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ZIM AGORA/PUBLIC SPHERE

OPPOSITION POLITICS IN ZIMBABWE: IS A LAZARUS MOMENT POSSIBLE?

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"Promoting Cutting-Edge Research and Public Policy Analysis for Sustainable Democracy"

The primary aims and objectives of the Zim-agora are:

1) ***Critical Analysis****:* To provide a platform for critical analysis of Zimbabwean political economy questions, particularly in the context of elite succession contestations within the ruling ZANU-PF party and the broader securocratic state.

2) ***Public Discourse****:* To foster public discourse on topical issues such as corruption, climate change diplomacy, public policy, human rights, and democracy within the framework of transitology political discourses and narrative shaping.

3) ***Empirical and Theoretical Grounding:*** To offer an empirically, theoretically, and locally grounded window into the Zimbabwean political economy, interrogating recent movements within the security sector and their implications for stability and sustainability.

4) ***Weekly Think-Tanking Papers****:* To produce weekly think-tanking papers that provide critical analysis of current political economy questions, power configurations within the party-state-military-business complex, and the roles of opposition and civil society organizations.

5) ***Democratic Space****:* To tackle the shrinking democratic space in Zimbabwe and explore pathways to transition and improve human life from the ills of a securocratic state.

Opposition Politics in Zimbabwe: Is a Lazarus Moment Possible?

Introduction

A few weeks ago, as I walked through one of the streets of Harare on my way to Parirenyatwa Hospital, I encountered two vendors hurriedly pushing their empty carts. They were fleeing from the police, who were forcefully clearing all vendors off the streets in the wake of the recent SADC Summit. As we walked, these men passionately criticized the opposition for betraying their hopes for a better future. They lamented the opposition's failure to mobilize protests, the political silence from its leaders, and their perceived timidity and cooptation, which they felt came at the expense of the suffering masses. This sentiment—that Zimbabwe's post-2023 opposition is in hibernation and possibly "dead'—is a common public opinion shared by people from various walks of life. While the vendors initially perceived the opposition as dead, by the time we parted ways, the general feeling was that the opposition was in a coma, uncertain whether it was dead or alive.

This brought my mind back to a conversation with a doctor earlier that morning. He had mentioned that a patient I was going to visit had experienced a "Lazarus moment," a term used to describe a sudden and unexpected recovery after being given no hope of survival. This dramatic turnaround was witnessed after medical personnel rushed the patient into the intensive care unit (ICU), where they performed various life-saving procedures such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), defibrillation, and administration of emergency medications. This imagery of a patient in the ICU and the subsequent Lazarus moment news kept me wondering whether Zimbabwe's opposition has a chance for a similar revival given the existing political context of a competitive authoritarian regime, also known as hybrid regime. In such political systems, key democratic institutions, including opposition parties, are created and allowed to compete to a limited extent for elective posts but are conditioned to promote and maintain the ruling elite in power and mitigate threats to their rule.[1] This inspired our focus in this week's Zim-agora on four key questions: What does a vibrant and/or comatose opposition look like? Is the opposition really on its deathbed? How can it be resuscitated? Is a Lazarus moment possible for Zimbabwe's opposition?

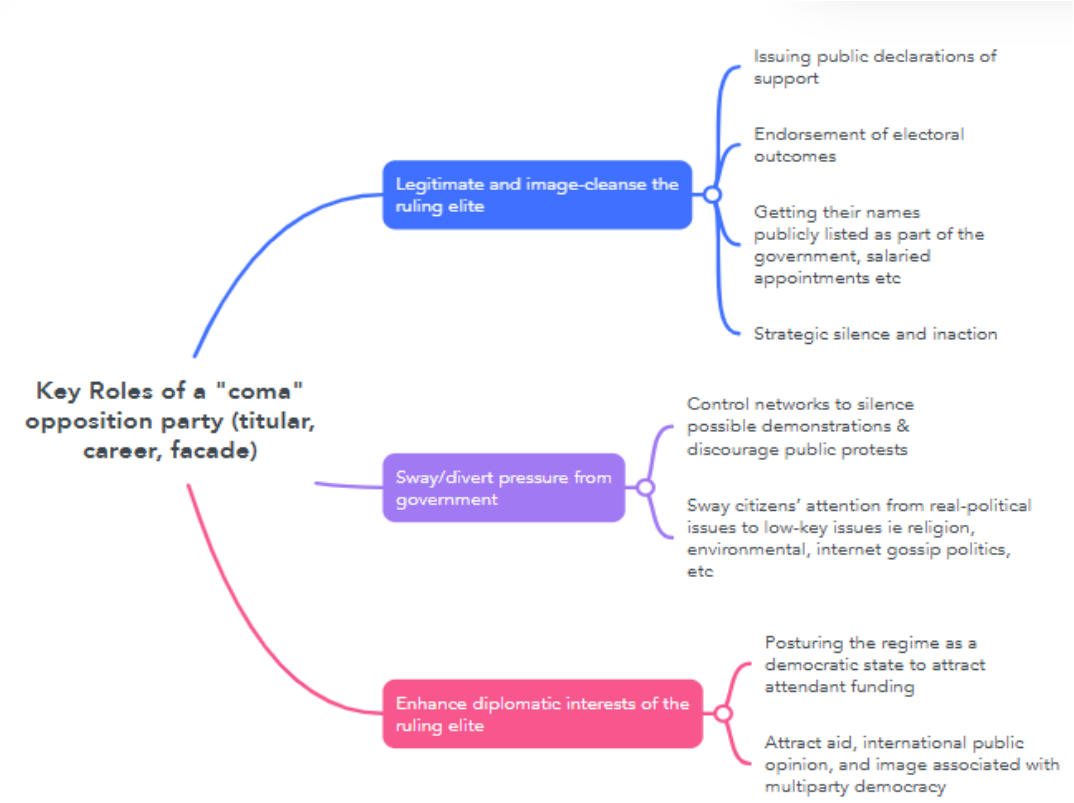
To fully unpack these questions, it is important to note that ever since Giovanni Sartori (1976), it has been widely acknowledged that the nature of a party system largely depends on the core features of the opposition parties.[2] The nature of party-based political contestation has been widely used to classify regime types.[3] In democracies worldwide, opposition political parties are a fundamental feature of the political system, providing citizens with various options for candidates, leadership, policies, and political narratives at all levels of the state.[4] These parties play a crucial role in maintaining the health and efficiency of the political system by fulfilling key functions such as aggregating and representing interests, integrating diverse groups, recruiting and training elites, and facilitating accountability.[5]However, these classic roles are most effective in democratic settings where there is a clear distinction between the state and the incumbent, and where a loyal opposition exists.

In competitive authoritarian regimes, such as those in Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Russia, opposition parties can take on two distinct forms: vibrant or comatose. Consequently, the functions of opposition parties in these regimes, whether vibrant or comatose, differ

significantly from those in democracies. What does a comatose opposition party look like? In the next section, we will explore this question to provide a clear view of the current state and position of the Zimbabwean opposition.

Comatose Opposition Parties

In competitive authoritarian regimes, also known as electoral autocracies, such as Zimbabwe, opposition parties often find themselves in a state of dormancy, effectively becoming "comatose."[6] A comatose opposition party is one that has ceased to perform its fundamental roles of scrutinising, opposing, and counterbalancing the ruling party and government. Despite being registered as opposition parties, it lack the spirit and deed to challenge the status quo. These comatose opposition parties are prevalent in competitive authoritarian regimes where key democratic institutions, including opposition parties, are created and allowed to compete for elective posts to a limited extent. However, their primary function is to promote and maintain the ruling elite in power, mitigating threats to their rule.[7] The ruling party often provides life support to these opposition parties, strategically keeping them as a smoke screen or titular career opposition parties to serve three main purposes.



Firstly, comatose opposition parties serve to legitimise the ruling elite's rule by issuing public declarations of support, endorsing electoral outcomes, and participating in government initiatives. Authoritarian regimes co-opt these opposition party leaders by offering financial benefits, access to patronage resources such as ministerial and legislative posts, or limited policy concessions. Examples of opposition party co-optation include A Just Russia's support for President Medvedev's 2007–2011 policies and the National Union for Democracy and Progress's leader Bello Bouba's appointment to the 1997

cabinet by the Cameroonian President Biya. In Zimbabwe, the ruling party, ZANU-PF, has maintained its dominance through institutional control, political maneuvering, and co-optation of opposition.[8] Examples include the 1987 Unity Accord with ZAPU, the post-2018 Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD) - a platform where the ruling party president engaged in dialogue with candidates who lost elections including buying them state-of-the-art vehicles,[9] and the appointment of the current controversial CCC leader Sengezo Tshabangu as the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament despite objections by the opposition CCC.[10] These cases got celebratory state media coverage such as the Herald, which is viewed as a ruling elite project outcome harvesting and amplifying handle. In return, co-opted leaders cooperate with the ruling party, supporting their policy initiatives or re-election bids.[11] The strategic silence and inaction by opposition on key political developments including arrest and detention of 78 CCC activists and members in the post-2023 period is unusual and conspicuous. By ensuring the cooperation of select opposition parties, incumbents can secure legislative majorities, bolster their credibility, and neutralize potential threats to their rule.[12] This facade of legitimacy helps the ruling elite maintain their grip on power while giving the illusion of a functioning democracy.

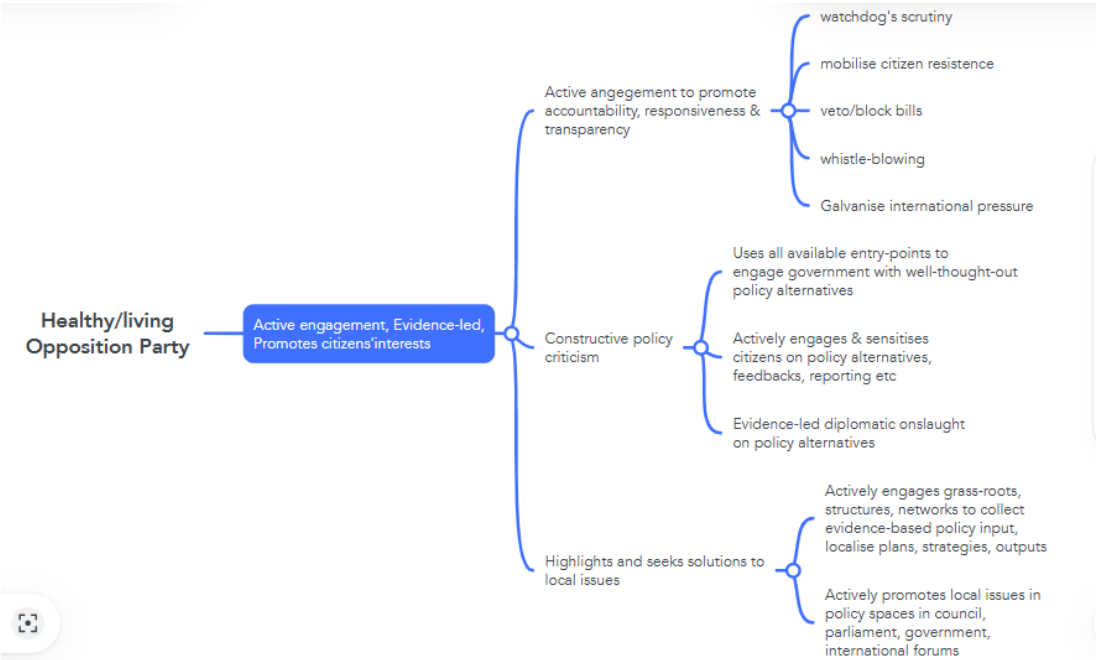
Secondly, comatose opposition parties serve to sway citizen pressure from the government by pacifying citizen resistance. They control their networks to silence possible demonstrations, discourage public protests, and swerve citizens' attention from real political issues to low-key issues such as religion, environmental politics, internet gossip politics, etc. This diversion of attention helps the ruling elite avoid scrutiny and maintain control. This casts more light on the current focus on internal leadership fights, power struggles and competition for government salaried posts and recognition at the expense of issues raised by citizens above.

Third, they serve as necessary evils in the international economic and diplomatic interests of the ruling elite. This includes posturing the regime as a democratic state where opposition exists peacefully alongside the ruling party while in reality being appendages of the ruling party. This is important as more aid, international public opinion, and image associated with those regimes that have multipartyism are very important interests of the ruling elites in authoritarian regimes. In countries like Venezuela, Turkey, and Russia, autocratic incumbents have entrenched their rule despite unfavourable circumstances by co-opting opposition party leaders.

Vibrant Opposition Parties: A resilient Remnant

Although most African opposition parties in competitive authoritarian regimes are often perceived as mere vehicles for individuals looking for patronage opportunities, empty shells created to legitimize a regime, or weak actors incapable of playing a major role in their country's politics,[13] there are resilient remnants of vibrant opposition.[14] A vibrant opposition party is one that is in a functional state of a real opposition party, vibrant and active in its business of opposing the incumbent party. These actively engage a hybrid regime through strategies that include boycotting or running for elections, organizing protests and civil disobedience campaigns, sitting in parliament, local councils, and other institutions, court challenges, holding press conferences and lobbying international stakeholders among others.[15] Findings from a comparative study of opposition to the competitive authoritarian regimes in Montenegro (1997–2020) and North Macedonia (2006–2017) reveal that large protests, rather than boycotts, prior to elections have been

important factors in facilitating opposition cohesion and signalling broad support while the ability of opposition parties to cooperate and form pre-election coalitions is a key determinant of their success.[16]



The roles of vibrant opposition parties in competitive authoritarian regimes can be subdivided into two broad functions drawn from comparative study of opposition parties in competitive authoritarian regimes such as Burkina Faso, Uganda, Rwanda and Egypt among others. First, a vibrant opposition party protects citizen interests by keeping the ruling government and party under a watchdog's scrutiny, denunciation and threat of mobilised citizen resistance. This includes scrutinizing the operations of the executive, that is, exercising the oversight of the implementation of the law from the angle of performance and accountability and, especially, the use of the finances granted to the executive for its work. By denunciation, a vibrant opposition actively engages in exposing the ruling elite's wrongdoings, and systemic failures calculated to erode the regime's public support and legitimacy. This is calculated to "weaken both voters' support for the regime and international credentials it may have, while making it more difficult for the government to rig elections to stay in power."[17] In these contexts where the government is *de facto* not accountable to its citizens, this serves as limited version of exerting accountability pressure in what Courtney Jung and Ian Shapiro termed "asking awkward questions, shining light in dark places, and exposing abuses of power."[18] Thus, a vibrant opposition is ever-ready to whistle-blow, veto, block bills through voting in parliament, mobilize resistance from the people, and galvanize international pressure in case of adverse policies or government conduct that undermines the interests of citizens. Mobilization public dissent maintains popular pressure against the incumbent and their regime, in order to increase their cost of survival. This active engagement ensures that the government remains accountable, responsive and transparent.

Second, a vibrant opposition offers constructive criticism of government policies, providing detailed alternatives to ensure effectiveness, inclusiveness, people-centeredness, and the best pursuit of national interests. This is where an opposition can significantly

contribute to the efficient running of the country while also demonstrating how their policies might achieve better results. By presenting well-thought-out alternatives, the opposition pushes the government to improve its policies and better serve the public. This process is also known as succession signalling, indicating that a credible alternative to the incumbent regime is available.[19] Succession signalling builds real and perceived confidence in the opposition, making it less risky for citizens to support regime change and encouraging elite defection from the ruling party. To sustain credible succession signalling, a vibrant opposition party strategically takes up elective positions in state institutions, such as parliament or local councils, and outperforms the incumbent. For example, South Africa's opposition, the Democratic Alliance, has demonstrated sterling performance in its local authorities.[20] This includes bringing local issues to the political system, ensuring resolution through policy and program outputs, achieved through active participation in parliamentary portfolio committees, debates, and other mechanisms. This connection to grass-roots concerns ensures that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard and addressed at the highest levels of government.

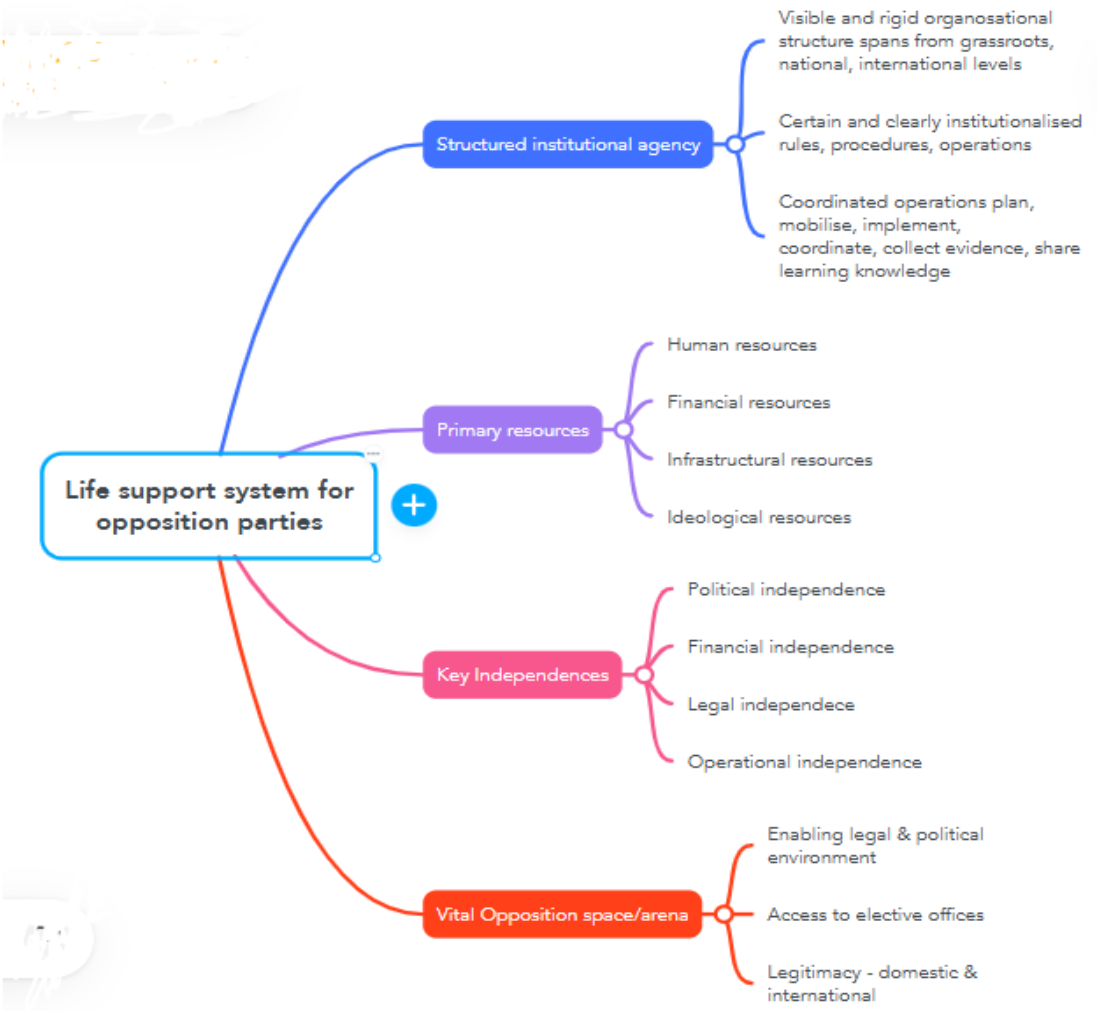
Through these activities, opposition politicians develop an understanding of governance, acquire practical skills, and establish strategic networks within the state apparatus for future use. They also gain status in their constituencies through their elected positions and their ability to reinvest financial and political capital back into their communities. In this way, they build their credibility as an alternative governing elite. The net outcome is that, such a vibrant opposition "can appear as a more credible government-in-waiting, in the eyes of citizens and foreign partners, and allow for a smoother, civilian transition if and when a regime change is possible."[21] A recent comparative study of 16 national parliaments, shows that opposition parties with larger sizes and previous government experience are more likely to adopt confrontational strategies, increasing their chances of winning future elections.[22] However, for the opposition to effectively fulfil these roles, several key 'life supports' are needed.

The Life Support System for Opposition Parties

In this section, we address the question: What does 'life support' for vibrant opposition look like? Four key contextual factors contribute to the resilience of vibrant opposition parties. While not exhaustive, these factors form the necessary but not sufficient 'life support' environment for enabling vibrancy. First, opposition parties require four primary types of resources: human, financial, infrastructural, and ideological. The role of a committed knowledge management team engaged in evidence mining, curation, sharing, and promoting evidence use is emphasised. These resources must be strategically and tactically deployed across the country. However, legitimacy enjoyed by liberation parties creates ideological dilemmas for the opposition in their competing claims about the shape of economic and political governance.[23] Second, opposition parties need independence—financial, political, legal, and operational—from the state, the ruling party, their elites, and other foreign or domestic entities. Third, an opposition space to conduct their activities is essential. This includes an enabling legal and political environment, access to elective offices, and both international and domestic legitimacy.

Fourth, and very key for Zimbabwean opposition, a structured institutional agency is required to plan, mobilize, and implement the stated resistances. This enhances the effectiveness and credibility of succession signalling by opposition parties, as discussed

above. This process involves building the party as an organization, developing a base of supporters, and designing policy proposals.[24] Such efforts make the opposition appear committed to challenging the regime (whether in parliament or on the streets), thereby garnering popular support and positioning the opposition (as parties or individuals) to claim legitimacy after the regime's fall.



Although co-optation primarily occurs through the use of incentives and coercive capabilities by autocratic incumbents,[25] Kavasoglu (2021) uses data sets on opposition party organizations in electoral autocracies between 1970 and 2019 to show that opposition parties with high mobilizational capacity—characterized by a nationwide network of permanent local branches, entrenched ties to prominent social organizations, devolved internal decision-making authority from the party leadership to lower cadres, and ideological distance from autocratic incumbents—are less prone to co-optation.[26] Thus,

the ability of autocratic incumbents to control opposition parties through co-optation is determined not only by resource availability, institutional manipulation, and repression but also by the organizational features and ideological positions of the opposition parties. In short, empirical evidence shows that opposition party organizational features and ideological positions determine the possibilities for elite co-optation in electoral autocracies.

This has been evident in Zimbabwe's past two vibrant opposition parties, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and its successor MDC-T, MDC Alliance. These opposition parties owed their resilience to strong mobilizing structures, the ability to develop and sustain effective mobilizing structures, appropriating the mobilizing structures of other organizations such as trade unions, following (albeit inconsistently) inclusive internal democracy procedures, and constructing a highly partisan identity that minimized defections to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party.[27] This enabled resilience despite challenges such as factionalism, coalition-building difficulties, and external influences. Their good electoral and street-wise performance was chiefly determined by internal dynamics.

Engineering the Lazarus Moment

To overcome these challenges, the opposition must undergo a strategic transformation, addressing the four key contextual factors that support vibrant opposition parties: structured institutional agency, resource mobilization, independence, and influencing the development of an enabling environment. This "Lazarus moment" can be engineered through several key actions:

1. **Unity and Cohesion:** Building a unified front by resolving internal conflicts and fostering collaboration among opposition factions is crucial. Opposition parties should strive for greater unity and collaboration, focusing on shared democratic goals rather than individual party agendas. This unity is essential for presenting a credible alternative to the incumbent regime and for mobilizing citizen resistance against government misconduct.
2. **Strategic Communication:** Developing a clear and compelling narrative that resonates with the electorate and effectively communicates the opposition's vision is essential. Engaging with civil society and fostering a vibrant public sphere can help opposition parties better articulate the concerns of citizens and promote democratic values. This includes exposing the ruling elite's wrongdoings and systemic failures to erode the regime's public support and legitimacy.
3. **Resource Mobilization:** Securing financial, human, infrastructural, and ideological resources, strategically and tactically deployed across the country, is vital. Building robust and inclusive mobilizing structures that can withstand government pressure and co-optation is essential for maintaining broad-based appeal. This involves appropriating the mobilizing structures of other organizations, such as trade unions, and following inclusive internal democracy procedures.
4. **Grassroots Engagement:** Strengthening connections with grassroots movements and civil society organizations to build a broad-based support network is necessary. This active engagement ensures that the government remains accountable, responsive, and transparent. Mobilizing public dissent maintains popular pressure against the

incumbent and their regime, increasing their cost of survival.

5. **International Advocacy:** Engaging with international bodies and foreign governments to garner support for democratic reforms and highlight the challenges faced by the opposition is important. International support for democratic institutions and practices can provide a conducive environment for the opposition to thrive and contribute to the democratic process. Lobbying international stakeholders and holding press conferences are key strategies in this regard.
6. **Independence and Enabling Environment:** Opposition parties need independence—financial, political, legal, and operational—from the state, the ruling party, their elites, and other foreign or domestic entities. Institutional reforms that ensure fair and transparent electoral processes are necessary to level the playing field for all political contenders. An enabling legal and political environment, access to elective offices, and both international and domestic legitimacy are also needed.

To be a vibrant opposition, Zimbabwe's opposition should actively engage in its role of opposing the incumbent party. This involves protecting citizen interests by keeping the ruling government under scrutiny, exposing wrongdoings, and mobilizing citizen resistance. This includes also offering constructive criticism of government policies, providing detailed alternatives to ensure effectiveness, inclusiveness, and the best pursuit of national interests. This process, known as succession signalling, builds confidence in the opposition as a credible alternative to the incumbent regime.

The future of democracy in Zimbabwe hinges on the ability of opposition parties to overcome their fragmentation and present a united front that resonates with the electorate. By addressing these challenges and implementing the aforementioned recommendations, there is potential for a more democratic and pluralistic political landscape in Zimbabwe.

End Notes

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[6] Levitsky and Way, Competitive Authoritarianism; Schedler, The Politics of Uncertainty.

[7] Arriola, "Patronage and Political Stability in Africa"; Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, "Democratic Subversion"; Buckles, "Internal Opposition Dynamics"; Gel'man, "Political Opposition in Russia"; Kelly, "Party Proliferation and Trajectories of Opposition"; Levitsky and Way, Competitive Authoritarianism; Lust-Okar, Structuring Conflict in the Arab World; Reuter and Robertson, "Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest."

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