

POV Community Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE



PRESIDENT

a film by Camilla Nielsson

www.pbs.org/pov



PRESIDENT

Zimbabwe is at a crossroads. The new leader of the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Nelson Chamisa, is challenging the old guard, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic front (ZANU-PF), represented by the country's incumbent president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The 2018 Zimbabwean general election will serve as the ultimate test of both the ruling party and the opposition. How will they interpret democracy in a post-Mugabe era—in discourse and in practice?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Film Summary
3	Using this Guide
4	Key Participants
6	Key Issues
7	Background Information
10	Discussion Questions
15	Discussion Guide Writer

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *President* to engage family friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. Conversations that center on politics and democracy can be difficult to begin and facilitate, but this guide is meant to support you in sustaining conversations around democracy, activism, politics, colonialism, and the importance of community organizers. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people listen actively and share divergent viewpoints with care and respect. We hope this discussion guide will inspire people with varying degrees of knowledge about these topics to enter the conversation and hopefully stay in the conversation in order to impact change and awareness.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the topics in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. *And be sure to leave time to consider taking action.* Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult and/or uncomfortable.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

- **Nelson Chamisa**, main candidate for the opposition party/ former president of Movement for Democratic Change, community organizer
- **Robert Mugabe**, former president of the Republic of Zimbabwe
- **Emmerson Mnangawa**, current president of the Republic of Zimbabwe
- **The Political Parties** - The major political parties in Zimbabwe are the following:
 - **Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)** is the political party that was formed in opposition to Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).
 - **Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)** is a political party that was under the leadership of former president and prime minister Robert Mugabe. Originally, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) merged with the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), and this political party became ZANU-PF. At one point ZANU-PF had sole control over parliament. This political party was formed and led by Mugabe, but in 2017, ZANU-PF led the coup to remove Mugabe from office. After Mugabe was removed, the ZANU-PF was led by the former vice president of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa.
 - **The Patriotic Front (PF)** was organized as a military and political alliance between the ZANU and ZAPU parties.
 - **Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC)** is the newest political party and was formed in 2022 by Nelson Chamisa after this upsetting loss in the presidential election. The CCC was formed after the film was finished.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

ZIMBABWE POLITICAL TIMELINE

- 1980: Zimbabwe gained independence from British rule and ZANU political party leader, Robert Mugabe, became the first Black prime minister of Zimbabwe.
- 1987: Amendments to Zimbabwe's Constitution created the new role of Executive President and gave Robert Mugabe power to run for office for an unlimited period of terms. This amendment effectively made Zimbabwe a de facto one-party authoritarian-ruled state.
- 1990s: Though Mugabe won elections in March 1990, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), these elections were accompanied by intimidation of opposing parties and manipulation through government-controlled media. Throughout the 1990's, the economy sharply contracted and was met with civil resistance, workers strikes, and growing discontent with the government.
- 1999: The economic crisis in Zimbabwe worsens and the opposing political party, MDC, is formed and led by Morgan Tsvangirai.
- 2002: Despite the MDC's attempts, Mugabe is re-elected through elections that were neither free, nor fair. During this election cycle many opponents were assassinated through state-sanctioned violence.
- 2008: Tsvangirai (MDC) gains the parliamentary majority vote in March 2008 but in the presidential runoff elections in June 2008, Mugabe is declared the winner after Tsvangirai withdraws due to state violence under Mugabe's rule which made free and fair elections impossible.
- 2013: Mugabe gains a seventh term leading Zimbabwe despite [reports of unfair election](#).
- 2017: Mugabe resigns days after the military takes control as part of a coup coordinated by former vice president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa becomes the president of Zimbabwe.
- Early 2018: The first post-Mugabe election is held.
 - February 2018: Opposition candidate Tsvangirai dies of cancer. Nelson Chamisa takes the place of Tsvangirai and becomes the presidential candidate for the MDC, running against Mnangagwa.
 - July 30, 2018: The election takes place. At two p.m. the results stop coming in. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) delays announcing the results of the presidential election.
 - August 1, 2018: People protest because of the delayed announcement of the results. Protestors chant, "Please protect my vote" and six civilians are killed by the army in the streets of Harare.
 - August 2, 2018: The ZEC announces the results and declares Mnangagwa the winner.
 - August 2018: The MDC goes to court to argue that Mnangagwa's victory should be overturned due to fraud, but despite all of the data and stories the MDC has collected and presented, the court rejects the opposition's plea to annul the election results. The constitutional court declares Mnangagwa the duly elected president of Zimbabwe.

- Civic engagement
- Unfair elections, voter suppression, and State violence
- Authoritarian Regimes
- Voting rights and legitimacy
- Nationalism and citizenship rights
- Human rights and violence
- Community resistance
- Political corruption, violence, and power
- Grassroots political organizing
- Strands of activism and mobilizing community
- The key principles of democracy (freedom of expression, independent judiciary, independent election authorities)
- The building of democratic institutions in an undemocratic environment

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

ZIMBABWE'S INDEPENDENCE AND THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY

On April 18, 1980, the Republic of Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain. Robert Mugabe served as prime minister of Zimbabwe from 1980 to 1987 and then as president from 1987 to 2017. Mugabe's presidency was marked by controversy, rigged elections, and violence against his political opponents. Mugabe resigned from his post in response to political and military pressure organized by vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa. Mugabe's resignation symbolized hope for a new beginning for Zimbabwe that centered the people—as evidenced by scenes of Zimbabweans cheering in the streets upon his resignation to illustrate their enthusiasm for change. Mnangagwa took over Mugabe's role as president of Zimbabwe upon Mugabe's resignation.

The political story of Zimbabwe is one of corruption and hope for democratic change. After Mugabe stepped down, the opposition leader of the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change), Morgan Tsvangirai, was seen as the favorite to win the first post-Mugabe election. Tsvangirai energized crowds with promises of no more violence and support for human rights. Unfortunately, Tsvangirai passed away four months before the 2018 presidential election. Nelson Chamisa stepped in and took over as the presidential candidate of the opposition. President Mnangagwa assured the people of Zimbabwe that a peaceful, fair, and transparent election would take place in 2018. The two main candidates were Chamisa (MDC) and Mnangagwa (ZANU-PF).

GETTING TO KNOW NELSON CHAMISA: THE “PEOPLE’S PRESIDENT”

At the time of this film's development, Nelson Chamisa was a 40-year-old lawyer who had been fighting the regime of former president of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe since he was a student activist. He had been fighting physically, financially, mentally, and emotionally for a new Zimbabwe for most of his life. In the film, Zimbabweans admirably call him “Mr. President” and the best hope for the country. Chamisa built incredible momentum for the 2018 election with little financial means. Some people doubted him because of his age. But he did win people over with his charisma, by connecting with them at intense rallies, and with his honesty. During the course of the film, Chamisa shows himself to be a leader who can navigate systems and structures despite disruption and corruption (i.e., illegal ballot printing, death threats, and the murders of innocent people). Chamisa handles these upsets with grace and calm while remaining steadfastly dedicated to a free and fair election by any means necessary. When he was said to have lost the 2018 Zimbabwe election, The MDC challenged the election result in Zimbabwe's constitutional court. However, despite the overwhelming evidence of voting irregularities, the judges, who were appointed by the ZANU-PF regime, ended up handing power to Emmerson Mnangagwa.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After long-running government harassment of the MDC, Chamisa later abandoned the MDC and now runs a new political party, the Citizen Coalition for Change (CCC). He continues to fight tirelessly for a democratic Zimbabwe and the will of the people.

Zimbabwe was one of the last African countries to become independent from Britain and then was governed by the same leader and political party from 1980 to 2017. *President* illustrates how this recently independent country is hungry for change at a pivotal time and the efforts required of Chamisa and other leaders to liberate the people of Zimbabwe from the corrupt ruling party. The next election will take place in 2023, and Nelson Chamisa is planning on running again under the CCC banner.

VOTING DISCREPANCY, FRAUD, FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Unfortunately, Zimbabwe has become known as a country that lacks credible elections. In 2018, [Human Rights Watch](#) published an article that highlighted the abusive laws and violence on the part of the ruling party that hamper free and fair voting. Military and security interference in elections has persisted since Mugabe was in office, as the film demonstrates. Additionally, the film brings to light how the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), a body tasked with overseeing the election as a neutral party, had trouble remaining independent and fair. The ZEC's lack of impartiality was concerning in the 2018 election and ultimately led to the election being seen as illegitimate.

President illustrates how a democratic society is unachievable when constant violations interfere with fair and just elections. Illegal ballot printing, delayed voting results, abuse of poll workers, and suppression of voting rights are just a few of the elements that lead to voting and election fraud and ultimately obliterate the right to choose representatives and democracy itself. At one point in the film someone asks, “How do you govern a country when you know you have not won an election?” Voting is a democratic right that people use to select a leader who will represent them, their needs, and their dreams. The election between Chamisa and Mnangagwa tramples on democratic rights and the right of Zimbabwean voters to choose their leaders freely and potentially opt for change and hope. The MDC made known its concerns about a rigged election and provided sources and data regarding abuse of poll workers and voters, as well as examples of illegal actions taken by the ZANU-PF to secure leadership and “victory.” The evidence was shared in a high-profile court case. Ultimately, the court upheld the false election results. Democracy is a system that is governed by the will of the people. *President* shows how the freedom and the will of the people may be unstable and oppressed by corruption, lack of transparency, and violence. The film opens up discussions about what is at stake when the hopes of a democratic society are violated and threatened by state-sanctioned violence. This knowledge and the discussions that the film inspires could explain why this

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

film was banned by the Zimbabwean government. Freedom of speech, freedom to vote safely, and freedom to seek change are what Chamisa wants for his country, but he was robbed of his opportunity to birth a democratic Zimbabwe in the post-Mugabe era.

SOURCES

Human Rights Watch (2018, June 7). "Zimbabwe: Lack of Reform Risks Credible Elections." *Human Rights Watch*. (2020, October 28).

Retrieved August 25, 2022, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/07/zimbabwe-lack-reform-risks-credible-elections>

Matiashe, F. S. (2022, April 25). "Zimbabwe: Who's Who in Nelson Chamisa's Inner Circle." *The Africa Report.com*. Retrieved August 25, 2022, from <https://www.theafricareport.com/193436/zimbabwe-whos-who-in-nelson-chamisas-inner-circle/>

Moyo, J. (2018, August 24). "Zimbabwe Court Upholds Results of Presidential Election." *The New York Times*. Retrieved August 25, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/world/africa/zimbabwe-election.html>

Public Broadcasting Service. (2018, August 3). "Legal Challenge Necessary for Zimbabwe Election Legitimacy, Chamisa Adviser Says." *PBS NewsHour*. Retrieved August 25, 2022, from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/legal-challenge-necessary-for-zimbabwe-election-legitimacy-chamisa-adviser-says>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If you were going to tell a friend about this film, what would you say?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly striking or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you want to know more about?
- Did anything in the film surprise you?
- What aspects of the film (landscape, language, feelings, family dynamics) were relatable? What, if anything, felt familiar? What, if anything, felt new and unfamiliar?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

POWER, THE PEOPLE, AND THE POLITICS OF HOPE

- Nelson Chamisa calls himself a servant of the people. Do you think it is possible to represent the people without *serving* them?
 - What does it mean for a leader to be a servant of the people?
 - How does Chamisa exemplify using power to navigate an unjust system while sticking to values and principles?
- In the film, what issues do you notice about how political power works in the Republic of Zimbabwe? What discussions do you think this film can inspire?
- In the film, Emmerson Mnangagwa and the Zanu-PF party fraudulently win the presidential election. Do you think it is possible to govern a nation whose people did not elect you to lead and to do so with integrity and be of service to the people?
 - How is power mishandled in the election process and what are the implications for everyday citizens?
- How do politics and power connect to human rights issues?
 - What are the ways that politics and power provide some with opportunities and/or create barriers for others?
- How does not protecting peoples' voting rights work to stratify the members of some groups and maintain power for others?
- How are people's identities impacted by their circumstances in society and the party governing their country?
 - How are the political conditions of peoples' lives impacted by their identities?
- What are some examples in the film that show the lasting impact of political oppression on individual and community identities?
- What questions does this film raise about those who live on the margins of society yet somehow remain hopeful?
- How has *President* changed your ideas about politics and how politics relate to people, power, and hope?
- What role does the media play in creating democratic space or in limiting democratic space?
 - What role does media literacy play, particularly when media is run by the State?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is it important to have an independent judiciary?
- Why is it important to have an independent election commission?

INDIVIDUAL STRUGGLES, COMMUNITY RESISTANCE, AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

- How do leaders and grassroots community members step into their power?
- What makes someone a strong community leader or activist? What examples do we see in the film?
 - Would you consider Nelson Chamisa an activist, and if so, in what ways?
- Based on what you learned from the film, how do community leaders need to support resistance to unjust policies, politics, and practice?
- What are some forms of being active in political movements that you recognized in this film for the first time?
- Has this film offered you new ways to think about being an activist that inspire you to frame personal community work differently?
 - What are some ways you can engage in activism in your own community?
- We see Chamisa and his colleagues take on a lot of responsibility to make change. What responsibility does an individual have to make society better?
 - In what ways can a single individual inspire change?
 - In what ways can a single individual not work for change alone?
 - What is the role of solidarity and people-power in movements for political change?
- How is economic oppression part of a larger project of political disenfranchisement? What systems and structures work to keep people with power and wealth in positions of power and keep those without the same resources disenfranchised?
- To what extent is collective action necessary to push back against injustice?
 - What successes do we see in the film?
- What is a democratic society? Does it exist and/or can it be achieved?
- What are the elements of democracy you think the people and Chamisa are fighting for?
 - What do you believe it means to live in a democratic society?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

- In what ways are aspects of personal life and political realities (policies, practices, access) always connected? What examples from the film highlight this? Do you have any examples from your own life that are relatable?
- In what ways is it a politician's responsibility to promote equality and to ensure that everyone has the same rights?
 - Why must politicians work to ensure that fairness and justice are cornerstones of countries that claim to be Democratic?
- What is the role of people and communities in holding those with power (e.g., politicians) accountable?
 - How does violence and state power threaten the power of people and communities?
- How can people learn to talk about injustice, push against injustice, and remain civil while balancing their safety and wellbeing in political realities that threaten violence?
- Should individuals stand up for what's right when it puts them and those around them at risk?
 - What do the conditions of risk and threat suggest about systems and structures of power? Why, for example, are activists and political leaders who are fighting for justice and equality at heightened risk or threat? Who, and what, is threatening them?
 - What are the people in positions of power afraid of? Why?
- Is making change worth risking it all? Why or why not?
- In what ways are all the decisions we make political?

CORRUPTING DEMOCRACY: OPPRESSIVE REGIMES AGAINST PEOPLE POWER

- How do everyday structures, policies, and practices rooted in oppression continue to reinforce the corruption of democracy?
- Can you draw any connections between the film and your own political realities or American politics?
- Describe some of the broader implications of potential complicity in not fighting

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

for democracy. What are some examples from the film that highlight the dangers of authoritarian power?

- Why are the media and freedom of speech important in a democracy?
- What are some of the biggest threat to democracy?
- Why should citizens be able to safely choose who represents them?
 - What do you think is more important, majority rule or independent freedom?
- Can you think of ways your country could be more democratic?
- This film shows us how democracy can be an elusive goal. Reflect on your ideas of democracy. What do you think the concepts of democracy are? What needs to be in place for these concepts to come to life?

FURTHER RESOURCES & TAKING ACTION

- To learn more about Zimbabwe's political history and how it informs the present, visit the webpage of Camilla Nielsson's film [Democrats](#). It is helpful to see both films (Democrats and President).
- [Zimbabwe Cultural Centre](#) in Detroit is an educational center and archive promoting the country's arts and culture.
- [Freedom House Reports on Zimbabwe](#) look at the past and present of politics in Zimbabwe.
- [Variety article on the film President being banned in Zimbabwe](#) by the government.

Maureen Nicol



Maureen Nicol is a graduate of Teachers College, Columbia University, where she studied early childhood education, a freelance content creator, and talented at bringing people together. Her background is in teaching and education. Nicol is committed to working with young children and educators to ensure every child and teacher knows their value, worth, and power. Nicol's research and work interests have always always situated children of color and specifically young Black girls and their creative brilliance. In her free time, Nicol enjoys exploring with her daughter, baking, and maxing out her library card with good reads.

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Discussion Guide Producer, POV: Courtney Cook, Education Manager

Thanks to those who reviewed this resource:

Asad Muhammad, VP of Impact & Engagement Strategy, POV

Natalie Danford, Copyeditor

Signe Byrge, Producer | President