

Public and private media coverage of the military coup in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines coverage by Zimbabwe's media of the events surrounding the military coup of November 2017. The study investigates 38 selected stories; 16 from the state controlled *The Herald* and 22 from the private owned *Newsday* newspapers. The sampled articles were considered relevant to the 'military assisted political transition' that took place in the period under study. Critically, the study is aimed to understand how events that transpired during the transitional period leading to President Robert Mugabe ouster, after three decades in power, have shaped journalism practice in Zimbabwe. Considering that the transitional period marked a major turning point in Zimbabwe's political life, this study seeks to understand the role played by the country's private and public media. In this paper, the authors try to find out who the two newspapers wrote about during the coup period, why the two normally opposite newspapers converged against Mugabe and how they framed his demise. Framing theory is used as an analytic lens of the study. The theory analyses meanings of statements, language and words used by the two newspapers. The study found out that, in an unusual situation, the newspapers reported a similar language and tone, demonstrating media convergence between a state-controlled newspaper and a private and oppositional publication that never existed since the country had gained independence in 1980. The study also observed that these media outlets violated journalistic ethics of fairness and right to reply as they saw the toppling of President Mugabe as crucial to the progress of the country.

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Keywords

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Introduction

In November 2017, the former President, Robert Mugabe, was ousted after 37 years at the helm in what was called ‘Operation restore legacy’ (Beardsworth et al., 2019). The army, which for decades helped sustain Mugabe’s rule in both party and state, turned against him and supported Emmerson Mnangagwa, then Mugabe’s deputy (Ndawana, 2020). What remains, largely, unasked is the role the media – both private and public – played during the transitional period. The purpose of the article is to fill that gap by examining how two newspapers, *The Herald* and *Newsday*, represented and framed events that took place between November 13 and November 24, 2017, the day Mnangagwa was inaugurated as Zimbabwe’s second executive president. The secondary goal of this study is to respond why private and public media, which for almost three previous decades presented opposite narratives, converged in framing Mugabe’s demise and Mnangagwa’s elevation.

The Herald newspaper has the government as the major shareholder with a stake of 51% while the rest is owned by private companies and individuals (Moyo, 2010). Throughout its history, *The Herald* has always reported as a mouthpiece of the ruling elites beginning with interests of colonists until 1980, when Mugabe took over turning the newspaper into a mouthpiece of Zimbabwe’s ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) (Mare, 2017; Matsilele, 2013). *Newsday* is a private newspaper owned by Alpha Media Holdings (AMH), publishers of *The Independent* and *The Standard*. The former was established in 2010 while the later were formed in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Veteran journalist, Trevor Ncube, owned 100% shares of the publishing house at the time of the investigation.

Rationale of the study

Several studies have already been carried around the ouster of Robert Mugabe in a military-style coup (Asuelime, 2018; Beardsworth et al., 2019; Magaisa, 2019). Most of the studies have looked at the role of the military in civilian politics, the false hope presented by the military assisted transition and the reconfiguration of the state due to the military-politics nexus. Fewer studies conducted looking at the role of the media, are positioned during the post coup period (Mare, 2019; Munoriyarwa & Chibuwe, 2021; Mare & Matsilele,

2020). For example, Mare (2019) looked at media transformation in post-coup Zimbabwe with Munoriyarwa and Chibuwe (2021) looking at the emerging forms of digital journalism post coup. Mare & Matsilele (2020) looked at the state of hybrid media systems in post-Mugabe Zimbabwe. These studies do not paint a picture of the role media played during the transition but rather respond to the post-coup media environment. It is this gap in the scholarship this study fills and will contribute to understanding of the extent of the role media played in Zimbabwe coup transition and help determine how media can be viewed in semi-authoritarian regimes going through complex transitions.

The role of the news media in Africa in influencing political transitions is an important but often neglected research topic in the field of journalism and media studies. Yet, there is a strong interplay between media and politics, especially in developing contexts such as Zimbabwe, where authorities stifle media and other civil and political rights (Chuma et al., 2020; Chuma, 2008; Moyo, 2004; Moyo, 2010). Studying the two newspapers' coverage of the fall of Mugabe in the context of media sensationalisation, polarisation and legislation that stifles private media operations assist the study to examine the shifts and convergence of interests by the papers. This is in the context of laws and extra-legal regime that undermined the performance of news media to report freely on public matters that for a long time have been applied selectively against the private media (Zhou & Zvoushe, 2012; Makwambeni & Adebayo, 2021). The state media on the other hand, has been used to advance the ruling ZANU PF and at times the leading elites of the ruling party. These laws include the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) of 2002, which among other things compelled journalists and media institutions practising in Zimbabwe to register with a government-appointed commission (Mabweazara, 2018; Matsilele, 2013). The Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) of 2001 entrenched the monopoly of the sole state broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). The Public Order and Security Act (POSA) of 2002 infringes on the exercise of fundamental civil and political liberties by making it unlawful to assemble, protest or demonstrate without police authority (Hondora, 2003).

Theoretical frames

Framing theory explains how the media play a critical role in determining how the public views societal events (Park et al., 2012; Chuma, 2005; Adebayo & Makwambeni, 2020). Agreeing with Sung-Yeon et al. (2012), Goffman (1974) posits that, 'frames are the "schemata of interpretation", by which people can

“locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its limits.” Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) note that framing assumes how an issue characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure the meaning of a message. Hurtikova (2013) advances framing as being concerned with the presentation of issues, persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, with the salience of issues. Goffman (1974) agrees that people interpret events around them through primary framework. Its usefulness as a framework, Goffman observes, does not depend on other frameworks. Lecheler & de Vreese (2012) opine that framing theory can explain the extent to which the media affect citizens’ understanding of politics. They argue that ‘a frame can affect an individual by stressing certain aspects of reality and pushing others into the ground – it has a selection function.’ It is observed that frames make suggestions to the audience through making some considerations more significant than others, ‘thereby leading these considerations to be applied when forming an opinion’ (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012). In this study, the two newspapers, for the first time, unanimously framed Mugabe as an old tyrant and deserved to be overthrown from power. Such framing of Mugabe could have arguably facilitated public protests that accompanied the military coup. Akpabio (2011) has looked at how Zimbabwean immigrants in Botswana are framed as a way of denying them belonging. Pasirayi (2017) used the framing theory to analyse how the fast-track land reform in Zimbabwe was framed in the state-controlled press. Pasirayi (2017) submits that selecting certain topics over others and providing coverage to people or events, the media set an agenda on issues that they want the public to debate, how to debate and consider the most significant. Scheufele (2000) distinguishes five factors that influence the frames of journalists, namely social norms and values, organisational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines and ideological or political orientations of journalists. These two newspapers showed through their language that they were anti-Mugabe and celebrated the coup by describing Mugabe as a dictator and Mnangagwa as a hero and liberator. The media ‘provide cognitive knowledge informing us about what is happening, but they also order and structure political reality, allotting events greater or lesser significance according to their presence or absence on the media agenda’ (McNair, 1995). In this instance, the two newspapers were subjective in their portrayal of Mugabe, which could have influenced public perceptions about his continued stay in power and his consequent ouster.

Methodology

This study employs the qualitative approach and the purposive sampling design. A qualitative research ‘uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand a phenomenon in context-specific settings, such as real-world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest’ (Patton, 2002). The researchers conducted a desktop ethnography searching for articles that were published in these two newspapers during the research period. Focus was placed on frames identified during the military operation as reported by the two newspapers. As it has already been mentioned, this study uses qualitative content analysis with bias towards thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ which is mainly descriptive in approach. In gathering data for this investigation, the researchers started by harvesting all stories that appeared between November 13 and 24, 2017 from two titles under review. The articles selected were a mixture of editorials and news articles. Articles help in understanding the overall scope of events taking place while editorials give a window into what a newspaper considers important (Matsilele, 2013). The researchers conducted a google search by date against a newspaper title, which pulled all relevant articles that were published on a specific date. This was done for all dates classified as critical for this study, that is November 13 to 24, 2017. The *Newsday* newspaper had 26 articles that appeared in direct relation to the military coup and ZANU PF infighting while *The Herald* had 16 articles identified.

Discussion and analysis

The vilification of Mugabe

The two newspapers demonised Mugabe as a way of legitimising the military coup. Attaching labels is meant to strip individuals of their humanity, citizenship, legitimacy or belonging. In this case, labels attached on Mugabe such as ‘tyrant’ and ‘old’ were meant to delegitimise him as the leader of Zimbabwe. The two newspapers portrayed Mugabe as an old tyrant and soft on corruption respectively (*Newsday*, November 22, 2017; *The Herald*, November 22, 2017) who should have been removed from the office and did not deserve any democratic recourse. While the private owned media was known to have an adversarial relationship with Mugabe and his style of leadership, the shift in tone and stance by *The Herald* was the most striking. It is observed that the first two days under review, the state controlled *The Herald* newspaper was firmly in the hands of Mugabe sympathisers as the newspaper blacked out the press

conference held by the military generals. However, when it became evident that the military was in control, *The Herald* followed the vilification and critical tone set by the *Newsday*. Since independence 1980, Mugabe received accolades and praise from the state controlled *The Herald* until events of November 2017. *The Herald* of November 22, 2017, issued with a headline 'Zanu-PF pays tribute to Mugabe', seems to be giving him respect but the contents of the article deviates from the headline as it claims, 'He had indeed overstayed the hospitality of the people of Zimbabwe. Worse still, he surrounded himself with people of criminal conduct, primitive and disrespectful attributes.' This paradox, if anything, demonstrates changing power dynamics. the *Newsday* of November 17, 2017 had a headline, 'Breaking: Mugabe too old & must go – All Zanu PF provinces', portrayed Mugabe as a leader who had lost control of the state and party to a faction led by his wife, Grace. Demonstrating that, Mugabe did not deserve to remain president regardless of having been elected in 2013, the *Newsday* of November 22, 2017 issued with a headline 'Jubilation as tyrant Mugabe falls.' The subjective representation of Mugabe supports one of the core arguments in qualitative analysis, which dismisses the notion of objectivity in media representation. The subjective characterisation of Mugabe as a tyrant was meant to remove any sympathy he could potentially receive from within and outside the country. In this regard, the characterisation of Mugabe by the two newspapers fits in the framing view which submits that framing theory explains how the media play a critical role in determining how the public views societal events (Park et al., 2012). This framing was meant to justify Mugabe's unconstitutional removal by the military.

Portrayal of Mnangagwa as a hero

Scheufele (2000) argues that journalistic frames such as social norms and values, organisational and ideological or political orientations of journalists affect how the media cover news. In this respect, the ownership and control of *The Herald* by the state, influenced on demonization of Mugabe and the legitimization of the coup leaders. The *Newsday's* ideological position as a market driven and liberal newspaper that promotes human rights influenced its coverage on Mugabe's fall who it framed as authoritarian. Both newspapers framed Mugabe's nemesis as a hero and liberator in order to influence public opinion against Mugabe. Following Mnangagwa's dismissal from the government on November 6, 2017 and subsequent return on November 22, 2017, both newspapers portrayed Mnangagwa as a victim and a hero. *The Herald* of November 17, 2017 issued with a headline 'Breaking: Zanu-PF calls for President Mugabe's resignation.' The newspaper wrote, 'The provinces also demanded the reinstatement of

former Vice President Cde Emmerson Mnangagwa who they said was dismissed without endorsement of the central committee.’ The paper sought to portray Mnangagwa’s firing as unconstitutional and therefore invalid. The paper ignores the fact that Mugabe had powers in both the party and the state to hire and fire his two deputies including members of the political bureau. The *Newsday* of November 23, 2017 described Mnangagwa as a hero on his return from exile in South Africa. It is written, ‘Hero’s welcome for Mnangagwa.’ The story goes on to say, ‘New Zanu PF leader and President-designate Emmerson Mnangagwa made a triumphant return home yesterday as pressure piled to form a coalition government comprising of key stakeholders to stabilise the economy.’ The paper in using the phrase ‘triumphant return’ invokes biblical Jesus character as he visited Jerusalem as ‘Israel’s King’. Mnangagwa is therefore portrayed as a leader who is coming to redeem the country from its political and economic turmoil under Mugabe. The message of Mnangagwa as the coming ‘king’ had already been infused into the national consciousness through a musician who is also a Mnangagwa’s adoring supporter, Jah Prayzah, with his popular song called ‘Mudhara Achauya’ translated as ‘father’ or ‘daddy’ will come. It can be assumed that this message is about coming to power. Mnangagwa also coded his messages in mystery playing into the mysterious symbolism he represented towards Mugabe’s ouster. While in exile, Mnangagwa issued a statement on November 8, 2017 telling Zimbabweans of his impending return to lead Zimbabwe. Both newspapers did not remind the readers that Mnangagwa had been part of Mugabe’s government and contentious policies for the past 37 years. It is this ‘hero’ who would also see for the first time in nearly two decades western envoys coming to Zimbabwe for a president’s inauguration. Such high-level attendance by top envoys such as Rory Stewart was meant to legitimise Mnangagwa’s ascendancy as portrayed by the newspaper. The *Newsday* of November 24, 2017, reported that Stewart said that the country had experienced was ‘an absolutely critical moment’. The attendance by Stewart from Zimbabwe’s former imperial power, the United Kingdom, and many other western envoys in Zimbabwe was part of international legitimisation of Mnangagwa’s leadership. This downplayed the unconstitutional overthrow of Mugabe. This paper argues that in its framing of Mnangagwa, the media also failed to abide by its journalistic ethics of giving a truthful and fair coverage. Mnangagwa, whom the media labeled as the ‘coming messiah’, was the same person who has been named by various independent reports on the Matabeleland massacres of the 1980s and also the crackdown on opposition politicians in 2008.

The military as popular change agents

Since independence, the military has been accused of interfering in the electoral and public affairs of Zimbabwe. Moyo (1992) in his book, 'Voting for Democracy: Study of Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe', accused the military of interfering in the 1990 elections by campaigning for ZANU PF party. Interestingly, for the first time across political divide, citizens and political parties lauded the military for its interference in civilian political affairs. The private media until November 2017 was critical of the military dabbling in electoral and political affairs of the state. Notably the private media accused the army of the human rights violations attendant to its interventions, for instance, in the 2008 disputed elections. *The Herald* of November 16, 2017 wrote, 'no military takeover in Zimbabwe.' This gave the military space to counter allegations of a military coup. In the statement published by *The Herald*, the military claimed that 'the action taken by the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) did not represent a military takeover of the Government but was meant to address the political, social and economic situation that could have ended in violent conflict.'

The Herald did not make any attempts to give a balanced view of what was unfolding in Zimbabwe. If anything, this statement defeats the denials captured in the headline as interfering in the political, social and economic affairs of the state is beyond the limits of the military as provided for by the country's constitution. *The Newsday* of November 16, 2017 had a headline 'Military takeover should be temporary.' This tacitly gave support of the military interference in civilian affairs by endorsing military intervention but for a limited period. Both newspapers are not critical to the unlawful military intervention in public affairs without the authority of Mugabe as provided under the constitution. *The Herald* of November 18, 2017 carried an article demonstrating the extent to which the military had gone in extending its mandate to policing affairs such as giving clearance to public protests, which is the role of the police. The paper quoted ZDF commander General Chiwenga saying, 'We wish to advise the nation that for as long as the planned march remains orderly, peaceful and in tandem with the fundamental Bill of Rights and within the confines of our Constitution and without hate speech and incitement to cause violence, we fully support the march.'

The language and expression of the authority clearly depicts General Chiwenga as de facto head of state, a clear sign of a military coup, which both newspapers failed to name it what it was. This failure by the newspaper seems to be well choreographed, the military was to be viewed as messianic figures in the ouster of Mugabe. The media by failing to be critical and giving alternative

views, apparently held by many across the political isle, demonstrates their involvement in confirming the role of military in civilian affairs.

ZANU PF and constitutional processes

The study reveals ZANU PF is represented as a party that follows due processes in administering state and party affairs. The two newspapers do not expose the double standards and hypocrisy of the leadership of ZANU PF over the claims. For instance, *The Herald* of November 18, 2017 had a headline 'ZANU PF recalls Mugabe.' The story insinuated the Mugabe was removed, following due processes. The story went on further to say, 'ZANU-PF yesterday recalled President Mugabe from the position of party First Secretary and replaced him with former Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa whom the ruling party also reinstated as a Central Committee member.' The fact of the matter is that there is no provision within ZANU PF constitution to recall the president of the party outside congress. The recall claim is therefore misleading. The statement was meant to remove liability from the army's military coup, which is unlawful. The *Newsday* gave legitimacy to a questionable ZANU PF meeting that 'recalled' Mugabe. In its story from November 19, 2017 under the headline 'Breaking: ZANU PF fires Mugabe, reinstates Mnangagwa', the newspaper claims that Mugabe was removed by the Central Committee. Both newspapers did not question the failure by the party to follow due processes as it claimed in expelling Mugabe. This approach fits into Akpabio (2011) argument that the news media use negative frames to deny people a sense of belonging. This framing was arguably embraced against Mugabe in order to legitimise the ascendancy of Mugabe and position Mnangagwa as the legitimate leader of ZANU PF post Mugabe.

In the firing of both Mugabe and Mnangagwa from the party in a period of a month, there was never a disciplinary process against either of the two leaders, which demonstrates the lack of due process and at the failure by the media to play its watchdog role in highlighting such problems. As argued by Trappell (2011), the democratic role of journalism and the media is to identify and make public the failings of elected representatives and public officials. Curran (2002) observed that the central thesis of liberal media history in democratic process is the development of the mass media, whose principle democratic role, according to traditional liberal theory, is to act as a check on the excesses of the state. The media should play a watchdog role and act as providers of information and resources for public opinion formation. They should circulate information and ideas that are deemed essential in sustaining a vibrant civil society and a functioning democracy. As this paper has demonstrated, the two newspapers failed to play the watchdog role on the activities of the military in public affairs.

Instead of playing their watchdog role, the two newspapers acted as lapdogs of the military as it romanticised the coup. This failure is in direct conflict with what other scholars have argued stating that the press can actually strengthen democracy in weak states, 'In any country where political institutions and opposition groups are not yet or no longer – operating freely, a press able to report and reflect popular discontent with the course of national policy or with the government of the moment can serve as important warning light identifying early problems that demand solution if political stability is to be maintained' (Unger, 1990).

Unger argues further that the rarity of media freedom in developing countries and former Communist states was, in his view, proof of how difficult it was for a democratic ethos to be socialized and to take root. That press freedom has traditionally been one of the first liberties to be denied by totalitarian governments demonstrates its significances in emerging democracies (Unger, 1990).

While it is generally agreed that the media play a critical watchdog role against those in public and powerful positions in society, this role is especially crucial in new and fragile democracies in Africa unlike in more mature democracies in the West. The watchdog role of the media is particularly vital in emerging democracies where it has been **argued that where opposition political parties are weak or non-existent owing to state repression, the private press can occupy that role of opposition.** In the case under review, the private media, civil society, the opposition and state-controlled media were arguably complicit in unlawful military intervention in the public and political affairs of Zimbabwe that resulted in the demise of Mugabe. In their analysis of the dual legacy of democracy and the authoritarian role of the media in Zimbabwe, given its colonial history of contested press freedom, Ronning & Kupe (2000) argue that the watchdog role of the press is particularly important in societies where the political parties or organisations have failed to provide an effective opposition to the ruling party such as is the case in Zimbabwe. In such situations, it is doubly important that the press examines the conduct of the rulers and questions how public resources are managed.

Entrenched positions, differences and interests of the two newspapers

Whereas the *Newsday* has always been critical of Mugabe's leadership, the reportage of *The Herald* showed shifts in editorial policy depending on who is under control of the party and government. The coverage of *The Herald* questions

the editorial independence and its public interest role as a public newspaper. The public interest is compromised by the partisan interests of those in charge. While *Newsday* sought to depict politics of accommodation by giving voices to both oppositional and mainstream voices such as those in ZANU PF, as well as minority groups like whites, *The Herald*, to the contrary maintained its stance of profiling and giving coverage to ZANU PF and leading state actors. However, it is critical to note that *Newsday* only gave space to voices that were sympathetic to Mugabe's ouster demonstrating a level of complicit in the coup. The *Newsday* of November 16 had a headline 'Tsvangirai, Mutsvanga jets in.' The story sought to portray a country headed for a government of national unity. This portrayal by *Newsday* had a goal to create an idea of a government of national unity – this was not the case. *The Herald*, which had become the official voice of Mnangagwa's faction, and the military demonstrated unwillingness to promote such politics, as it had never given coverage of these two politicians who played a major role in ending Mugabe's power. Both papers failed to give representation of events unfolding in the country, *Newsday* advanced a unity narrative which was never publicly admitted by either party while *The Herald* ignored covering other politicians representing alternative views. We argue that such framing by both papers failed to meet basic journalistic ethics of giving a truthful, accurate and representative view of events unfolding in the country.

The other differences in coverage are the patent interests of the two newspapers on the future of the state post-Mugabe. *The Herald* wanted the continued hegemony of ZANU PF under Mnangagwa while they sought legitimisation of opposition and civil society. The *Newsday*, wanted an inclusive government which includes Mnangagwa and the opposition formations of the MDC with a view of stabilising the political economy. The paper critically observes that the two newspapers had two opposite discourses that morphed only at the point of pushing Mugabe out of power. The *Newsday* promoted discourse of democratisation and inclusiveness of the post-Mugabe period, while *The Herald* promoted authoritarian discourses where ZANU PF remains in control of state politics. Therefore, the convergence we observed was rather ephemeral, that facilitated only Mugabe's fall but not permanent transformation of national politics.

Conclusion

Construction of the coup as 'acceptable'

One of the major findings of the study is the construction, framing and coverage of the military coup by both newspapers as 'acceptable'. Both *The Herald* and the

Newsday did not characterise Mugabe's fall as a military coup. They both did not point to the violation of the constitution and the undemocratic processes that took place. From the reportage of the papers on the military role, one can argue that the frames used by both newspapers had a sense that Mugabe was a burden to the nation's political and economic fortunes who deserved to be removed from power by any means necessary. In this regard, this study submits that the two newspapers failed to play their watchdog role, failed to give a truthful and representative coverage against the abuse of authority by the army. The failure by the two newspapers to play this critical role has major implication on media theory and journalistic practices in developing contexts such as Zimbabwe. As submitted by Schudson (2008), in both developed and developing contexts, the media can play critical roles that serve democracy. It is pointed out that news should provide full and fair information so that citizens can make informed political choices. The media can also investigate the concentrated powers of the elected representatives. It can also interpret events with a view to assisting citizens to understand complex issues in their societies. From the cases examined in this paper, it is submitted that such roles were undermined and negated by both newspapers as they lacked any balanced and critical assessment of Mugabe's fall aspects at the core of the social responsibility theory. The roles of the ruling party officials, opposition and civic groups to support a military coup were not scrutinized by the two outlets. While one could argue that Mugabe was no longer popular in both his party and state, the media had a public duty to serve the public interest by critically reporting Mugabe's demise following the due processes of the law. Instead, the two outlets failed to expose ruling party officials who had been in Mugabe's government and its failed policies since 1980 but turned against him at the last hour for political expedience.

For future research, it may be of interest to know how media ownership, especially of private media, has influenced the transition. As Ruhanya's study (2018) revealed, the 'cross-pollination of the political interests of the ruling political elites and the business interests of the publishers to find common ground to facilitate and enhance viability of the papers, financial assistance from donors through donation of newsprint and financial resources and internal cost-cutting measures in the operations of the publications' are some of the challenges that informed media business not only during the transition but more than a decade before the coup. The researchers recommend future studies to look at political-military-business nexus regarding media ownership during the transition to understanding the underlying interests that could have informed a damascene shift in framing, not only the military, but Mnangagwa and his Zanu PF faction.

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