

Loose Change

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. Two recent events in East Africa – one tumultuous, one expected – have highlighted that despite surface-level change, there is often much less change than expected or hoped. Political stagnation, or worse, going backwards, needs to be challenged in order for countries to reach their full potential.



The tumultuous event was, of course, the toppling of Robert Mugabe – something which was long hoped-for but which never quite seemed like it would happen. Nevertheless, here we are: thirty-seven years and out. The initial reaction, understandably, was one of jubilation. The tyrant was gone and change was coming. Except, err, it wasn't. The replacement was Emmerson Mnangagwa, Mugabe's former Vice-President, responsible for atrocities in the 1980s and who was only ejected from the Mugabe power circle due to the internal power struggle resulting from Grace's desire to take power for herself. While there may be some measure of economic reform and job creation, at least in the short term, it is questionable whether Mnangagwa's rule (or that of another selected successor) will see the change that Zimbabwe sorely needs.

Meanwhile, a few borders north, the unsurprising event was the swearing-in (again) of Uhuru Kenyatta as President of Kenya, following a rerun of the election boycotted by the opposition. The original contest, on August 8, was deemed irregular but Raila Odinga, the opposition leader, claimed that there had been no reforms made to the electoral system and so refused to stand again. Kenyatta therefore won by a landslide at a time when, it might have been expected, Odinga could have won and brought some positive change. Fifty people have since died in election-related violence and the cycle of political intransigence, leading to an almost total paralysis of the political system, looks set to continue.

Surface-level change is not enough. Root-and-branch reform is arguably the only process which can bring about lasting and peaceful change but, it is in the vested interests of the powerful to maintain the status quo, and the powerful usually have the means of enforcing their views.

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Not only does this obviously create extreme difficulties for the afflicted countries on the domestic front, but it harms their ability to operate on the international stage. The corruption, nepotism and paralysis become entrenched, and those bodies and individuals *'in the driving seat'* can spread their tentacles into everything that matters. For instance, one has to look very far to find a major Iranian business that does not ultimately answer to the Revolutionary Guard Corps, or an energy business in Angola that was not in the pocket of the Triumvirate. This is less horizon scanning than looking to the edge of the galaxy.

This is why, whatever 'change' may or may not occur, the negative consequences must always be analysed and assessed not only in light of what is different, but what is the same. A good geopolitical risk analysis should be conducted after any *'seismic shift'* as, quite often, it will reconfirm that things are just as complex and difficult as before, but is not worth taking the chance that change always equates to good change.

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