

Dropping the Democracy Ball in Southern Africa SADC, South Africa, and Zimbabwe

Michael Bratton and Peter Penar

Abstract

Authoritarian resilience is not only a function of a state's domestic politics. International relations also may provide much support when authoritarian governments need it most. In the case of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) relied on support from neighboring states in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), including a permissive South Africa, despite severely flawed elections in 2002, 2008, and 2013. Why have neighboring states often turned a blind eye to electoral abuses in Zimbabwe? Our main argument is that Zimbabwe's neighbors are complicit in allowing the erosion of democracy in Zimbabwe because political incumbents across Southern Africa give priority to ruling-group survival. In this instance, the domestic imperative of political survival is underpinned by a collective international norm of political solidarity that originated in a shared, formative experience of national liberation struggles against white settler colonialism. Resulting ruling-group solidarity has been a strong enough force to trump a ruling group's material interests. To sustain their support of ZANU-PF, the governments of Southern Africa have been willing to incur considerable costs in the form of reduced investment opportunities, impeded trade, unpaid public debts, and a burdensome flood of refugees and migrants. The concept of ruling-group solidarity helps explain an important mechanism that contributes to democracy prevention, particularly in the Southern African context.

Keywords: Authoritarian resilience, democracy promotion, regional organizations, Southern African Development Community, Zimbabwe.

Michael Bratton is University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and African Studies at Michigan State University, East Lansing. <mbratton@msu.edu>

Peter Penar is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Political Science at Michigan State University, East Lansing. <ppenar@msu.edu>

In recent years, the comparative study of political regimes has split into divergent streams. While some scholars still study the dynamics of democratic transition and consolidation, others seek to unravel the mysteries of authoritarian resilience. Certainly, triumphal celebrations of a democratic end to history have long passed. Instead, a more sober global story of expanding strong-arm rule is the order of our less confident, more pessimistic times. In addition, the study of political regimes is no longer confined—if it ever correctly was—to the domestic realm of each state’s internal affairs. Rather, regime developments are now routinely seen in terms of interactions between a state’s domestic politics and its international relations. In the extreme, the prospects for democratization in small and weak states are even sometimes depicted as a function of the democracy-promotion or democracy-prevention efforts of larger entities located in a wider international system.

This essay explores the development of electoral authoritarian rule in one African country: Zimbabwe. We take it as given that this country’s political trajectory was produced in main part by a domestic contest between an entrenched ruling party—the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), led by Robert Mugabe—and a nascent opposition movement—the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai.¹ In place of these well-documented internal currents, this essay privileges international factors by situating Zimbabwe in relation to its powerful neighbor, South Africa, and by considering both countries within the regional organization of which both are members: the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This perspective reveals that middle-rank powers in neighboring states—acting alone and in concert and often autonomously from major global powers—help to shape regime outcomes from an intermediate regional position.²

The research questions are as follows: Why, under South African leadership, did SADC endorse a series of less-than-democratic elections in Zimbabwe? What explains the gap between principle and practice in the regional monitoring of elections in Southern Africa? Why have neighboring states often turned a blind eye to electoral abuses in Zimbabwe? Stated more broadly, what does the Southern Africa case contribute to our understanding of the international factors driving the erosion of democracy?

¹ Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo, *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2009); Adrienne LeBas, *From Protest to Parties: Party Building and Democratization in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eldred Masunungure and Jabusile Shumba, eds., *Zimbabwe: Mired in Transition* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2012); Michael Bratton, *Power Politics in Zimbabwe* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2015); and David Coltart, *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Press, 2016).

² Andrew Cooper, ed., *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave, 1997), and Eduard Jordaan, “The Concept of Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers,” *Politikon* 30, no. 2 (2003): 165-181.

Our main argument is that Zimbabwe’s neighbors are complicit in allowing the erosion of democracy in Zimbabwe because political incumbents across Southern Africa give priority to ruling-group survival. In this instance, the domestic imperative of political survival is underpinned by a collective international norm of political solidarity that originated in a shared formative experience of national liberation struggles against white settler colonialism. A common political identity among “brother presidents and sister organizations”³ finds expression in a characteristic set of elite preoccupations: resistance to perceived threats of regime change; attachment to the mantra of “African solutions to African problems”; and dogged defense of a vanguard-party approach to governance.⁴

The essay begins by tracing a shared regional history of settler colonialism, liberation war, and the rise of post-colonial ruling parties. We then draw on a selective review of the literature on democracy promotion and democracy prevention in order to distinguish our own working concept: ruling-group solidarity. The empirical heart of the essay is an analytical narrative that traces political interactions among three groups of political actors in the two decades from 1994 to 2013. These actors are:

1. The governments of South Africa led by Nelson Mandela (1994–1999), Thabo Mbeki (1999–2009), and Jacob Zuma (2009–2013);
2. The fifteen-member Southern African Development Community, especially in its role of addressing economic and political crises in Zimbabwe; and,
3. The electoral protagonists within Zimbabwe, namely the incumbent ZANU-PF government and the opposition MDCs, up to and including the forced cohabitation of these parties in a government of national unity, 2009–2013.

Presidential elections, often conducted under crisis conditions, are the focal points of this narrative. The essay analyzes the political dynamics of

³ Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Reconstructing the Implications of Liberation Struggle History on SADC Mediation in Zimbabwe,” *South African Institute of International Affairs Occasional Paper*, no. 92 (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, September 2011), 3.

⁴ Henning Melber, ed., *Limits to Liberation in Southern Africa: The Unfinished Business of Democratic Consolidation* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2003); Roger Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2013); and Renske Doorenspleet and Lia Nijzink, eds., *One-Party Dominance in African Democracies* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013).

election competition, administration, and monitoring over three elections in Zimbabwe in 2002, 2008, and 2013. It shows how external actors undermined their own professed standards⁵ by downplaying the Zimbabwe government's repeated violations of democratic norms and procedures. The essay concludes with reflections on the possible contributions of the Southern Africa case to our understanding of how regional political solidarity can erode democracy and shore up autocracy.

Conceptual Framework

The existing literature provides a measure of guidance.

Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion is an aspect of foreign policy in which an external actor encourages progress on democracy by shaping the rules by which politics is conducted in a target state.⁶ Beyond free and fair elections under universal suffrage, democratic rules include respect for civil and political rights and the rule of law. Although democracy is a contested concept,⁷ its promotion is most often associated with liberal values and institutions of popular government. In principle, it clearly excludes diminished regime forms in which oligarchic elites—political, military, or religious—act as “guardians” of the public interest.⁸ The tools of democracy promotion range from confidential diplomacy, through public praise or shame, to the attachment of political conditions to development aid, the implementation of in-country democracy-building programs, and military pressure, even intervention.⁹

Autocracy Promotion

Efforts at promoting Western democracy have prompted a backlash. Rulers in key authoritarian regimes have learned to resist political openings and to preempt democratization at home and abroad. Whether dubbed “autocracy

⁵ Southern African Development Community (SADC), “SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections” (Pretoria: Organ on Politics, Defense and Security, July 2015).

⁶ Daniela Huber, *Democracy Promotion and Foreign Policy: Identity and Interests in US, EU and Non-Western Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁷ David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki, eds., *The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion* (London: Routledge, 2012); and Michael Coppedge, Staffan Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, and Jan Teorell, “Measuring High Level Democratic Principles Using the V-Dem Data,” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 5 (2016): 580-593.

⁸ Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁹ Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), and Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

promotion” or “democracy prevention,” their strategies combine restrictions on civic mobilization within national borders and international outreach with “hard-,” “soft-,” and “sharp-power” initiatives.¹⁰ A new generation of assertive autocrats seeks to counter democratic norms by proclaiming ideologies based on traditional, religious, or national values. They make sophisticated use of the global communications media by disseminating propaganda over state-sponsored television networks and manipulating the content of information on the Internet. They actively seek to erode the accountability effects of elections, legislatures, courts, and watchdog agencies, thus subverting democratic institutions. *In extremis*, autocratic regimes also deploy military means, including territorial occupation and cyber warfare.

Ruling-Group Solidarity

To date, however, scholars have had little to say about international ruling-group solidarity as a factor contributing to the fate of political regimes. The behavior of ruling elites is shaped in good part by a self-interested drive for political survival.¹¹ But leaders cannot govern strictly alone; they require a coterie of supporters, a winning coalition. Among other considerations, what distinguishes democrats from autocrats is the size of this ruling group, with autocrats seeking to limit the spoils of power to a small circle of insiders.¹² Moreover, autocratic governance is marked by an approach to governance in which conflict is managed less by enforcing institutional rules than by arbitrary resort to violence.¹³

To the extent that the game of political survival is played in international as well as domestic arenas, incumbents try to extend minimal coalitions to include external actors.¹⁴ In this regard, international collaboration among autocrats is primarily a self-serving project in which rulers enter regional

¹⁰ Peter Burnell, “Is There a New Autocracy Promotion?” *FRIDE Working Paper*, no. 96 (Madrid: Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior [FRIDE], March 2010); Rachel Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013); Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); and National Endowment for Democracy (NED), *From “Soft Power” to “Sharp Power”: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World* (Washington, DC: NED, 2018).

¹¹ Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sandcastles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

¹² Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith, *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Perseus Public Affairs, 2011).

¹³ Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Robert Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427-460, and Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

alliances principally to maximize their own chances of staying in power.¹⁵ By opening up to the outside world, however, autocrats also risk exposing themselves to criticism of their own harsh practices or becoming subject to unwanted efforts at rule enforcement by third parties.

Beyond the calculations of rational leaders, other factors—institutional, ideological, and structural—also are at play. In the first place, ruling groups—rather than individual leaders—are the most appropriate units of analysis. Rather than sticking with any particular incumbent come hell or high water, ruling groups instead prioritize the long-term survival of the political regime. This broader goal is best served by the construction of resilient institutions, such as dominant political parties, even if institution building involves devising rules for rotating or replacing top leaders.¹⁶

Second, ruling groups are glued together by ideas and values as well as by material self-interest. Group cohesion is often founded when political leaders develop a common world-view based on shared political experience in early adulthood. A shared history of revolutionary struggle is the experience perhaps most likely to generate lasting cohesion once a ruling group takes office. Whenever the chips are down—say during periods of economic contraction—former revolutionaries can call upon ideological solidarity as a supplementary resource for ensuring regime survival.¹⁷

Finally, a country's position in the world order may encourage a ruling group to behave in collective rather than isolated fashion. Because small and weak states tend to perceive a high level of threat from the international environment, they face strong incentives to collaborate in their own defense. The more that autocrats in the developing world think that Western countries promote a crusade of democratic regime change, for example, the more likely they are to react with a coordinated quest for collective security. In short, self-interest (however conceived and constructed) is best pursued through a strategy of “all for one and one for all,” including by entering regional alliances.

The Southern Africa Context

Compared to other parts of Africa, the Southern Africa region displays a distinctive history. An influx of European immigrants who put down roots during the colonial period set Southern Africa apart from Central and West

¹⁵ Christian von Soest, “Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes,” *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 623-638.

¹⁶ Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in the Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 869-890, and Blessing-Miles Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals and the Media* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

Africa, where the colonial presence was much more tentative and temporary. Under settler-colonial rule, white leaders built durable political institutions that were relatively autonomous from control by the imperial metropole. They used the political discretion at their disposal to construct legal regimes of strict racial separation, culminating in the institutional edifice of apartheid in South Africa. Moreover, settler colonists invested in relatively advanced capitalist economies based, for example, on gold and diamonds in South Africa and large-scale export-oriented agriculture in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). At the popular level, the countries of the region were bound together by flows of black migrant labor to the mines and farms of the south, which helped to imbue local populations with common experiences and shared identities that persist to the present day.

Because white minority rule became politically and economically entrenched, Southern Africa followed an atypical path to majority rule. In the rest of the continent, African nationalists were able to obtain early political independence by the mid-1960s, using tactics of mass political mobilization and constitutional negotiation. The colonial authorities, weakened by World War II, readily acquiesced to the dissolution of empire, which benefited countries on the northern rim of the Southern Africa region such as Zambia and Malawi (both independent in 1964), as well as Botswana (1966). But in the largest countries of Southern Africa, settlers held *de facto* political power and were determined to uphold their own privilege and to block African political advancement. As a result, the struggle for majority rule took longer. Political independence under a universal franchise occurred in Angola and Mozambique only by 1975 and in Zimbabwe by 1980, Namibia by 1989, and in South Africa as late as 1994.

Liberation War

More importantly, the long march to freedom succeeded mainly as a result of liberation war. Once African nationalists realized that settlers would never voluntarily cede political power and that peaceful protest was futile, they had little choice but to turn to violence. Armed struggle in Southern Africa took the form of a region-wide cascade of rural guerrilla insurgencies, mounted by the armed wing of each country's most popular nationalist political party, such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia. In Zimbabwe, the liberation movement was divided between rival groups: the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), led by Joshua Nkomo, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), led by Robert Mugabe. Other countries of the region, such as Zambia and Tanzania, acted collectively as "front-line states" by providing rear bases for the guerrilla armies and weathering political destabilization and trade disruption imposed by South Africa.

Across the region, fighting or supporting a liberation war was the seminal life experience of an entire political generation. By engaging in resistance and struggle, African nationalists incurred severe costs; many of those not killed or injured on the battlefield were detained, jailed, or exiled by the colonial authorities. In a hostile world full of perceived enemies and potential “sellouts,” the “comrades” were never certain whom they could trust. As a result, elite political culture became deeply secretive, confined to a small circle of insiders. Elite identity and cohesion were underpinned by shared political values, articulated via an emerging ideology of anti-settler resentment and revolutionary violence. When Western governments refused to underwrite armed struggle, the Africans turned to the Soviet Union and China for training, weapons, and logistical support. The internationalization of the conflict as a proxy for the Cold War pushed the ideology of African nationalism leftward and reinforced a lasting suspicion of Western imperial ambitions in the region.

Political Legacies

Governments tend to govern according to the means by which they come to power—whether by bullet or ballot. To be sure, in the final days of settler rule throughout Southern Africa, African-led governments were all finally installed through competitive elections under a universal franchise. However, for many leaders of the region, a democratic election was viewed less as an intrinsic end in itself than as a means to an end—to capture the robust and extensive powers of the settler-colonial state. To the extent that one-person, one-vote guaranteed that a demographic majority of black voters would always prevail, democracy was understood more in majoritarian terms than as civil liberties and minority rights. And, as the gold standard of international legitimacy, elections had the additional useful property of endorsing a country’s government in the eyes of the wider world. To this extent—and, in some cases, no further—the new nations of Southern Africa were born as democracies.

Indeed, the legacy of the liberation war lived on. The incoming rulers used the sacrifices of guerrillas—“we died for this country”—as the ultimate justification for elite entitlement. As liberators, the ruling group claimed that Zimbabwe (or Namibia, or Mozambique, or Angola) belonged to them and not to anyone else. They thus expected to rule in perpetuity. Moreover, they asserted a prerogative to seize the spoils of victory by wresting ownership of farms, mines, and businesses from settler hands. Regarding political opposition, leaders deemed not to have partaken in the liberation war, or not to have done so with sufficient vigor, were seen as permanently ineligible to enjoy the fruits of independence. Instead, by challenging a revolutionary ruling group, opposition groups were held to be unwitting agents of white-settler colonialism and international imperialism.

In notable regularity, every political party that sponsored a national liberation war in Southern Africa survives in office to the present day. The quintessential example is ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, which in 2016 had not

surrendered power over eight election cycles since 1980. But the ANC, SWAPO, MPLA, and FRELIMO have proved just as durable. Even the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which rose to prominence without a liberation war, has controlled state power for fifty years without an electoral alternation. To a greater or lesser extent, leaders of Southern Africa regard these parties as revolutionary vanguards that guide and shape the nature of democracy in each country.

The critical question is whether parties of national liberation will ever be willing to cede control of the state if opposition forces win national elections. So far in Southern Africa, this issue has been tested only in Zimbabwe. All indications in the narrative that follows are that the answer is “no.” Faced with the prospect of electoral defeat in 2002 and 2013—and actual defeat in 2008—ZANU-PF employed a battery of electoral manipulations and violent abuses to cling to power. And it did so with the tacit consent of South Africa and SADC. In this respect, the ruling group in Zimbabwe demonstrated its uncertain attachment to the norms and procedures of democracy; instead, the legacy of national liberation—bullets rather than ballots—was revealed as the bedrock value of this competitive authoritarian regime. And SADC and South Africa were closely involved in monitoring—and, ultimately, certifying—a series of disputed elections in Zimbabwe. In this way, international actors revealed their commitment to ruling-group solidarity, even at the cost of the erosion of democracy in the region as a whole.

From Mandela to Mbeki

Following the installation of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa in 1994, the promotion of democracy in Africa became a cornerstone of the ANC government’s foreign policy.¹⁸ Addressing international audiences, Mandela publicly criticized one-party and personal rule, arguing instead that South Africa’s national interests, and the success of the country’s own democratic experiment, were served by advancing human rights and free elections across the continent.¹⁹ In practical terms, this policy stance led South Africa to criticize annulled polls and the execution of environmental activists in Nigeria, to broker peace talks in Burundi, and to send troops into Lesotho (under a SADC banner), purportedly to pre-empt a military coup.

Some African leaders resented the moralistic tone of the Mandela doctrine, especially since South Africa was a latecomer to the ranks of majority-ruled states. Others saw the upstart government in Pretoria as having arrogant ambitions as a regional superpower. Home to Africa’s largest and

¹⁸ Chris Landsberg, “Promoting Democracy: The Mandela–Mbeki Doctrine,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 3 (2000): 107-121.

¹⁹ Nelson Mandela, “South Africa’s Future Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (1993): 86-97.

most sophisticated economy, South Africa dominated production, trade, and banking in the SADC region and beyond. Indeed, diplomatic outreach to the continent was accompanied by the rapid spread of business investment, often to the detriment of local firms unaccustomed to competing with efficient multinational operations from the south.²⁰ Small wonder then that South Africa's early efforts at democracy promotion were regarded in some quarters as the imperialistic machinations of a Western surrogate.

The Mandela presidency (1994–1999)—with Thabo Mbeki as deputy president and diplomat-in-chief—was therefore marked by tense relations with other countries in Africa. SADC itself was divided over the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): whereas Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia sent troops to prop up the government of Laurent Kabila in Kinshasa, South Africa provided arms to Rwanda and Uganda, which backed rebel groups. South Africa was therefore unable to insert itself as an honest broker between the warring parties and to promote its preferred solutions: a peace agreement and a government of national unity. At the same time, South Africa and Zimbabwe clashed over the post-apartheid state's delay in lifting protectionist tariffs that hurt Zimbabwean industries. Nor could they agree on the purpose of SADC's Organ for Politics, Defense and Security; Mandela (then chairperson of SADC) threatened to resign over a rupture with Mugabe (as head of the Organ).

Chastened by foreign policy setbacks, South Africa changed tack. Under the influence of Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela as president in 1999, Pretoria opted against public confrontation with a policy of “strategic ambiguity.”²¹ While South Africa would continue to promote democracy, it would now do so in co-equal partnerships rather than as an over-assertive hegemon. In a July 1998 meeting with African counterparts, Mbeki proposed an “African Renaissance” that imagined a continental rejuvenation based on black consciousness, neoliberal reforms, and the global rise of a modern Africa. This vision would be self-implemented through a New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and self-monitored through an African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). In these ways, Africans would collectively address their own political and economic challenges without interference from the outside—read Western—world.

Perhaps most importantly, high-profile public oratory about democracy, which Mbeki characterized as “megaphone diplomacy,” would be replaced with “quiet diplomacy,” that is, informal, behind-the-scenes negotiations

²⁰ John Daniel, Varusha Naidoo, and Sanusha Naidu, “The South Africans Have Arrived: Post-Apartheid Corporate Expansion into Africa,” in *State of the Nation: South Africa 2003-2004*, ed. John Daniel, Adam Habib, and Roger Southall (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2003), and Dianna Games, *The Experience of South African Firms Doing Business in Africa* (Pretoria: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2014).

²¹ Chris Landsberg, “Promoting Democracy: The Mandela-Mbeki Doctrine,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 3 (2000): 107-121.

among top political elites. Indeed, South Africa's Zimbabwe policy became identified more with the office of the president than with the foreign ministry and increasingly reliant on personal, back-channel diplomatic interventions by Mbeki himself.

The key issue was the degree of ambiguity involved in the new strategic initiative. Would South Africa still be able to send a clear and unambiguous message about democratization? Or would *realpolitik*—the interest of ruling groups in political survival—prevail? As it happened, elections in Zimbabwe became a recurring test case. According to Mbeki's biographer, Mark Gevisser, "no other issue, save AIDS, was to generate more public opprobrium for Mbeki than his handling of Mugabe."²² Over time, the policy of quiet diplomacy came to be seen as appeasing and enabling an African autocrat in his bid to rule indefinitely.

Zimbabwe's 2002 Elections

Election outcomes in post-colonial Zimbabwe were grossly lopsided. The ruling ZANU-PF party always won and by growing majorities over time; by 1990, it controlled 98 percent of the seats in the National Assembly and, in 1996, Mugabe won 93 percent of the popular vote for president. But with average real incomes lower than at the time of independence and cuts to social services under IMF-induced austerity reforms, citizens were ready for change. In the late 1990s, a nascent opposition emerged from the trade union movement, which called for more jobs and better wages, and from a coalition of civic organizations that demanded political accountability and an end to corruption. Together, they forged the Movement for Democratic Change, initially around the issue of reforming Zimbabwe's national constitution by reducing the powers of the presidency.

When ZANU-PF lost a 2000 referendum on constitutional reform—its first electoral defeat ever—Mugabe reacted aggressively. He abandoned an independence-era agreement to pay fair market prices for land and unleashed armed militias to forcefully expel white settlers from their farms. By confiscating land without compensation, he proclaimed himself a liberator in a life-and-death struggle for the restoration of black Africans' lost rights, a populist message that resonated throughout SADC and the wider African continent. In July 2000, the government announced a so-called Fast Track Land Reform and Resettlement Program in which some six million hectares were redistributed to small-farm families and black commercial operators. But the prime properties were allocated to party and state elites, some of whom obtained several farms.

²² Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007), 432.

The violent and chaotic land seizures set the tone for 2002 elections in which the MDC for the first time posed a meaningful threat to ZANU-PF's control of the presidency. MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai contested the election with a trumped-up treason charge hanging over his head that was resolved only by his acquittal after the election. As in other SADC countries that favored control of mass politics, the incumbent's hand in Zimbabwe was strengthened by new laws: a Public Order and Security Act (POSA) banned meetings of five or more people without police permission, and an Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) required the registration of journalists and prohibited foreign correspondents. In addition, a Citizenship Act served to disenfranchise farm laborers and mineworkers who originated from Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique, as well as the few remaining whites who had kept foreign passports.

As in 2000 parliamentary elections, the ruling party's strategy was to create "no go" zones in the countryside that were closed to opposition campaigning. MDC meetings were proscribed or disrupted; voters were indoctrinated in all-night ZANU-PF propaganda sessions; and opposition candidates and supporters were beaten, driven from their homes, arrested, abducted, or killed. When drought devastated rural Zimbabwe in 2002, a key ruling party insider declared, "We don't want all these extra people...we would be better off with only six million [of] our own people who supported the liberation struggle."

Despite campaign irregularities and state-sponsored violence, Tsvangirai obtained 42 percent of the presidential vote to Mugabe's claim of 56 percent in the March 8–10, 2002 presidential election. Yet, the total number of votes for the incumbent was almost half a million (40 percent) higher than the incumbent's party had received in the 2000 parliamentary election, which raised the possibility that the count had been manipulated. Certainly, the fact that final results were compiled without full scrutiny at a "command center" run by intelligence and security forces did not inspire confidence.

The head of the Commonwealth observer group, General Abdusalam Abubakar, drew attention to a number of irregularities and recommended against accepting the election outcome. The presidents of Ghana and Senegal concurred. Yet, President Mbeki, whose judgment was the most influential for the region, preferred to accept determinations that the election was "credible" (from an ANC party delegation) and "legitimate" (from an official government South African Observer Mission).

Apart from the fact that neither group deemed the election "free and fair," Mbeki's position was squarely contradicted by a third South African report that the South African president personally commissioned from two prominent high-court jurists. In the so-called Khampepe Report, the judges noted a suspect voters' roll, a shortage of polling places in urban opposition strongholds, and a court-ordered extension of the voting period.²³ They weighed their positive

²³ Sisi Khampepe and Dikgang Moseneke, "Report on the 2002 Presidential Elections of Zimbabwe" (Pretoria, 2002), <http://serve.mg.co.za/content/documents/2014/11/14/reportonthe2002presidentialelectionsofzimbabwe.pdf> (accessed September 27, 2016).

view of the technical administration of the vote on polling day against serious pre-election abuses that resulted in the deaths of 107 mainly opposition supporters at the hands of ruling party militias. They inferred that “violence and intimidation must have engendered fear in connection with the electoral process. In certain areas, freedom of choice must have been compromised.”²⁴ The judges concluded that, due to “the cumulative substantial departures from international standards...these elections... *cannot* be considered free and fair.”²⁵

Mbeki declined to publicly release the Khampepe Report, however, as did his successors in the presidency. In June 2008, the *Mail and Guardian*, an independent South African newspaper, lodged a freedom of information request to secure access to the report. A disputatious back-and-forth process of affidavits, court orders, and appeals followed in which the presidency made every effort to suppress its content. But the Constitutional Court of South Africa finally ruled in November 14, 2014—more than twelve years after the election—that the Khampepe findings about Zimbabwe’s flawed 2002 presidential contest belonged in the public realm. Why would the South African government exert such a dogged effort to cover up electoral irregularities in a neighboring state?

Part of the explanation must surely draw on political solidarity among former liberation movements, a solidarity that did not automatically exist but had to be constructed. In 1980, the South African ANC—then exiled in Lusaka, Zambia—was shocked by ZANU-PF’s decisive victory in Zimbabwe’s independence election. At the time, the ANC was aligned with Joshua Nkomo’s Zimbabwe African People’s Union and ZAPU’s electoral rout felt like a defeat for many South Africans. But Mbeki—then the ANC’s political secretary—understood that the electoral demography of Zimbabwe, with its rural Shona-speaking majority, gave Mugabe a lasting grip on power. He therefore embarked on a personal and professional mission to befriend Mugabe and realign the ANC with ZANU. These efforts paid quick dividends: the ANC was permitted to open a political office in Harare, even though it never succeeded in gaining ZANU-PF support for opening an infiltration route through Zimbabwe to South Africa for the ANC’s *Umkhonto we Sizwe* fighters.

The ties between former liberation parties—the ANC and the ZANU-PF—had deepened by the 2000s. The cultural nationalist strand in Mbeki’s African Renaissance harmonized well with Mugabe’s neoracist quest to restore lost African land rights. For example, the South African president amplified Mugabe’s claim that Britain was responsible for paying the costs of land purchases and resettlement in Zimbabwe.²⁶ According to his biographer, Mbeki

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁶ Thabo Mbeki, “We Will Resist and Upside-Down View of Africa,” *ANC Today* (December 12–18, 2003), and Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe*.

“believed with a passion that the only reason that the Western world (and white South Africa) had demonized Mugabe was because his victims were white farmers rather than nameless black masses” and he read “any white criticism of Mugabe as racist, an attack on Africans’ ability to govern themselves.”²⁷ The younger Mbeki may even have seen the senior Mugabe as a father figure within a wider “family of freedom fighters.”²⁸ Moreover, the cantankerous “old man” always could speak over Mbeki’s head to land-hungry peasants and unemployed workers in South Africa. In this regard, South Africa had limited leverage over Zimbabwe.

Perhaps in an effort to remedy this situation, by 2002, South Africa had become an ardent international advocate for overturning Zimbabwe’s suspension from the Commonwealth, imposed when land seizures had turned violent. And when Mbeki met George W. Bush in 2003, he persuaded the U. S. president that, because Africans were responsible for their own neighborhood, he (Mbeki) should be the international community’s point man in brokering a solution in Zimbabwe.²⁹ By 2004, SADC leaders came out publicly behind Mugabe, saying “they were tired of preaching from countries that had denied them democratic rights under colonial rule” and, because Africans were “spiritually anchored in the lands of our ancestors, we cannot run away from our historical duty to set right...historical wrongs and injustices.”³⁰

Zimbabwe’s 2008 Elections

By 2008, Zimbabwe’s economy was close to collapse. Under direction from the Office of the President, the governor of the Reserve Bank had gone on a money-printing spree that triggered rampant hyperinflation. At a time when per capita incomes were beginning to rise in the rest of Africa, the Zimbabwe economy contracted in every year between 2000 and 2008, shrinking by nearly half over the period. One of every two Zimbabweans was dependent on international food aid. Social services crumbled: schools closed country-wide and thousands died in epidemics of cholera and AIDS. Consequently, perhaps a quarter of the country’s twelve million people took the exit option by migrating to Botswana, South Africa, or overseas.

The economic crisis was matched by a political crisis. In a landmark event in March 2007, state agents attacked a peaceful protest: one person was killed,

²⁷ Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, 440.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 441.

²⁹ George W. Bush, “The President’s News Conference with President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa in Pretoria, South Africa” (July 9, 2003), online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucs.edu/ws/?pid=145> (accessed September 27, 2016).

³⁰ Thabo Mbeki, cited in Linda Freeman, “South Africa’s Zimbabwe Policy: Unravelling the Contradictions,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23, no. 2 (2005): 151-152.

fifty were hospitalized (including Tsvangirai), and nearly two hundred were arrested. A crackdown followed in which opposition operatives were beaten in front of their families or abducted to secret torture sites. Lawyers who sought to locate and defend victims were also targeted for violence. Zimbabwe's Catholic bishops issued a pastoral letter asserting that "black Zimbabweans today fight for the same basic rights they fought for during the liberation struggle." Mugabe's reaction to this criticism was to announce: "If they protest again, we will bash them again."³¹

Growing regional unease about mounting violence within a member state prompted SADC to convene an extraordinary summit meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in March 2007. The intergovernmental body signaled that political solidarity was not a blank check; each government had a responsibility to ensure stability and avoid international opprobrium by keeping its own house in order. In a consequential move, the summit's final communique charged Mbeki to serve as facilitator of dialogue between the Zimbabwe government and its opposition. Whereas elements within the MDC appeared committed to a mediation process, ZANU-PF displayed much more reluctance. Mugabe delayed sending envoys to talks and repeatedly refused face-to-face deliberations with Tsvangirai. And representatives of civil society, who were denied a seat at the negotiating table, rejected Mbeki's strategy of quiet diplomacy; they saw his unwillingness to publicly criticize Mugabe's policies as inadequate to obtain real concessions.

These concerns were borne out. No sooner had the conferees agreed to piecemeal reforms to repressive laws than ZANU-PF ignored them. In violation of agreed-upon procedure, Mugabe unilaterally announced general elections. At first, when a splintered MDC won a slim majority in the House of Assembly election of March 2008, it looked as though the opposition had made the political breakthrough it had long sought. But their jubilation was short-lived. After a suspicious five-week delay, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission announced that no candidate—neither Tsvangirai with 48 percent of the valid vote nor Mugabe with 43 percent—had achieved the absolute majority necessary to win in the first round of the presidential contest. A constitutionally mandated runoff election was therefore scheduled for June 27, 2008.

On the brink of losing the presidency, ZANU-PF launched a terror campaign. The country was divided into ten provincial command centers, staffed by two hundred serving army officers who were dispatched mainly to rural areas to mobilize militias. These combined forces—sometimes in uniform, often not—were ordered to invade farms, burn houses, and intimidate voters. The rulers' strategy for the runoff—code-named Operation Mavhotera Papi (How did you vote?)—was partisan cleansing; the objective was to displace MDC supporters from swing districts, thus eliminating the opposition

³¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Bashing Dissent: Escalating Violence and State Repression in Zimbabwe* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007).

as an electoral threat. Up to two hundred MDC officials and sympathizers were killed and perhaps 200,000 uprooted from their homes. Tsvangirai appealed to African and Western governments to isolate the Mugabe regime and, fearing for his own life, ultimately withdrew from the election. Mugabe was left to claim a hollow victory, with 85 percent of the vote from a brutalized and shrunken electorate.

But few regarded him as the legitimate president of Zimbabwe. In this instance, SADC observers reported that the runoff election “did *not* represent the will of the Zimbabwean people” (emphasis added).³² At an African Union (AU) summit meeting in Egypt, with a startled Mugabe in attendance, African leaders—from Kenya, Botswana, Nigeria, Liberia, and Senegal—condemned the violence, with some even calling for Zimbabwe’s suspension from the AU and a new election in the presence of peacekeepers. But the final AU communique praised SADC mediation efforts and recommended a power-sharing settlement.³³ The United Nations Security Council considered a resolution, drafted by the United States, to impose an arms embargo and targeted sanctions. Yet, this measure was vetoed by two permanent members—Russia and China—and opposed by others including Libya, Vietnam, and South Africa. At best, South Africa’s position on this issue was designed to keep options open for a regional alliance of like-minded regimes to devise homegrown solutions to problems in their own backyard. At worst, by aligning with an international pro-Mugabe bloc, Pretoria’s foreign policy reaffirmed its leaders’ deep ambivalence to meaningful political change in Zimbabwe.

Indeed, it seems that Mbeki always saw the route to crisis resolution in Zimbabwe as occurring through the reform—but never the displacement—of ZANU-PF. To be sure, reforms would require ZANU-PF to submit to democratic elections to ensure that it represented the will of the people. But Mbeki apparently refused to countenance an alternation of power, an outcome that was interpreted by the ruling groups in Harare and Pretoria alike as a manifestation of a Western “regime-change” agenda. ZANU-PF elites harbored, and many in SADC shared, a suspicion of the MDC as outsiders who lacked anti-colonial struggle credentials and thus were never part of the family of allied national liberation movements. In that regard, the opposition’s charge that Mbeki was a “dishonest broker”³⁴ carried some weight. The older generation of liberation leaders distrusted the MDCs’ ideological attachment to a liberal form of democracy and their financial ties to Western governments. Certainly, Tsvangirai—who financed his party operations with grants from

³² SADC Election Observer Mission (SEOM), “Preliminary Statement on the Presidential Runoff Election Held on 27 June 2008” (Harare: SADC, June 29, 2008).

³³ African Union (AU), “African Union Summit Resolution on Zimbabwe,” adopted at the 11th Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly, Sharm el Sheik, Egypt, July 1, 2008.

³⁴ Morgan Tsvangirai, “Address to MDC Members of Parliament” (Harare: Harvest House, December 18, 2002).

U. S. sources and routinely preferred to curry favor with Western rather than African diplomats—did little to allay charges that Zimbabwe’s democracy movement was a neocolonial appendage.

Mbeki had his own reasons to worry about the emergence of a labor-based opposition in Zimbabwe, especially since the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) had swept to power under a trade union leader in Zambia in 1991. After all, the ANC headed a fractious federation with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Mbeki and his party were therefore always vulnerable to division from the left. The ANC’s fear of being outflanked only intensified when COSATU came out openly in support of the trade union-backed MDC and the SACP criticized the violent displacement of black farmworkers under Zimbabwe’s land seizures.³⁵

Thus, a political settlement based on a transitional government of national unity (GNU) became Pretoria’s preferred option. Not only was a GNU backed by the AU and SADC but also 70 percent of adult Zimbabweans agreed that “problems in (our) country can only be solved if the MDC and ZANU-PF sit down and talk with one another.”³⁶ Mbeki may have arrived at this preference as early as 2002, but others in SADC—especially hardline regimes in Angola and Namibia—needed more time to get on board. As a compromise solution, a GNU would both acknowledge ZANU-PF as the leading liberator and contain the MDC as a junior partner.

Thus, again under Mbeki’s mediation, a memorandum of understanding was brokered in July 2008 for talks about “establishing the framework of an inclusive government.” After several months of tense on-again, off-again negotiations in Pretoria, ZANU-PF and two wings of the MDC signed a self-styled Global Political Agreement (GPA) on September 15, 2008. The main protagonists—Mugabe, who remained in office as president; Tsvangirai who assumed a newly created post of prime minister; and Arthur Mutambara as deputy prime minister—accepted a deal to divide state power and to govern cooperatively.

Zimbabwe’s 2013 Elections

For many reasons, power sharing worked badly in Zimbabwe. In the first place, international rather than domestic actors originated the idea of a coalition government and supervised its implementation. Mbeki had repeatedly moved

³⁵ Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), “COSATU Condemns MDC Arrests” (Johannesburg: COSATU Media Centre, March 12, 2007), and Linda Freeman, “South Africa’s Zimbabwe Policy: Unravelling the Contradictions,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23, no. 2 (2005): 147-172.

³⁶ Afrobarometer, *Zimbabwe Round 3 Data* (2005), <http://afrobarometer.org/data/zimbabwe-round-3-data-2005> (accessed September 27, 2016).

negotiations forward by exaggerating to SADC the extent of buy-in from the principals in Zimbabwe.³⁷ Hence, the commitment of mutually distrustful domestic actors to implement the GPA was reluctant and half-hearted from the outset. The MDCs had reason to question whether all parties were sincere; after all, Mugabe had a long record of renegeing on past agreements. Second, intentionally or not, the terms of the unity agreement were left vague, especially how power would be divided between the president and prime minister. On key issues of political appointments and policy consultation, the protagonists seemed destined for deadlock.

Most importantly, core powers were never genuinely shared. Thanks to its intransigence during negotiations, ZANU-PF retained exclusive control over the coercive instruments of state. The party's ministers managed the security, intelligence, and judicial services, as well as the politically strategic agencies responsible for land, agriculture, and provincial administration. And even before the ink was dry on the GPA, the army seized control of the country's lucrative diamond fields. For its part, the MDC held a weaker hand with a slim majority in the National Assembly, as well as nominal control of an underfunded Ministry of Finance and several bankrupt social-spending ministries. This imbalance meant that critical issues such as civilian control of the military, the depoliticization of the civil service, the repeal of repressive legislation, and media and judicial bias never made it onto the reform agenda. Indeed, the security chiefs, long loyal to ZANU-PF, refused to salute Tsvangirai, thereby withholding from him recognition as the country's legitimate prime minister.

By mid-2010, the government of national unity had become dysfunctional, prompting leaders from both sides to call for a return to elections. The parties clashed over the electoral schedule, with ZANU-PF pressing for an early vote and the Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T, created by a split in the MDC in 2005, and today the major opposition faction) demanding prior constitutional and electoral reforms. Having again endorsed Mugabe (then almost ninety years old) as its presidential candidate, ZANU-PF campaigned for the popular takeover of private enterprises ("indigenization") and the removal of international travel and financial bans on top party leaders ("sanctions"). MDC-T argued instead for job creation through international investment and the establishment of a level playing field for free and fair elections. As soon as campaigning began, there was a renewed upsurge in political violence centering on the intimidation of rural voters by war veterans and the suppression of street protests by the police. Since the ruling group was treating MDC-T as if it were a banned organization, Tsvangirai warned that Zimbabwe was in the grip of "dark and sinister forces."

³⁷ Brian Raftopoulos, "The Global Political Agreement as 'Passive Revolution': Notes on Contemporary Politics in Zimbabwe," *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 99, no. 12 (2010): 705-718.

As he did repeatedly when outmaneuvered, Tsvangirai took his grievances to SADC, the guarantor of the GPA. In a vigorous round of diplomatic appeals, he toured African capitals to raise the alarm about the resumption of political obstruction and state-sponsored terror. In an apparent breakthrough, the SADC Organ on Politics, Defense, and Security—a “troika” composed of the heads of state of South Africa, Zambia, and Mozambique—issued an unusually sharp rebuke to Mugabe. In a statement after meeting in Livingstone, Zambia, on March 31, 2011, the regional leaders “noted with grave concern the polarization of the political environment as characterized by, *inter alia*, resurgence of violence, arrests, and intimidation.”³⁸

By this time, Jacob Zuma had replaced Thabo Mbeki as ANC party leader (in December 2007) and state president (in May 2009). From his support base on the left of the ANC and in the SACP, COSATU, and the ANC Youth League, Zuma staked out a tougher stance on Zimbabwe. Before taking office, he criticized Mbeki as one of those world leaders “who witness repression and pretend it is not happening” and rebuked Mugabe for refusing to step down after losing the 2008 election.³⁹ Speaking for the SADC troika in 2011, Zuma stated: “It is time for SADC to speak with one voice in impressing on all the parties concerned that the situation can no longer be tolerated.”⁴⁰

Thereafter, and even though Mugabe periodically threatened to pull Zimbabwe out of SADC, the struggle over rules for the election was played out within the framework of a SADC “roadmap.”⁴¹ This charter included a set of liberalizing reforms to revise the voters’ roll, permit private broadcasting, speed up the announcement of election results, allow free assembly, and prohibit political hate speech. Other issues, such as the recruitment of nonpartisan staff for the electoral commission and public commitment by the security chiefs to uphold the rule of law were nonstarters due to ZANU-PF’s obduracy.

By disciplining Mugabe, SADC seemed to have taken decisive action to settle the political impasse in Zimbabwe. In practice, however, the SADC-sponsored election roadmap represented a retreat from a broad reform agenda. In its place, the international facilitators adopted “a strategy of containment and deterrence, intended primarily to avert widespread violence and ensure that elections are reasonably credible.”⁴² All parties, SADC included, became distracted from pursuing electoral reforms by the effort to design and pass a

³⁸ Southern African Development Community (SADC), “Zimbabwe: Summit of the Organ on Politics, Defense and Security,” press release (Pretoria: SADC, March 31, 2011).

³⁹ “Zuma Blasts Mbeki’s Quiet Diplomacy,” *Zimbabwe Metro*, December 16, 2007, and “Mugabe Has Outstayed His Welcome,” *Zimbabwe Times*, July 9, 2008.

⁴⁰ Clemence Manyukwe, “Jacob Zuma’s Shock Report,” *Financial Gazette* (Harare), April 15, 2011.

⁴¹ Southern African Development Community (SADC), “Zimbabwe Elections Roadmap with Timelines,” signed by the GPA negotiators at Harare, July 6, 2011.

⁴² International Crisis Group (ICG), “Zimbabwe: The Road to Reform or Another Dead End?” *Africa Report*, no. 173 (Brussels: ICG, April 27, 2011).

new constitution, which was a GPA requirement. In addition, SADC failed to follow through on its role as mid-wife to the GPA by establishing a permanent and effective presence to monitor in-country developments. As a result, both international and domestic actors were ill-prepared to counter conditions that undermined the integrity of the vote as elections fast approached after the ratification of a new constitution in March 2013.

Because Zimbabwe's 2013 presidential and parliamentary elections represented the culmination of a period of power sharing, the political stakes were high. Henceforth, power would be divided: the winner would go on to govern without the constraints of a forced coalition.

Historically, elections in Zimbabwe always had been focal points for violence. However, at least on the surface, the 2013 campaign appeared peaceful. All parties wished to avoid a replay of the disastrous 2008 presidential runoff, which had triggered the need for power sharing in the first place. Even ZANU-PF elites recognized that, given past precedents, the quality of the 2013 contest was an object of intense international scrutiny. The ruling party therefore kept its overt terror tactics in reserve, to be used only if other methods of electioneering and manipulation failed. Because the economy partly had recovered under the GNU and windfall diamond revenues had become available, the incumbent government could campaign in 2013 by replacing violence with patronage. But an atmosphere of relative peace did not mean that ZANU-PF had dismantled its infrastructure of military, intelligence, police, and militia forces around the country. Earlier episodes of political violence served as a constant reminder, especially to the rural population, of the consequences that might befall them if they voted the "wrong" way. Thus, the ruling party stood ready to reap a harvest of fear that it had sown far earlier.

This narrative would be incomplete without reference to the last-minute roles—permissive at best, adverse at worst—played by key international and domestic actors. At a June 2013 SADC summit in Maputo, Jacob Zuma called into question his reputation for taking a harder line than Mbeki. He intervened to undercut Lindiwe Zulu, leader of his own mediation team for Zimbabwe, who had argued for a postponement of the elections since preparations were "not looking good." Responding to an aggrieved outburst from Mugabe, Zuma censured Zulu's "megaphone diplomacy," effectively silencing SADC's most critical public voice. On the domestic side, Tsvangirai reportedly insisted on adhering to ZANU-PF's tight election schedule, despite an apparent willingness from SADC to entertain the possibility of a delay. Behind the scenes, South Africa—along with Mozambique, Botswana, Zambia, and Tanzania—reportedly urged the MDCs to stay out of the elections because the outcome was predetermined. But Tsvangirai decided to go ahead anyway, either because he thought MDC could win a ballot contest or because he worried that Mugabe would proceed to an election without him. This erratic decision was a key factor in causing South Africa to wash its hands of a tortuous mediation process of which it had long grown tired.

In any event, the 2013 election in Zimbabwe was peaceful but flawed. The government extended invitations to observe the elections only to African regional organizations such as SADC and AU, and to friendly countries in Africa (including Algeria, Ethiopia, and Uganda), Asia (China, Iran, and Malaysia), and Latin America (Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba). Civic organizations charged bias in voter registration against populations—such as urban dwellers, new citizens, and young people—thought to lean politically to the MDCs. On the day of the election, domestic monitors reported high levels of bloc voting, assisted voting, voting by busloads of unregistered voters, and eligible voters turned away because their names did not appear on the voters’ roll.

African observers played down these discrepancies. The African Union team, headed by former Nigerian President Olesegun Obasanjo, ended up judging the election “free, honest and credible.”⁴³ Other regional observers, including the SADC team led by Bernard Membe, Foreign Minister of Tanzania, praised the orderly nature of the election, deeming it “free and peaceful.” Together, friendly observers arrived at a consensus that evident problems with election administration were not serious enough to invalidate the outcome. Speaking as the facilitator appointed by the regional community, South African President Jacob Zuma extended “profound congratulations” to Mugabe on his re-election in a “successful” vote and called for all parties to accept the result. The Government of Botswana later disassociated itself from this endorsement, saying that its eighty-member observer mission felt that “an acceptable standard for free and fair elections had not been met.”⁴⁴

Local election observers and Western governments agreed. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), whose seven thousand monitors were the largest watchdog group, claimed that up to one million people were prevented from voting.⁴⁵ From abroad, the United States noted “a deeply flawed process” with “substantial electoral irregularities.” Secretary of State John Kerry asserted, “The United States does not believe that the results announced today represent a credible expression of the will of the Zimbabwean people.”⁴⁶ Echoed by Australia and Canada, the United Kingdom also “call[ed] into serious question the credibility of the election.”⁴⁷

⁴³ African Union (AU), “Statement of the African Union Election Observation Mission on the Harmonised Elections of 31 July 2013 in the Republic of Zimbabwe” (Harare: Rainbow Towers, August 2, 2013).

⁴⁴ John Allen, “African Observers Question Credibility of Polls,” *All Africa Global Media*, August 6, 2013.

⁴⁵ Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN), “2013 Harmonised Elections Preliminary Statement” (Harare: ZESN, August 1, 2013).

⁴⁶ United States Government (USG), “Press Statement: Zimbabwe’s Presidential Election” (Washington, DC: Department of State, August 3, 2013).

⁴⁷ Devon Maylie and Patrick McGroarty, “Mugabe Tightens Grip on Power after Disputed Zimbabwe Vote,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2013.

The official election results gave Mugabe a seventh term in office, with 61 percent of the vote, and ZANU-PF a supermajority of 160 of the 210 Assembly seats. The ruling group's landslide dumbfounded its opponents and surprised even its own supporters. In an ironic twist, ZANU-PF may well have indulged in an overkill of manipulation, thus calling into question the validity of its own apparent victory.⁴⁸ Regardless, Mugabe was welcomed back into the regional and continental fold when he was elected chair of SADC in August 2013 and chair of the fifty-four-nation African Union in January 2015.

Discussion and Conclusion

The electoral rehabilitation of a government led by a former liberation movement in Zimbabwe represented the triumph of continuity over change. Domestically, ZANU-PF's sweeping 2013 electoral victory restored a one-party dominant system, signaled to the MDC the futility of challenging the incumbent, and led directly to the fragmentation of organized opposition. Internationally, SADC's and South Africa's endorsements of yet another flawed election in Zimbabwe served as a reminder of the lasting legacy of political solidarity among ruling groups in the region.

Why did South Africa and SADC drop the democracy ball in Zimbabwe? We have argued that the new democracies of Southern Africa trace their origins to roles played—as armed liberation movements or sometimes as allied front-line states—in the struggle against settler colonial rule. This shared historical experience sometimes had to be constructed, as illustrated by Mbeki's efforts to align the ANC with ZANU-PF once the latter had gained power and by the ongoing efforts of liberation parties to cooperate in the face of existential political threats. This ruling-group solidarity created a legacy of deep loyalty in which, in Mbeki's words, “none has a possibility to succeed while another fails”; for this reason, South Africa would not abandon Zimbabweans “during their greatest hour of need, in much the same way as they did not abandon us in our greatest hour of need.”⁴⁹ This common identity and collective solidarity is triggered when ruling groups feel pressure for regime change emanating from former imperial metropolises or domestic opposition groups assumed to be Western surrogates.

It could be argued that material interests, rather than shared values, drive regional political elites to align in a mutual protection racket. We contend, however, that identity-based political solidarity is a strong enough force to trump a ruling group's material interests. It is clear, for example, that

⁴⁸ Michael Bratton, Eldred Masunungure, and Boniface Dulani, “Detecting Manipulation in Authoritarian Elections: Survey-Based Methods in Zimbabwe,” *Electoral Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 10-21.

⁴⁹ Thabo Mbeki, cited in Linda Freeman, “South Africa's Zimbabwe Policy,” 158.

South Africa and SADC would benefit economically and socially from the presence of a stable and prosperous Zimbabwe in their midst. Yet, the governments of the region have been willing to incur considerable costs in the form of reduced investment opportunities, impeded trade, unpaid public debts, and a burdensome flood of refugees and migrants. Mass southward migration has spurred a xenophobic backlash in some host countries, notably South Africa. The radical policy stance of the Zimbabwe government also has stirred up public support across the region for uncompensated land grabs or the forced indigenization of business properties, measures that host governments would rather avoid. In other words, the SADC member states have borne economic shocks and made social sacrifices rather than see a fellow ruling group undergo political change against its will.

Support for the political status quo in Southern Africa is sometimes expressed in terms of the Pan-African trope of national sovereignty. But, in practice, this norm amounts to a broader collective assertion of what we have called ruling-group solidarity. Our emphasis is on incumbent political elites—meaning the ruling parties that emerged from former liberation movements—rather than on any individual strongman. To be sure, until Mugabe’s displacement in an internal party coup in November 2017, the upshot in Zimbabwe was thirty-seven years under the same top leader. But in other countries of the region—such as Namibia, Mozambique, and Tanzania—ruling-group solidarity allowed for early leadership succession within the framework of a dominant single party, especially when this form of renewal enhanced regime resilience. By virtue of the ruling party’s role in national liberation, leaders regard it as the only legitimate vessel of political power with a right to rule *ad infinitum*. By fusing party and state, incumbents ensure the institutionalization of ruling-group solidarity.

As we conceive it, ruling-group solidarity has international dimensions. Shared revolutionary goals were first expressed when liberation movements came together in 1962 as the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa (PAFMECSA). After the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, the Liberation Committee of that continental body took on the tasks of international coordination. By the time of Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, a political alliance of nine front-line and recently liberated states had formed the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), which aimed at collective economic development and the reduction of dependence on apartheid South Africa. By 1992, an expanded group of states had established SADC with the goals of regional integration, poverty alleviation, and peace and security. Quite apart from the official Summit of Heads of State or Government—the apex decision-making body of SADC—political parties with a liberation movement heritage met separately every couple of years in a more informal setting. Starting in 2008, five parties—the ANC of South Africa, SWAPO of Namibia, MPLA of Angola, FRELIMO of Mozambique, and ZANU-PF of Zimbabwe—gathered

to plan and coordinate political strategy. Their *raison d'être* is to counteract “an onslaught by Western powers to topple former liberation movements through sponsoring puppet political parties and illegal regime change.”⁵⁰

In this light, ruling-group solidarity—both national and international—is a leading explanation of the longevity of ZANU-PF rule in Zimbabwe. It is consistent with a domino theory of regime change in which democratic alternation in one member state is seen to raise the risk of a similar transition in all other states in the region.

That said, the region's endorsement of the Mugabe regime was sometimes uneven and never unconditional. At different times, neighboring countries extended variable levels of diplomatic support to the power brokers in Harare. The key distinction was their collective experience in opposing settler colonialism. On the one hand, a core bloc of countries won delayed independence under a national liberation movement only after an extended guerrilla conflict on their own territory. This group—led by Angola, Mozambique, and Namibia—took the lead within SADC's Organ on Politics, Defense and Security and formed the region's informal association of vanguard parties. Together, these hardliners were the most reliable allies of ZANU-PF. On the other hand, other countries in the region arrived at an early independence via a negotiated route and played a secondary role in national liberation struggles as supportive, rear-base, “front-line” states. This group—led at various times by Botswana, Zambia, or Tanzania—were less fulsome in their embrace of Mugabe, being willing at key moments to criticize his regime's abuses. Caught in these regional cross-currents, South Africa—tasked by SADC to both “facilitate” and “mediate” a resolution in Zimbabwe—was sometimes inconsistent and always opaque in its approach.

Under what conditions, then, did regional political actors attempt to constrain the behavior of incumbent elites in Zimbabwe? As we see it, the key condition was political violence: if ZANU-PF used overt physical repression to intimidate the electorate, SADC would unite to publicly oppose it; if, however, the ruling party used subtler means to manipulate elections, SADC turned a blind eye. These outcomes were most evident at critical junctures. For example, SADC observers unanimously withheld endorsement of Mugabe's “victory” in the violent presidential runoff race in 2008. Later, led by then president of Zambia, Levy Mwanawasa, SADC rapped Mugabe's knuckles for reviving terror tactics in 2011. Finally, President Ian Khama of Botswana was even willing to break with SADC in declaring that the 2013 election had been peaceful and credible. Otherwise, the net effect of SADC election monitoring—whether in 2002 (with the suppressed Khampepe Report) or in 2013 (with a report that validated an election that local and Western governments found “deeply flawed”)—was to overlook imperfections in the democratic process.

⁵⁰ Lovemore Chikova, “President in SA for Former Liberation Movements Meeting,” *Herald* (Harare), March 7, 2013.

Paradoxically, the defense of an autocratic regime ran counter to the established constitutional rules and expressed foreign policies of South Africa and other governments of the Southern Africa region. Moreover, SADC's endorsement of flawed elections contradicted its own code of principles and guidelines for the conduct of democratic contests.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the case of Zimbabwe in Southern Africa cannot be seen as an instance of autocracy promotion. The international actors in this scenario did not set out to consciously sponsor a nondemocratic form of rule; rather, they framed their actions in the language of popular government and clean elections. Still, SADC proved an ineffective force for *democracy* promotion. Instead, regional elites oversaw an erosion of democracy by allowing themselves to be outmaneuvered by a wily autocrat who successfully appealed to historical political solidarity.

Looking forward, the time is long overdue to reintegrate the separate narratives of democratic consolidation and authoritarian resilience. In this regard, an analytic focus on hybrid regimes and democratic deconsolidation is a conceptual step in the right direction. Precisely because the machinations of autocrats are undermining the defining qualities of democracy, scholars of comparative politics should regard these dynamics as part of a single story. Finally, we also must acknowledge that this story has international as well as domestic dimensions. As this essay illustrates, processes of regime continuity and change occur within an international environment in which regional alliances of middle-range powers—themselves eroding democracies—play influential roles.

⁵¹ Southern African Development Community (SADC), “SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections” (Pretoria: Organ on Politics, Defense and Security, July 2015).