

Zimbabwe's incoming leader Mnangagwa makes first public appearance to cheers from huge crowd

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Harare: Poised to become Zimbabwe's next president, a former confidant of ousted leader Robert Mugabe on Wednesday promised "a new, unfolding democracy" and reached out to the world, saying international help is needed to rebuild the shattered economy.

Supporters of Emmerson Mnangagwa await his arrival at the Zanu-PF party headquarters in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Emmerson Mnangagwa, who fled Zimbabwe upon being fired from his job as vice president on November 6, made a triumphant return to the country a day after 93-year-old Mugabe resigned. His departure after 37 years in power followed a week of intense pressure - from the military that staged a government takeover, from members of parliament who started impeachment proceedings and from citizens who protested in the streets.

While Mnangagwa talked in his speech about democracy and "working together," he also recited slogans from the ruling ZANU-PF party such as "Forward with ZANU-PF, down with enemies" that are unlikely to attract Zimbabweans in the opposition.

He served for decades as Mugabe's enforcer, a role that earned him the nickname "Crocodile." Many opposition supporters believe he was instrumental in the army killings of thousands of people when Mugabe moved against a political rival in the 1980s.

Mnangagwa was in hiding during the political drama that led to Mugabe's resignation. His appearance at the headquarters of the party electrified a crowd that waited for hours. Flanked by bodyguards, and dressed in a blue suit, he raised his fists and danced a little on a podium, delighting supporters who hope he can guide Zimbabwe out of political and economic turmoil that has exacted a heavy toll on the southern African nation of 16 million.

"Today we are witnessing the beginning of a new, unfolding democracy," said the 75-year-old, who added that he had already received messages of support from other countries.

"We need the cooperation of the continent of Africa," he said. "We need the cooperation of our friends outside the continent."

After meeting with South African President Jacob Zuma, Mnangagwa flew in a private jet from South Africa to Zimbabwe. He indicated that his inauguration as president will be on Friday. That is "when we finish this job to legally install a new president," he said.

Mnangagwa will serve Mugabe's remaining term until elections next year. Opposition lawmakers who have alleged vote-rigging in the past say that balloting must be free and fair.

The party's Central Committee had voted to remove Mugabe from his party leadership post and replace him with Mnangagwa, a former justice and defense minister with close ties to the military.

Mugabe fired his longtime deputy as the former president's wife, Grace Mugabe, positioned herself to replace him and succeed her husband. That led the military to step into the party's factional battle a week ago by sending tanks into the streets and putting the president under house arrest - a move that opened the door for the party and the people to turn against the leader who took power after the end of white minority rule in 1980.

The resignation was met with wild celebrations across the Zimbabwean capital of Harare. People were thrilled to be rid of a leader whose early promise, including an emphasis on education, was overtaken by economic collapse, government dysfunction and human rights violations.

Mnangagwa "faces high expectations but will have a short honeymoon while he starts the process of moving Zimbabwe forward," the state-run Zimbabwe Herald newspaper said in a commentary.

"He has the best wishes of most Zimbabweans, at least today," the newspaper said.

One unemployed man who heard that Mnangagwa was arriving at an air force base on the outskirts of Harare waited in vain at its entrance in hopes of seeing him.

Godwin Nyarugwa said he was "very ecstatic" about Mugabe's resignation and that "we need change in this country, change in everything" after years of economic crisis. But he said Mnangagwa would have to produce results.

"We have to try him and see," he said of Mnangagwa. "If he doesn't come up with something, we need to change him as well."

- AP