals had to ensure that the military publicly supported ZANU-PF, while demeaning the MDC. Major General Martin Chedondo commanded soldiers either to vote for President Mugabe or resign from the military. He stated that:

Soldiers are not apolitical. Only mercenaries are apolitical. We have signed up and agreed to fight and protect the ruling party’s [ZANU-PF] principles of defending the revolution. If you have other thoughts, then you should remove that uniform. Mugabe is the leader of Zimbabwe’s defence forces. We should therefore stand behind our commander in chief. (The Associated Press 2008)

The binary of soldiers and mercenaries is used to justify why soldiers should be involved in politics. For Chedondo, soldiers are ‘mandated’ to be deeply involved in politics, to ‘fight’ and ‘protect’ ZANU-PF. While it was indisputable that by virtue of being the President, Mugabe was the commander-in-chief of the military as head of government, defending him in elections remains unlawful because Chapter 11, Section 21, Subsection 2(a-d) of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe states that members of the security services must not act in a partisan way and further the interests of any political party.

Through public speeches and press briefings, army generals publicly sustained ZANU-PF and Mugabe in power. What many do not know is that the army generals did not just wake up one day and decide to make speeches in support of ZANU-PF. A lot of political work was first done in the barracks, making sure that junior soldiers were well aligned with the politics which the army generals believed in. Military generals publicly supported ZANU-PF and denigrated the MDC and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai as a political stooge and sell-out. On the eve of the 2002 presidential elections and with ZANU-PF's candidate facing a serious threat from Tsvangirai, General Zvinvashe, flanked by other generals, addressed a press conference and declared that:

We wish to make it very clear to all Zimbabwean citizens that the security organisations will only stand in support of those political leaders that will pursue Zimbabwean values, traditions and beliefs for thousands of lives lost in pursuit of Zimbabwe's hard-won independence. Let it be known that the highest office in the land is a straightjacket whose occupant is expected to observe the objectives of the liberation struggle. We would therefore not accept, let alone support, or salute anyone with a different agenda that threatens the very existence of our sovereignty, our country, and our people. (Quoted in CNN 2002)

This is an example of the military's direct involvement in party politics. The extract reveals that politics in the Zimbabwean context is embodied in the history and experience of fighting against colonialism and imperialism. The assertion was in support of political interests entrenched in the liberation struggle which is deemed to have particular political 'objectives' to be 'observed'. It was meant to threaten those who were deemed to have a different agenda, which is contrary to liberation, and to send a clear message that the military and not the people had veto powers to reject any winner of a presidential election whom they say has values and objectives opposed to the liberation struggle agenda. The MDC and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai were perceived by ZANU-PF to be a front for imperial forces. The military in Zimbabwe stepped in to refuse handing over political power to a perceived retrogressive party.

The idea of portraying the opposition political parties as enemies of ZANU-PF and the military started soon after Zimbabwe became independent in 1980 and has been maintained by army generals ever since. According to my interviewees, in June 2007, General Chiwenga, now Vice President of Zimbabwe, moved from one brigade to another addressing soldiers on parade, telling them to vote for Mugabe. In the 2008 election, which Mugabe lost to Tsvangirai in the first round, leading to a run-off, General Chiwenga stated, 'elections are coming, and the army will not support or salute sell-outs and agents of the West before, during and after the presidential elections'. Responding to a journalist's question on the role the army was going to play in the elections, Chiwenga blustered, 'Are you mad? What is wrong with the army supporting the President against the election of sell-outs?' (IRIN 2008).

The military thus justified its interference in elections. To intervene successfully, the military first presented the opposition political party as an enemy of the liberation ethos. The MDC and its leader were 'sell-outs' and 'agents of the West', while Mugabe was backed as the President to be supported by the military. In this regard it is important to acknowledge the realities. This was an election between the military and 'its political wing' ZANU-PF, versus the opposition political party, the MDC. It was both a political contestation and a military operation to defeat the MDC and governments seen as hostile to the state.

ZANU-PF had to be protected by the military to win an election and become the government. This was made evident by Mugabe himself when, in 2009, he publicly thanked the army generals for intervening in elections to turn the tables against Morgan Tsvangirai and his MDC party. He first asked General Chiwenga to stand up, and thanked him for making sure that ZANU-PF survived the controversial and tightly contested presidential run-off election, which was characterised by state violence. Mugabe then stated:

Totenda ma war veterans, the military also, they played their role. Ndosaka takachengetedza varume ava vanga vasvika paku retire kuti tirwe hondo ne opposition, tikabva tabuda shudhu [We are grateful to war veterans and the military for playing their role. We extended their contracts when they were about to retire so that they could assist us in fighting the opposition, so we then came out victorious]. (President Mugabe, quoted in Mambo 2016)

Mugabe presented the loss of the 2008 election as a war, which required army generals to deal with the opposition political party:

We then reorganised ourselves after the 2008 loss ... That is why I kept these men [pointing at the army generals] in their positions even though they had long reached retirement age. We said we must fight this war first then we will see what happens later. (President Mugabe, quoted in Mambo 2016)

The public thanks given to the military by Mugabe was a clear acknowledgement that ZANU-PF as a political party would not have beaten the MDC in an election without the intervention of the military. For Muzondidya (2009), ZANU-PF approached the elections as battles, in which the opposition party is framed as an enemy to be annihilated and decimated. Mugabe depicted the elections as *hondo*, 'war' against the MDC, in which the invitation and involvement of the military was justified to help ZANU-PF to fight the opposition. Thus, Mugabe's public announcement of the military's participation in winning elections was a political threat to the electorate to ensure that ZANU-PF remained in power.

For Major General Chedondo, soldiers should be involved in national politics as this is part of ZANU-PF politics. He stated that:

A national defence force the world over is there to protect national politics, national integrity, the Executive and other systems that form part of the Government. By virtue of this, defence forces automatically become a political animal. Soldiers cannot be blind or blinkered on what they are protecting. We have to be alert and know where we came from and where we are going. As soldiers, we will never be apologetic for supporting ZANU-PF because it is the only political party that has national interests at heart. (*The Herald* 2012)

Chedondo's understanding of the function of the military was that it was to protect the ZANU-PF party. He castigated opposition political parties which questioned the involvement of the army in politics. Responding to why soldiers are involved in politics, he said:

The answer that I am giving those politicians who always ask if it is right for soldiers to be partisan is that the defence forces must exhibit the national outlook. As soldiers we must never apologise when we are discharging our noble role of protecting the integrity of our nation, hard won independence and our precious resources. We cannot be seen supporting a political party that is going against the ideals of a nation, which came by as a result of a liberation struggle, which saw many of the country's sons and daughters losing their lives. As soldiers we must support ideologies that we subscribe to, I for one will not be apologetic for supporting ZANU-PF because I was part of the liberation struggle. (*The Herald* 2012)

Another senior army officer, Major General Douglas Nyikayaramba (formerly Chief Executive Officer of the then Electoral Supervisory Commission, now the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission [ZEC], responsible for running the country's elections) believed that Morgan Tsvangirai was a 'security threat':

Tsvangirai doesn't pose a political threat in any way in Zimbabwe ... He takes instructions from foreigners who seek to effect regime change ... This is what has invited the security forces to be involved because we want to ensure we protect our national security interests. President Mugabe will only leave office if he sees it fit or dies. No one should be talking about his departure at the moment. We will die for him to make sure he remains in power. (*Mail & Guardian* 2011)

In March 2015, General Chiwenga accompanied then-Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa to a by-election campaign in Zibagwe-Chirumanzu constituency where Mnangagwa's wife was a candidate. Mnangagwa introduced General Chiwenga as the ZANU-PF political commissar:

The person I want you to meet is our commissar. Do you know Chiwenga? He is the one who brought all the helicopters which you saw here today. Stand up Chiwenga so that people can see you. He can't openly chant our party slogan because he is putting on army uniform, but he is our commissar. (Mhlanga and Mushava 2015)

There is an understanding that the military does not openly engage in politics, yet General Chiwenga was introduced as a 'political commissar'. While the actual ZANU-PF political commissar official was a civilian (Saviour Kasukuwere), Chiwenga did not hesitate to stand up and acknowledge that he campaigns for ZANU-PF. The General momentarily took over the function of the political commissar. Mnangagwa was reiterating the view which has been expressed by both ZANU-PF and military leaders, that the two organisations are one. He could also be seen as asserting power within ZANU-PF's factional politics, as Chiwenga was perceived to be backing Mnangagwa in the race to succeed Mugabe. Both were sending a message that the military leaders were stakeholders in ZANU-PF and were in control. As evidenced in Mnangagwa's statement, the military uses its resources to support ZANU-PF, yet Zimbabwe's constitution expressly prohibits the military from engaging in partisan politics.

However, Chiwenga viewed himself not only as a 'political commissar' of ZANU-PF but also as among those who 'own' Zimbabwe. As he emphatically stated: 'We are stockholders of the country. Some are stakeholders. Stakeholders will come and go, but stockholders have nowhere to go, so we stockholders, we come with it: Zimbabwe' (cited by Guramatunhu 2016).

Hence, there are those who join politics and those who are joined in politics. General Chiwenga and other commanders frame themselves as among those who have been joined. To understand ZANU-PF, we must recognise its historical relationship with the movement. While scholars tend to point to the 'politicisation of the military' and 'militarisation of politics' (Rupiya 2011), in Zimbabwe, the military is not being politicised. The military has always been political. To state that the military is politicised is a misunderstanding of the role and history of its operations in the liberation struggle and post-independence Zimbabwe. 'Militarisation of politics' and 'politicisation of the military' (Rupiya 2011) connotes that there are certain moments in time in which the military has been less heavily involved in politics. The military has a firm political position, and it periodically outlines it to ward off threats to its political interests.

At the height of political factions and succession debates within ZANU-PF, the Zimbabwe government as well as President Mugabe's spokesperson, George Charamba, rebuked the former Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Professor Jonathan Moyo (now in exile), who was opposed to the role of the army generals. He belittled and advised Moyo, a senior ZANU-PF leader and Member of Parliament, that the succession question was already settled:

Chine vene vacho chinhu ichi [This thing (Mugabe's succession) belongs to some people] and you won't be there when great questions of the day are settled *mumatare avo* [in their courts]. Too young, too small, simply a late arrivant, my good soulmate. You, me, all others like us, must do what we know and do best: quietly remake our worlds by remaking the knowledge that animates and moves them. (Cited by Pindula News 2017)

The idea of *Chine vene* is the politics of entitlement. It is 'them' and 'us' politics. The military are at the core of *Chinhu*, the succession. This was evidenced in the November 2017 coup, which toppled Mugabe, who was succeeded by Mnangagwa, with General Chiwenga as Vice President.

Coup and post-coup politics

Given the military's deep interest in ZANU-PF politics, it was not surprising to see it staging a coup to force Mugabe from power. On 13 November 2017, General Chiwenga declared that:

We will soon control the levers of power in our beautiful party and country. It is with humility and a heavy heart that we come before you to pronounce the indisputable reality that there is instability in ZANU-PF today and as a result anxiety in the country at large. We must remind those behind the current treacherous shenanigans that when it comes to matters of protecting our revolution, the military will not hesitate to step in. (Cited by Mackintosh 2017)

The military was reasserting its position of power in ZANU-PF. General Chiwenga's view was that only the military could stabilise the 'instability in ZANU-PF'. In this context, the military not only seeks to protect the 'revolution', rather it also sustains its own political interest. For General Chiwenga, 'The current purging, which is clearly targeting members of the party with a liberation background, must stop forthwith' (cited by BBC News 2017).

General Chiwenga was referring to ZANU-PF liberation activists who were dismissed from the party by President Mugabe. Those dismissed included Vice President Mnangagwa, among other top party officials. This statement was made to justify why military intervention and a coup was necessary in both ZANU-PF and the government. General Chiwenga led the subsequent coup which ousted Mugabe on 17 November 2017.

The military presented the ZANU-PF practices of purging its senior members as political practices spreading to and within the government. Hence the military appeared as the 'political saviour'. While the army commander referred to the coup as 'Operation Restore Legacy', for Mugabe, 'it was truly a military takeover ... it was a coup' (The *Guardian* 2018).

The post-coup context testified to the continued relationship between the ZANU-PF government and the military, as army generals were appointed to key government posts. Retired army general Chiwenga joined the ZANU-PF's politburo (the highest decision-making body of the party) and was appointed Vice President to President Mnangagwa. Major General SB Moyo (who was deeply involved in the DRC war diamond extraction) was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Perence Shiri, Commander of the Airforce of Zimbabwe, was appointed Minister of Lands, Agriculture and Rural Resettlement. Major General Rugeje was appointed ZANU-PF political commissar. Four other major generals were posted as ambassadors: Major General Chedondo, Major General Nyikayaramba, Major General Sanyatwe and Air Vice-Marshal Shebba Shumbayawonda.

On 1 August 2018, in the aftermath of the presidential elections, some opposition party members thought there was a delay in releasing the election results and feared that the ZEC was rigging the results. Though the ZEC's delay was still within the law, civilians swamped the streets of Harare in protest and some properties were destroyed. In response, the military was deployed to deal with protesters. Live ammunition was used, resulting in the deaths of at least six people. Questions were asked about who had deployed the military, with many arguing that action was uncalled for. In response to local international pressure to probe the state violence, the Motlanthe Commission of inquiry was appointed, headed by former South African president Kgalema Motlanthe, which Major General Sanyatwe and General PV Sibanda testified before. General PV Sibanda stated that he was advised by Vice President Chiwenga that President Mnangagwa had authorised the deployment of soldiers in accordance with the constitution (Motlanthe Commission 2018, 26). Major General Sanyatwe and General PV Sibanda justified the army's deployment but refuted claims that it was responsible for the death of protesters. However, the Commission's summary findings concluded that the deaths of six people and injuries to 35 people were because of the actions of the military and the police (Motlanthe Commission 2018, 48). The commission added that 'the use of live ammunition directly at people, especially while they were fleeing, was clearly unjustified and disproportionate' (Motlanthe Commission 2018, 47).

In a related but separate matter, in January 2019, the army deployed soldiers to respond to civilian socio-economic protests in Harare. The government also ordered the internet to be shut down for some days. It was reported that during the internet blackout, soldiers brutally assaulted and were alleged to have raped several civilians in their homes and streets (Al Jazeera 2019). Some lost their lives, and others were severely injured (Dzirutwe 2019).

These incidences led to renewed calls by Nelson Chamisa, leader of the Citizens Convergence for Change, for military reforms in Zimbabwe. In June 2019, Chamisa said:

Some have accused us of threatening to fire them all, but no, we want to fire those who are abusing the state. If you are soldiers you should respect the will of the people, because you are not a party army or party militia. We respect the army. So let's get to know each other better. (Cited by Munhende 2019)

Of note is the repeated threat or promise by the main opposition party leader, Nelson Chamisa, that they will depoliticise the military if they take over the government. The military has long dismissed these calls that it should be reformed, based on their understanding that this is a regime-change agenda (Munhende 2019).

Conclusion

This article has argued that the military in Zimbabwe directly and indirectly actively participates in the political system, which continues to serve its interests. At certain moments, particularly when its interests are threatened, it contributes to defining Zimbabwean politics, for example, who should be in power and who should continue being in power, and under what political terms and conditions.

Separating the military from politics remains a thorny and deeply political issue in Zimbabwe. Opposition parties in Zimbabwe have been calling for military reforms for years. The liberation war's experience and history challenges the concept of military professionalism both in theory and in practice, and informs the ways in which army commanders think and act. In the liberation war, guerrillas were inseparable from their political parties. This continues to this day in the relationship between the military and ZANU-PF, and will be difficult to change in the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. This was the brigade which was deployed to unleash violence against dissidents and civilians during the *Gukurahundi* massacre.
2. COSLEG was a Congo–Zimbabwe joint stock company, and key for military-backed business which involved diamonds, timber, war-time procurement, shareholding and banking in the DRC.
3. These were companies involved in the exploitation of diamonds in the DRC, which had strong relationships with the Zimbabwe military elites in the DRC.
4. These deals between military elites and civilian political elites in the DRC involved diversion of taxes, false invoicing, undervaluation of copper to evade customs duty, and smuggling, as well as kickbacks and bribes to public officials.
5. Throughout the discussion, I use military phonetic names as pseudonyms: Sierra Tango, Alpha Romeo, Oscar Papa and Charlie Mike.

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