

The Woman Behind Robert Mugabe

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After thirty-seven years of power Robert Mugabe has been ousted in a military coup. Mugabe is one of the most controversial leaders in recent history. Heralded by some as the emancipator of the British colony of Rhodesia, now modern day Zimbabwe, and by others as another African dictator (Winter, 2017), Mugabe has regardless been important personality in modern African politics. However, Mugabe's latest action, which has inspired the protests in Zimbabwe that have resulted in a coup, seem to be orchestrated by his wife, Grace Mugabe. Grace Mugabe is 52 (ABC/wires, 2017), forty-one years Mr. Mugabe's junior and one of the most powerful figures in the country. Nicknamed 'Gucci Grace', 'The First Shopper' and more recently 'DisGrace', Grace Mugabe has gained herself the reputation of being an excessive spender with lavish taste. It is speculated that she once spent upwards of 75,000\$ on a shopping spree in Paris (Martin, 2017). While frivolous spending is not in itself necessarily bad, Mrs. Mugabe's spending habits vilify her in a country that has been enduring an economic crisis (Dendere, 2017). This has gained her many enemies in her husband's cabinet as well as among the public. Although her shopping may be a topic of contention for the citizens bearing the burden of the slow economy and lack of money for food, up until now, it had not created enough animosity amongst the public and military to revolt against their once beloved leader.

So, if her spending habits haven't caused people to revolt why is the coup being staged now? Earlier this week, Robert Mugabe fired his long-standing friend and vice-president Emmerson Mnangagwa, who fled to South Africa (Plaut, 2017). Mnangagwa was one of the earliest supporters of Mugabe in the fight against the white nationalist leader of South Rhodesia, Ian Smith. Mnangagwa led one of the first guerrilla groups in fighting the white controlled South Rhodesian military. As the security general to Mugabe, before being deposed, Mnangagwa stood to be the next natural leader of Zimbabwe. Everything was peaceful—until Grace Mugabe capitalized on her influence with her husband to achieve her own political aspirations.

Trying to re-brand her image, Mrs. Mugabe started taking a more direct role in Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, and even called for the demotion and expulsion of some of its main leaders (Mufuka, 2017). As well, she has tried to re-brand herself as being a mother to the Zimbabwean people. In an effort to show that she is serious about her political aspirations, she traded in her designer clothes for more military inspired clothing including the beret, which was emblematic of the Zimbabwean rebel fighters. All of this was in an effort to transform herself from 'Gucci Grace' to 'Comrade Grace'. With all of these changes, she started to garner much more support from the women of Zimbabwe who feel like they don't have a voice in African political life (Dendere, 2017). Supporting the women of Zimbabwe is contradicted by Mrs. Mugabe's influence in firing of Robert Mugabe's previous prime minister, Joice Mujuru (BBC News Africa, 2017). In a BBC article on the rise of Grace Mugabe Mrs. Mugabe is quoted as accusing Ms. Mujuru of being, "corrupt, an extortionist, incompetent, a gossip, a liar and ungrateful", and

accused her of collaborating with opposition forces and white people to undermine the country's post-independence gains.” Months after the accusation, Mujuru was expelled from the ZANU-PF party, although she did go on to spearhead another political party where one of the goals is ending the Mugabe’s reign of power. Once she abdicated her role in the Mugabe government and the ZANU-PF party’s leadership, Mrs. Mugabe took over Mujuru’s place as the leader of the ZANU-PF’s women’s wing. The naked ambition Grace Mugabe has shown in demonization of a political rival to gain the upper hand doesn’t make her a likeable character. Yet, sometimes, these purely political goals of trying to become the leader of Zimbabwe can have unexpected outcomes. One of the things that Mrs. Mugabe has tried to change is the ZANU-PF constitution (Tarabay, 2017), with her influence in the party, by adding new requirements for the Vice-presidents office. Mrs. Mugabe has petitioned the congress to make it mandatory to have at least one female Vice-President. While this move may be purely selfish in order to guarantee her a political position at the highest reaches of government, it could also have a lasting impact on women in politics in Zimbabwe. Another political group, which Mrs. Mugabe has had an impact on, is the ZANU-PF youth league. Convinced of her narrative of mother to Zimbabwe and the influential legacy of Robert Mugabe, it seems that many want to retain the Mugabe name in office. Yet despite support among the youth and women Mrs. Mugabe still lacks support among the military, something that has caused what is now being seen as her eventual demise.

Grace Mugabe is potentially as controversial a character as her husband. She started as a typist and became an immensely influential and powerful woman in Zimbabwean politics. Although she has the support of her ailing husband, and various political factions of the greater ZANU-PF party, the current military coup is proving that neither she nor her husband have control of the military. As well they are no longer popular enough to secure her transition to being Vice-President. It is probable that she is the central reason for the ongoing coup, which has deposed her husband, through her aggressive political posturing and exile of Emmerson Mnangagwa. Grace Mugabe has been barred for life from the ZANU-PF party, and so her political aspirations seem to have hit a decidedly dead-end, however despite never holding office, she will have a lasting impact on Zimbabwean politics (MOYO, 2017).

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