

## **Mugabe's violent youth militia could be ready to march again**

Written by Administrator  
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Jane Flanagan 19/04.2021

A national youth service programme that spawned a violent militia that carried out some of the worst excesses of Robert Mugabe's rule in Zimbabwe is to be revived.

Kirsty Coventry, 37, the minister of youth and the only white person in the government, proposed its resurrection to instil patriotism and loyalty among people aged 18 to 35, according to a cabinet briefing note. It has provoked fears that the unit is being readied before a bloody general election in 2023 and has led to fresh criticism of Coventry, a retired Olympic swimmer. Last year she was criticised for taking a lease on a prized farm that was seized during Mugabe's catastrophic land grab.

Zimbabwe's national youth service, established in 2001, was repurposed as a private militia for the ruling Zanu-PF party and became known as the "Green Bombers" after its military fatigues. It became synonymous with the vicious targeting of Mugabe's critics and was linked to "rape camps" where abducted girls were held while the authorities turned a blind eye.

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The deployment of youths to opposition strongholds became a key strategy for Zanu-PF retaining power in elections in the early 2000s. Henry Chimberi, 59, recalled having his leg and knee cap broken by ten Green Bombers in 2005 when he was campaigning for election on behalf of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. "They were demonic and brainwashed into doing the dirty work for the regime," he said.

One survivor tweeted: "End of December 2001, these militants beat me to a pulp, left me for dead for not possessing a Zanu-PF card."

The youth wing was disbanded in 2009 when Mugabe was under pressure to set up a government of national unity. Many of its members have joined the army, police and prison service.

Coventry joined President Mnangagwa's government after the ousting of Mugabe in 2017. Her failure to condemn or distance herself from atrocities committed by state security forces has cast a shadow over her extraordinary achievements.

Fadzayi Mahere, a spokeswoman for the Movement for Democratic Change, said: "It is sad that an accomplished Olympian and a one-time beacon of youth excellence is advancing the establishment of a militia whose operations before have caused so much terror."