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Book Review: Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe

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Book Review

**Abiodun Alao, *Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe*.
Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012**

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As a relatively new student of African politics, and a committed student of international security, it was with both excitement and trepidation that I set out to read and review Abiodun Alao's newest book, *Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe*. I was excited at the prospect of reading another book by such an accomplished scholar, and by what I could learn. But, I was afraid that my relative inexperience with the specifics of Zimbabwean culture and history would leave me lost and confused. My excitement was well-founded, but my fear largely misplaced. *Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe* is not a perfect book, but it is a very good one, that should not be overlooked by scholars of security or southern Africa.

Alao explains that this study of Zimbabwe is a return to his academic roots, a homecoming of sorts (p. xiii). The book has a conversational tone that speaks to Alao's obvious comfort with the subject matter. The book attempts to describe and explain the broad range of factors that influence physical security in Zimbabwe from its independence in 1980 to the signing of a power-sharing agreement between Robert Mugabe and his political opponents in 2009. Alao draws upon historical sources as well as a number of interviews he conducted himself (p. 9). The benefit of these first-hand accounts can be seen throughout the book when he provides insights that no mere observer could.

Perhaps knowing that he was tackling a complex and difficult topic, Alao breaks down his analysis of security into seven elements, and devotes a chapter to each element. In the first chapter, Alao reaches back in time to lay a historical foundation, briefly exploring the influence of Cecil Rhodes on the colonial administration of what was then Rhodesia (pp. 12-14). He describes a Rhodesia ruled by fear and brutality for the benefit of a handful of white settlers whose rule only faltered as independence movements began to sweep the African continent (p. 16). During this time, several key organizations that would shape the future of Zimbabwe were founded, most notably Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), the organization which would eventually be led by Mugabe, and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the organization led by his rival Joshua Nkomo (p. 17). Each organization developed a militant wing, which would eventually unite for the liberation of Zimbabwe.

In the six following chapters, Alao discusses Zimbabwean security under Mugabe's leadership in topical chunks. Those topics include: the development of security institutions, the politics of those institutions, Zimbabwe's interactions with its neighbors, Zimbabwe's external military engagements, Zimbabwe's relations with non-African countries, and Zimbabwe's role in international organizations. This structure represents possi-

ably the book's only real weakness. A chronological book structure may have improved the usability of Alao's excellent information and insights. Each chapter begins around 1979 and ends in 2009. While each chapter thus provides a complete picture of the topic, it forces the reader to construct a separate timeline in order to understand how the topics interact over time. This leads to much flipping forward and backward through the book, and makes it difficult for the reader to fully appreciate the complex problems facing Zimbabwe at any given moment.

Through an analysis of Mugabe's years as prime minister and president of Zimbabwe, Alao paints a picture of a Zimbabwean security system built around a single personality: that of Robert Mugabe. Yet, the book does not lead to the easy conclusion that Mugabe has been a force of evil in Zimbabwe. Instead, it suggests that Mugabe's policies, and firm hand on the country, were necessary during the first few years of Zimbabwean independence. The problem arose when Mugabe continued to exert unilateral power and control beyond the initial period of necessity (p. 73-4). Whereas Mugabe's power hunger pushed him to be conciliatory in the early days in order to cement his power, his conciliation gave way to repression and violence in the later portion of his rule.

Each element of the security puzzle can be traced back to Mugabe himself, according to Alao. The makeup of the defense forces, for example, put most of the military power in the hands of ZANU members who fought alongside Mugabe in the war, and, over a span of about eleven years, Mugabe managed to put sole control of those forces into his own hands (pp. 60-63). Furthermore, Mugabe tightened his hold on the military by intervening in the DRC. This intervention was highly lucrative for the high level officers in the Zimbabwean army, and only somewhat lucrative for many other officers (p. 154). Mugabe also built a new power base off the foundation of his old ZANU friends. As the war veterans gradually retired from the military, many expected Mugabe's iron grip to fail. However, over the previous decades, Mugabe had built a loyalty incentive system that ensured that all high level military officers were loyal to him (pp. 67-68). It was this loyalty that led the military to wield its influence in more recent elections in Zimbabwe. Even Zimbabwe's international relationships were based on how they could serve Mugabe's regime. Zimbabwe remains close to China, for instance, more because of China's tolerance of Mugabe than for overall strategic and economic purposes (p. 189). International institutions, once key supporters of Mugabe and Zimbabwean independence, have long since abandoned much of their support, but Mugabe continues to use them in his domestic narrative as external threats (p. 216).

In his conclusion, Alao claims that his book is about three things: the influence of "personality" on Zimbabwean politics, the exploitation of history by a regime, and the fickleness of international attitudes (p. 217). Alao is not wrong. His book is about all of these things, but it is also about the fragility of new states and the struggle for security in an insecure environment. The conclusion itself weaves together the complicated narrative of the previous six chapters, and in many ways compensates for the book's organizational flaws. In all, *Mugabe and the Politics of Security in Zimbabwe* is a very good book that provides enough background to engage the novice, but enough insight to surprise the expert.