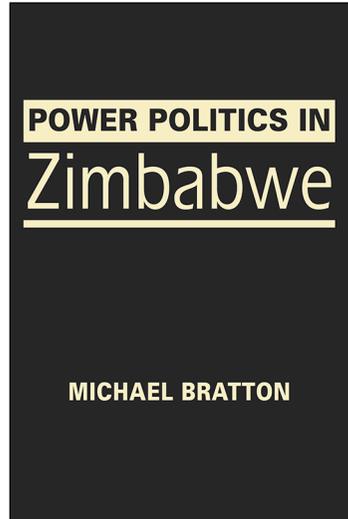


EXCERPTED FROM

Power Politics in Zimbabwe

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ISBN: 978-1-62637-076-0 hc




LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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1

Power Politics

In Zimbabwe's presidential, parliamentary, and local elections of July 31, 2013, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) meted out a crushing defeat to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), its erstwhile partner in a shaky power-sharing government. Robert Mugabe won a seventh presidential term with an official 61 percent of the vote against rival Morgan Tsvangirai's reported 34 percent. ZANU-PF seized well over two-thirds of the elected seats in Zimbabwe's House of Assembly (160 out of 210), a supermajority that would allow the party to change the country's newly minted constitution at will. Moreover, by effectively terminating an MDC presence in the cabinet and its control of the lower chamber of parliament, the result called into question the very viability of opposition politics in Zimbabwe.

In short, the election represented a resounding reassertion of one-party power and defeat for a decade-long attempt to introduce a more inclusive set of rules for the conduct of politics. To be sure, the lopsided vote confirmed that the old ruling party had succeeded in remobilizing a political base in Zimbabwe's majority rural areas, albeit in good part by intimidation. Using every strategy in the playbook of power politics, ZANU-PF outfoxed, out-organized, and out-muscled a well-meaning but inexperienced popular opposition movement, whose followers were concentrated in the towns. Indeed, Mugabe's party was so determined to emerge as the winner that it flagrantly manipulated the procedures and institutions of democratic elections, thus inadvertently calling into question the legitimacy of its own apparently overwhelming victory.

These striking events threatened to derail the country's fragile recovery from a dire period of deep economic and political crisis. Once one of Africa's most bountiful and promising lands, by 2008 Zimbabwe had descended into political violence, economic deprivation, and institutional

decay. A brief interlude of enforced power sharing between 2008 and 2013 helped deliver a degree of social peace and economic stability to the country's long-suffering population. But despite so thoroughly recapturing the commanding heights of state power in 2013, ZANU-PF appeared to have little to offer other than an unchecked return to economic folly, elite corruption, and the bitter politics of exclusion.

An obvious, but all too easy, explanation for misrule in Zimbabwe lays blame at the feet of the country's only leader during more than 30 years of independence: President Robert Gabriel Mugabe. His biographers have lent merit to this case (Chan 2003; Meredith 2007; Holland 2008). A veteran of a colonial liberation war, Mugabe is a quintessential purveyor of power politics (Blair 2002). His path to the apex of state power—by bullet as well as ballot—shapes the way he has subsequently governed. As Zimbabwe's top official, Mugabe has concentrated authority in the presidency and thus gained sweeping discretion over political decisions. Displaying his trademark political symbol of a clenched fist, he is usually seen in public surrounded by a phalanx of uniformed security forces. When challenged, he has seldom hesitated to apply his self-proclaimed “degrees in violence” against enemies—real and imagined.

Although African “big men” set the tone for a regime of governance, they almost never govern entirely alone. After all, politics is the art of the possible: leaders govern using the endowment of material resources, inherited institutions, and political alliances available to them at any given time. These legacies create as many constraints as opportunities. To survive in office, a leader must, at minimum, serve the vested interests of his immediate coalition of supporters, an elite group that often shares a comradeship born from a common political struggle. Together, these allies seek to maximize the group's collective advantage, usually to the exclusion of political rivals and ordinary citizens. While the life story of an authoritarian leader may personify the ruling group, its regime of governance—described in this book in terms of power politics—is internalized in the attitudes of dominant elites and institutionalized in how they exercise power. A powerful clique of party and military hardliners may sometimes limit a top leader's freedom of choice. And an authoritarian regime may persist long after the original “big man” leaves the political stage.

However, even the most powerful ruling group can never have everything its own way. Especially at critical junctures in a country's history, they discover that they must work with others to create new rules for the political game. The nature of the resultant regime is determined in good part by the political deals—this book calls them “political settlements”—reached among the preeminent political actors of the day. Sometimes these actors arise from factions within the ruling group, where they have learned to operate in the treacherous, fratricidal world of autocracy. At other times,

an opposition emerges from civil society, usually as a counterreaction to the excesses of an exclusive, narrow ruling coalition. At some exceptional moments, when rival elites attract a popular following, ordinary people may occasionally enter the power struggle as members of mass movements. Complicating the scenario, international actors from neighboring countries and further abroad may also intervene; if they align themselves with challengers rather than supporting the status quo, external interventions tend to further limit the discretion of would-be dictators.

In independent Zimbabwe, the country's ruling group emerged from the crucible of an anticolonial liberation war. Its political strategies and tactics cannot be understood apart from this heritage. Political leaders opted for violence, first as a reaction against the brutalities of settler colonialism, later as a means of retaining their tight grip on the bountiful privileges of state power. In imposing their preferred political settlement on the Zimbabwean population, ZANU-PF created a militarized version of an electoral authoritarian regime (Schedler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010). In response, the rival MDC sought to use the formal mechanisms of constitutional reform and competitive elections to unseat a group of rulers who had outstayed the population's welcome. But, as I will show, their strategy of non-violence and formal legalism repeatedly failed to dismantle the ruling elite's power structure. Instead, election campaigns became focal points for state-sponsored violence, overt or implied. And international actors played ambiguous roles, sometimes pressuring the country's leaders to compromise and other times turning a blind eye to political abuses.

The disturbing case of Zimbabwe raises general questions for sub-Saharan Africa, a region that, in the past half century, has suffered an excessive share of the world's armed conflicts, civil wars, regime changes, and state failures. These devastating events are only the most visible manifestations of a more generic deficiency: the failure of many African states to create a legitimate political order (Zolberg 1966). Far from establishing a consensual right to rule, African political leaders have too often asserted an unregulated desire to capture control of the state. To the extent that narrow political elites have been willing to resort to violence to secure this prize, political life in Africa has been governed by raw power politics.

These African experiences raise broad and fundamental questions. How can developing countries avoid civil strife? What are the institutional requirements for strong and legitimate states? Do power-sharing pacts provide answers to recurrent problems of legitimacy? Do these kinds of political settlements foster or undermine the consolidation of democracy?

In recent years, analysts have recommended power-sharing settlements as the most appropriate antidote to persistent political conflict (Lijphart 1985, 1999, 2008; Norris 2005; Reynolds 1999, 2002). In Africa, these institutional devices—which seek to marry political rivals in coalition gov-

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ernments of national unity—have been applied to problems of settler decolonization, civil war, and, more recently, protracted electoral crisis. But, one size does not fit all. Power sharing is unlikely to work when entrenched authoritarians lose an election but are unwilling to surrender power. Under these circumstances, the former ruling elite is instead likely to call upon established institutional and cultural legacies to reassert exclusive control of the state.

To illustrate these dynamics, consider a snapshot of a recent confrontation between rival political elites in Zimbabwe. The vignette provides a dramatic example of the power politics that undermine Zimbabwe's persistent search for an inclusive and legitimate—but ultimately elusive—political settlement. Specifically, in this book I offer an explanation of the failure of Zimbabwe's ill-fated power-sharing settlement of 2008–2013.

A Settlement Under Stress

In October 2010, Zimbabwe's fragile "unity" government was close to collapse. A deep rift had developed between the main protagonists: President Mugabe and Prime Minister Tsvangirai. Expressing frustration with political and policy deadlock, each called for fresh elections as the only way forward. Yet the prospect of a new round of political campaigning raised the specter of an unwelcome return to state-sanctioned violence.

This stalemate threatened to escalate into a full-blown constitutional crisis. The precipitating events were President Mugabe's decisions to appoint governors, judges, and ambassadors without informing the prime minister or seeking his consent. These unilateral acts were only the most recent violation of the terms of a power-sharing deal struck just two years earlier by Zimbabwe's main political parties. Mugabe's high-handed maneuvers seemed to confirm that power sharing will rarely work when one partner dominates decisionmaking and lacks a sincere commitment to cooperation.

From the outset, power in the government of national unity (GNU) was unequally shared. ZANU-PF retained control of the core instruments of coercion, notably the ministries of defense and justice as well as the intelligence service. The MDC gained leadership of the ministries of finance, education, and health. So, while the former opposition party took on the demanding responsibility of ensuring socioeconomic recovery (which it calculated would rebound to its electoral advantage), ZANU-PF concentrated on shoring up its apparatus of political control and national security (also in preparation for forthcoming elections).

The power-sharing agreement required the president to consult with the prime minister on important decisions, for example, appointing top officials

or announcing government policy. Yet Mugabe repeatedly acted as if he retained the untrammelled powers of an absolute ruler by failing to honor, even in the breach, the consultation requirement. He treated Tsvangirai with disdain, refusing him the chairmanship of the cabinet in the president's absence and condoning the refusal of army and police chiefs to salute the prime minister. The fledgling Prime Minister's Office and inexperienced MDC-T parliamentary delegation struggled to find reliable means to block such ZANU-PF power plays.

But Mugabe's unilateral political appointments were a step too far. Aside from the lack of consultation, they directly violated an understanding that these posts would be shared proportionally among the main parties and with the prime minister's consent.

In response, and abandoning his customary reserve, Tsvangirai raised the political stakes. He framed the issue as a constitutional dispute that threatened the viability of the coalition government. In a carefully worded public statement, the prime minister confessed that "the events of the past few months have left me sorely disappointed in Mr. Mugabe and in his betrayal of confidence that I and many Zimbabweans have personally invested in him."¹ He called upon the Senate to refuse to seat the governors, the chief justice to void the appointments of illegally appointed judges, and the international community to reject the credentials of unconstitutionally appointed ambassadors. While boycotting a cabinet meeting, Tsvangirai declared, "Neither I, nor the MDC, can stand back any longer and just allow Mr. Mugabe and ZANU-PF to defy the law, to flaunt the Constitution, and to act as if they own this country."²

Mugabe reacted with anger, denouncing the "foolish and stupid" events unfolding within the government. He declared that the power-sharing experiment was only meant to last for two years and called for an end to the unity government. By this time, the president and prime minister were communicating only through the press; even before Tsvangirai's boycott they had reportedly gone for many weeks without talking directly to each other.

These developments held ominous warnings for Zimbabwe. In the aftermath of a violent election in 2008, none of the contenders was ready to run an effective campaign. Given the uncertainty surrounding a constitutional reform process, it was unclear whether the next elections would be held under old rules or new. Moreover, the official electoral management body was ill prepared to guarantee a free and fair contest. And, most important, military and militia leaders were already circulating in rural areas warning would-be voters that violence would befall anyone who dared to vote for the MDCs, whether the larger faction led by Tsvangirai (MDC-T) or the smaller splinter group headed by Arthur Mutambara.

Yet, despite stresses and strains, Zimbabwe's so-called inclusive government continued to limp along. Neither ZANU-PF nor the MDCs had any

other potential political partner. Mugabe and his party continued to try to goad Tsvangirai and his supporters into leaving the coalition. Despite provocation, the latter refused to take the bait—or the blame that would go with it. However, given the unworkable dual political executive, a stalemated GNU was unlikely to accomplish much in the way of meaningful political or policy reform.

The Problem of Power Politics

Power is a relational concept. It refers to the relationship between A, a dominant person or group, and B, a compliant individual or collectivity. A is said to have power over B if A is able to get B to do what A wants. If B refuses to comply, then a power struggle ensues, much as occurred between Mugabe and Tsvangirai (and their respective elite coalitions) in the sequence of incidents just described.

In any such struggle, political protagonists may employ three essential power resources: coercion, incentives, or persuasion. The domination of A over B may be established by violence, for example, when A uses an arsenal of repression—or the threat thereof—to compel submission. Alternatively, A may reward B for obedience by offering attractive material inducements, whether in cash or in kind. The dominant party thus co-opts the compliant party, often by distributing political offices with attendant perquisites. Finally, beyond force or favor, A can use reasoned arguments to persuade B to acquiesce, for example, by appealing to traditional symbols, popular ideas, or ethical values.

It should be clear that these basic power resources lie on a continuum of political legitimacy. This continuum runs from coercion to persuasion; that is, from the least to the most justifiable form of power.

All political leaders—whether democratic or authoritarian—employ mixtures of these power resources as instruments of rule; none relies on just one approach alone. But leaders in authoritarian regimes assert political control by using methods that tilt toward the coercive end of the scale, for example, when they make decisions without consultation. By contrast, leaders in democratic regimes rely more heavily on persuasion, for example, trying to convince voters to choose parties based on the policy platforms presented during election campaigns. The strategies employed to legitimize these two main regime types overlap in the middle since each leader must deliver economic and social goods to ordinary citizens in order to substantiate a political right to rule. But the distribution of rewards, usually in the form of public goods, is expected to be broadly based (that is, inclusive) in democratic regimes. In autocratic regimes, leaders can afford to attend to the needs of a narrower ruling group by

supplying them with private goods and by backing up exclusionary policies with coercion.

In power politics, might makes right. In this form of politics, the main sources of authority are military strength and the selective distribution of economic resources. Little room remains for ethical values or constitutional rules to constrain the unlimited exercise of power. The practice of power politics creates a dog-eat-dog world in which only the fittest (who may also be the fattest) survive. The concept of power politics derives from the realist school of international relations, which views states as locked in blunt competition to achieve self-defined national interests in the absence of an overarching external authority (Wight 1946; Morgenthau 1967; Mearscheimer 2001).

In this book, I focus on domestic politics *within* a state rather than on international politics *between* states (Mills 1956; Svulik 2012). But the concept of power politics aptly characterizes the domestic political behavior of dominant political elites in authoritarian settings. Leaders in these regimes are motivated by the self-interest of the ruling group, determined to maintain dominance over opponents and rivals, and they resist independent constraints embodied in a rule of law. Instead, autocrats prefer to employ primal means to attain their desired political ends. In political struggles with rivals they rarely hesitate to unleash the full panoply of power politics, including manipulation of the law, economic exclusion, political intimidation, covert operations, and even physical violence.

The power politics approach has been criticized for granting undue attention to the biographical details and personal quirks of the towering gladiators who play starring roles in the political arena. But, as stated earlier, my goal is to de-emphasize individual leaders and instead emphasize the persistent elite coalitions and inherited political institutions through which they operate. My conception of power politics does not ignore political agency; rather, it situates groups of actors collectively within political structures. In my view, the ruling coalition gets its way mainly by monopolizing the key repressive institutions at the heart of the state, such as the army, police, and prisons. The prevalence of force in political life imparts “dismal,” even “gruesome,” features to authoritarian rule (Svulik 2012, 13–15). Because violence is the ultimate arbiter of conflicts, incumbent leaders cannot make commitments that other actors regard as credible. For example, even though rulers may seemingly agree to the negotiated terms of power-sharing settlements, they seldom hesitate to renege later if breaking promises becomes convenient. Because all parties, particularly those with less power, cannot trust rulers to abide by their word, elite settlements rarely hold.

Moreover, authoritarian politics are marked by the absence of an independent, sovereign authority that can enforce agreements. Absent external

sponsorship or a widespread culture of constitutionalism, formal political institutions are worth little more than the paper they are written on. Thus, political outcomes are driven less by democratic constitutions and other legal codes and more by the informal, often arbitrary, practices of power players. Rather than submitting to the rule *of* law, authoritarian elites typically employ the coercive powers of a rule *by* law (Ginsberg and Mustafa 2008). This mode of governance abandons due judicial process in favor of the selective prosecution of political rivals, frequently with trumped-up charges of legal obstruction or economic corruption.

Authoritarian rulers also employ coercion to accumulate economic resources, often through the confiscation of private property. They design extractive economic institutions in order to remove assets and income from producers in society and to transfer benefits to a political class (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Political predation of this sort undermines property rights and perverts incentives for innovation and investment, thus constraining economic growth. Instead, the proceeds of the economy—whether derived from land, mining, or commerce—are distributed to political loyalists, especially those within the leader’s inner circle. In this regard, rulers have an incentive to minimize the size of the governing coalition, the better to maximize the share of spoils accruing to each of its members (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2011). For this reason, in the context of power politics, political institutions are not only economically extractive but also politically exclusive. In times of economic crisis, there is even a tendency for the ruling coalition to shrink down to its coercive core. Leaders will always accord special treatment to the armed forces in order to maintain their essential loyalty; even if civil servants sometimes go unpaid, every effort is made to compensate the military. But because autocrats rely heavily on repression, they inadvertently strengthen the hand of the armed forces, who, in turn, are able to claim a share of both economic bounty and political decisions.

Although autocracies are built on foundations of political violence and economic extraction, some authoritarian leaders still try to use a comprehensive system of ideas to justify their rule. These ideologies may invoke either ancient traditions or a vision of revolution, but their purpose is to persuade people to support the political regime on a voluntary basis. Ruling parties that ascend to power via armed struggle may even have unusually powerful abilities to foster elite cohesion and regime durability (Levitsky and Way 2012). A violent mode of political transition generates strong political identities, social solidarity, and organizational discipline that serve as supplementary resources of authoritarian rule. The problem with appeals to past revolutionary glory, however, is that they have a limited shelf life, especially for new generations born since the initial struggle. Ideology can all too easily become a smokescreen that barely conceals the vested interests

of a narrow ruling clique. Leaders can try to renew the fervor of ideological commitment by conjuring up threats from internal or external “enemies.” But, ultimately, autocrats can build political legitimacy only by delivering economic and social goods, which requires a growing economy. If they cannot perform the basic tasks of economic management, they have little choice but to fall back on violence.

The problem of authoritarian rule can be summarized as the domestication of power politics. Can political actors channel open conflict along peaceful, legal, and institutional lines? In other words, can ruling and opposition elites arrive at a comprehensive mutual agreement—an inclusive political settlement—about the basic rules for governing society?

The authoritarian purveyors of power politics have distinct advantages in this struggle. To the extent that a partisan minority enjoys a monopoly over the means of coercion, they can effectively deter opponents from mobilizing popular support in the streets of the capital city. One negative consequence of rule by force, however, is that it leaves the opposition with few options but to resort to violence themselves, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle (Nkomo 1984; LeBas 2011). Moreover, elites who capture state power invariably extract and deploy economic resources to consolidate power. Even if authoritarian rulers find it useful to go through the motions of competitive elections, they do so only after ensuring an incumbency advantage over campaign resources, thus tilting the electoral playing field in their own direction and ensuring that they cannot lose. The more exclusive the ruling coalition and the more extensive their control of the private economy, the less any opposition movement is able to mobilize resources to mount a successful challenge (Arriola 2013).

For their part, challengers to authoritarian rule can usually offer appealing political messages: an end to state-sponsored violence, guarantees of personal political freedom, and the prospect of broad-based economic opportunity. One might expect that the deeper the pathologies of power politics, the easier it is for rival elites to persuade a mass population that they offer a brighter future. Much depends, however, on whether opposition leaders can convincingly get out their message in the face of official propaganda campaigns and mobilize their supporters in the face of the ruler’s efforts to suppress electoral turnout. Sometimes, widespread fear of political violence and extended experience with economic deprivation discourage citizens from participation in political life. Moreover, alternative leaders may have tainted their own reputations by participating as junior partners in power-sharing arrangements with entrenched dictators. Finally, the potential for a meaningful division of power depends on whether conditions exist for free, fair, and credible elections. Can electoral challengers withstand the organized efforts of entrenched authoritarian rulers to buy or bludgeon their way into retaining power?

Outline of the Book

This book analyzes the resilience of authoritarian rule in Zimbabwe through the lenses of power politics and elite political settlements. I show how, by capturing the state, leaders have sometimes been able to entrench lasting arrangements for organizing and exercising power. Zimbabwe's exclusive and defensive political regimes have never effectively incorporated the interests of a wide range of political players, let alone respected the will of a mass electorate. At certain critical junctures, however, key political actors have had little choice but to enter elite pacts to maintain their influence, most recently in the form of a power-sharing agreement signed in 2008. But a lasting political settlement based on an inclusive social compact has always remained elusive.

This book places power sharing in Zimbabwe in a comparative perspective, both over time within the country and laterally across other African countries. The empirical focus is on the political contest between a nascent democratic movement and a resilient authoritarian regime, especially during a transitional period of enforced coalition government. More broadly, the book aims to draw theoretical and policy lessons from one particularly problematic power-sharing experiment.

The text is organized in four parts. Chapter 2 is conceptual and theoretical. I begin by defining political settlements with reference to an emerging literature on the subject. Applying a power-politics perspective, I propose a framework of three different types of political settlement: *power capture*, where a dominant elite unilaterally imposes its own rules; *power sharing*, where contending elites struggle to institutionalize competing sets of rules; and *power division*, where elites agree on rules for periodically circulating power among contending elites, such as democratic elections under civil liberties and the rule of law. I also argue that the way political elites rule depends in good part on the way they ascended to power. Thus, Zimbabwean politics can best be understood by tracing the trajectory of the dominant political party, whose collective identity was forged during a violent guerrilla war. Once in power, the party readily appropriated the institutional legacy of a strong colonial state.

Part 1 compares institutional arrangements across time. A brief historical narrative first traces political settlements in Southern Rhodesia from the earliest colonial contacts, when British adventurers enticed traditional chiefs to strike dubious deals for land and minerals, to the last-ditch effort of white settlers to preserve political power by offering moderate African nationalists a so-called Internal Settlement (Chapter 3). The narrative then turns to independent Zimbabwe, starting with a compromise agreement hammered out at Lancaster House in London in 1979 to grant majority rule in return for guarantees of economic continuity. Also considered are the so-

called Unity Accord of 1987, aimed at mending rivalries among the principal liberation movements, and a landmark set of concessions that the ruling party made in late 1997 to veterans of the liberation war. The upshot of each of these political settlements was the maintenance of ZANU-PF's exclusive grip on state power (Chapter 4). I then provide a detailed account of the escalating political and economic crisis after 2000, which ended only when the international community prodded rival political elites into a power-sharing agreement in 2008 (Chapter 5).

Part 2 concentrates on power sharing. I place power-sharing settlements in cross-national context by examining the proliferation of such pacts in contemporary Africa (Chapter 6). The power-sharing approach has been used to bring a peaceful end to settler colonialism—as in South Africa—and to terminate civil wars—as in Sierra Leone. I distinguish the utility of power sharing in these cases to its more questionable application in crises of electoral democracy, as illustrated by the case of Kenya following disputed elections in 2007. I argue that, when entrenched elites retain control over the coercive instruments of the state, they are poised to act as spoilers for any negotiated political settlement. Moreover, while elite pacts help reduce overt political conflicts in the short run, sharing power has negative effects on the consolidation of democracy in the longer run. The internal dynamics of coalition politics in Zimbabwe's so-called inclusive government are analyzed with special attention to the challenges of establishing a legitimate political order (Chapter 7).

Part 3 draws attention to a set of fundamental reforms that together determine whether countries in transition are able to move toward more open forms of government. With reference to Zimbabwe since 2008, I consider constitution making (Chapter 8), election management (Chapter 9), security sector reform (Chapter 10), and transitional justice (Chapter 11). Since little systematic analysis has been written about these issues in Zimbabwe, I trace the trajectory of reform efforts in some detail. Ultimately, progress on political reform depends on the outcome of elite bargaining. Where relevant, I reference reform experiences in other countries. In addition, I assess popular support for political reforms and power sharing in Zimbabwe with a unique set of public opinion data.

The book concludes with lessons learned (Chapter 12). Some lessons are abstract, requiring scholars to revise theories about institutional change and power sharing. Other lessons are practical and are relevant to policymakers in the government of Zimbabwe, regional organizations in Africa, and the international donor community. The conclusion reiterates the abiding theme of the book: legitimate political settlements are elusive because autocratic elites who capture power are unwilling to share it. This explanation of authoritarian resilience is vividly illustrated in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Notes

1. “Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Zimbabwe and President of the MDC, Rt. Hon. Morgan R. Tsvangirai.” October 8, 2010. <http://www.zimbabweprememinister.org>.

2. Ibid.