

# How Zimbabwe lost on 31 July

It was 31 July 2020.

Harare was a ghost town.

The bristling capital, known for its hive of activity, was “sleeping”.

How ironic, considering that Harare means “a city that never sleeps!”

But on that day, it had a resemblance of a city that has endured a war for long, with the calm serving as a new beginning after years of gun sounds!

On this day, security forces barricaded the streets rendering them impassable for ordinary citizens who had intended to demonstrate in the capital and other major cities in Zimbabwe.

That heavy manpower deployed to thwart the intended demonstrations on 31 July personified the state’s uneasiness at the thought of protests and its propensity to spend resources to maintain its incumbency at all costs!

This precisely explains the sight of helicopters hovering about the different suburbs.

Any “untoward behaviour” was obviously going to be communicated swiftly to reinforcements on standby to deal with the “renegade elements” defying government’s directive to stay indoors on the day in which Zimbabweans had intended to demonstrate against a litany of grievances posing as an indictment for Mnangagwa’s “Second Republic”.

Zimbabweans intended to speak against corruption, state profligacy, impunity, human rights abuses, poor healthcare facilities and low wages among other concerns depicting systemic failure by a government which, despite coming on the

backdrop of a military coup, enjoyed goodwill both at home and internationally.

Although demonstrating is a constitutional right, experience in Zimbabwe has often shown that security forces have been quick to use disproportionate force on citizens, as happened on 1 August 2018, following [post-election violence!](#)

This time around, blood spilling was out of the equation.

Major cities were deserted, as nervous citizens retreated to their homes and occasionally vented their anger online, knowing full well the capabilities of the security forces.

For a government that has been struggling to contain the Covid-19 cases which have spiked from 605 at the beginning of the month to 4000 to date with 70 deaths, Covid-19 provided a perfect excuse to bar citizens from entering the town, on account of following the World Health Organisation's protocol on social distancing.

Covid-19 aside, 31 July provided a glimpse of Mnangagwa's authoritarian state resorting to colonial tactics of closing main cities on the pretext of combating an epidemiological threat which it was struggling to contain following a spike in imported cases of returning residents from Botswana and South Africa, and local transmissions.

### **A Pyrrhic victory**

To the government, the sight of empty streets posed a success in containing the intended demonstrations.

However, it was Zimbabwe which lost.

The bulk of the working population, who now survive from hand to mouth, were denied of their income streams on that day.

Democracy also suffered.

The citizens who had intended to demonstrate after having mobilised each other on social media were perceived by their own government as “regime change agents”.

How is it that this tired rhetoric, which was popularised by Robert Mugabe, who had well-founded colonially built grievances against the West, which he overplayed, was now being used as the pretext to bar citizens from carrying out protests which are constitutionally sanctioned?

It has been evident that Mnangagwa who had two weeks ago pronounced a daily [12-hour curfew](#), starting from 6 pm to 6 am and had prohibited political gatherings, had tirelessly worked to thwart the 31 July demonstrations way before the day.

In many ways, the fact that not much happened on the day depicted the closure of the civilian space by the security forces tasked to guarantee national peace and security, and protect the defenceless citizens!

It is unfortunate that two years after, the recommendations of the Kgalema Motlanthe Commission of Inquiry (COI) regarding the 1 August 2018 shootings that saw the death of six civilians and injured many others have not been implemented.

The Commission recommended [that the deceased's families be compensated and that security personnel should exercise restraint in their discharge of their duties, but none of these has been implemented to date.](#)

The security forces may perceive as a “success” what later became a “stay away”, which was, in fact, emblematic of the existing jitteriness amongst citizens who know the heavy-handedness of their uniformed forces.

The continuing frailty of citizens in confronting Mnangagwa's ineptitude is, however, a stark contrast to the November 2017 events in which they marched in the capital hand in hand with soldiers, as part of an exercise to legitimise a military coup against Robert Mugabe.

The decision by the citizens to retreat to their homes depicts the high military presence in the Zimbabwean political matrix, where political processes including protests require the army's assurance, at least for the safety of the ordinary disenfranchised citizens.

Sadly, even amidst the calmness, the authorities went on to arrest [award-winning Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga](#) and opposition MDC Alliance spokesperson Fadzai Mahere and six other activists on allegations of [inciting public violence after they were found wielding placards at a shopping centre in Harare.](#)

It is mind-boggling that authorities went on to arrest a few citizens marching peacefully outside the capital!

It is even more worrisome that instead of addressing local grievances, the Zanu PF acting spokesperson Patrick Chinamasa internationalised the whole debacle, singling out the involvement of America's ambassador to Harare, Mr Brian Nichols "and a coterie of gangsters and mercenaries who are disguised as diplomats" for funding ["acts of violence"](#) in the country.

Such recklessness has unfortunately dented Mnangagwa's re-engagement exercise with Western countries, who have had a tumultuous relationship with Zimbabwe since it embarked on the land reform programme two decades ago.

In a despicable fashion, Zimbabwe's Secretary for Information Mr Nick Mangwana poured scorn on the intended demonstrations, arguing that the burial of a national hero, military commander and former cabinet minister Perrance Shiri ["was the only major event in the country"](#).

The government's assertion that the intended protests were a none event was symbolic, considering that the burial of a long-time military commander turned agriculture minister, Air Marshal (Rtd) Perrance Shiri, whom [Mnangagwa said died of](#)

[Covid-19](#) and was buried on 31 July, the same day Zimbabweans sought to demonstrate about the mishandling of the pandemic!

While 31 July was about the citizens expressing the real issues, there was much contradiction in the fact that the Vice President Constantine Chiwenga, who had in the past derogatorily called doctors [“skilled labourers and not professionals”](#), had recently returned from China, where he was receiving [medical care!](#)

On 31 July, Zimbabweans, who have over the years complained about their dead healthcare system, were shocked to see top [Personal Protective Equipment \(PPE\)](#) worn by pallbearers at the burial of Perrance Shiri.

Ironically, the government has [failed to provide PPEs to frontline health](#) workers, which has immensely contributed to the rising cases of Covid-19.

Although having retreated to their homes following a series of threats from the establishment, Zimbabweans were definitely disgusted by the level of state profligacy at Shiri's burial.

Range Rover cars, [17 gun salutes](#), a flypast, all happening in a country confronted by a myriad of economic and health problems.

That the government resorts to name-calling its citizens seeing the glaring double standards is disingenuous.

Given these glaring contradictions of government's neglect of the healthcare system, which was one of the grievances of 31 July, President Emmerson Mnangagwa had the temerity to implore [“medical staff to act in the national interest and exhibit a sense of responsibility”](#) during the fight against Covid-19.

Even more telling, Mnangagwa who had shut the door to his own citizens intending to carry out protests had equally squandered an opportunity to apologise for the Gukurahundi massacres, in which Perrance Shiri was a commander under the

North Korean 5th Brigade.

In the end, 31 July provided a glimpse of the numerous contradictions which have existed in Zimbabwe for some time now. The curtailment of citizen's protests by the security services depicted an assault on citizens' democratic expression and freedoms.