**Research Article**

## Sovereignty Under Siege: International Security, Legal Order, And Afrocentric Reflections on the United States' Abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and Its Implications for Zimbabwe and the African State System

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**Abstract:** The abduction of the Venezuelan President, Nicolás Maduro, by the United States (US) in its operation codenamed Absolute Resolve, constitutes a profound rupture in the normative foundations of the post 1945 international order, exposing the fragility of legal frameworks governing sovereignty, non intervention, and the use of force (Burke, 2020; Tladi, 2022). For African countries, particularly Zimbabwe, such an operation resonates deeply with long standing apprehensions over external coercion and the selective enforcement of international law that has historically constrained post colonial autonomy (Murithi, 2019). From an international legal perspective, unilateral extra territorial regime change undermines the authority of multilateral institutions and erodes the integrity of statehood protections enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Charter. Within the African context, the political remnants of such an operation are likely to manifest in four interrelated arenas: the recalibration of regional security norms, intensified sovereignty driven diplomacy, internal legitimation struggles, and renewed scrutiny of great power competition within the continent (Aning & Atuobi, 2011; Acharya, 2014). By and large, Operation Absolute Resolve transcends Venezuela, symbolizing a neo imperial reaffirmation of Western dominance over weaker states under the guise of "law enforcement" or "democracy promotion." It evokes Africa's historical encounters with slavery, colonialism, and Cold War interventions and therefore signifies continuity in global hierarchies of domination and resource extraction. The US president's professed intent to "run" Venezuela and appropriate its oil reserves echoes patterns of resource plunder and externally orchestrated regime change cognizant of African and Caribbean experiences, intensifying scepticism toward the universality of international law. For Zimbabwe and its regional counterparts, the incident serves as a cautionary exemplar of how internal fragility, external dependence, and diplomatic isolation can render post colonial sovereignty precarious. Consequently, it reinforces the urgency of policy strategies centred on international security, national defence, equitable resource governance, and diversified diplomatic partnerships, all aimed at insulating African countries from unilateral coercion (Mavuta, 2021; Nhema, 2015). Ultimately, within Afrocentric perceptions, the abduction of a sitting head of state by a foreign government epitomizes an enduring asymmetry in global order, one that delegitimizes Western led multilateralism and compels the Global South to translate rhetorical solidarity into concrete mechanisms for collective sovereignty and normative self determination.

**Keywords:** Abduction, African Agency, African State System, Afrocentric Perspective, BRICS, Colonial Legacy, Constructivist Legitimacy, Decolonisation, Eurocentric, Extraterritorial Jurisdiction, Geopolitical Asymmetry, Global Governance, Global South, Hegemonic Structure, Immunities, International Law, International Order, International Security and International Security Relations, Multilateralism vs Unilateralism, Multipolar System, Multipolar World Order, Neo-Imperialism, Non-Intervention, Pan-Africanism, Postcolonial Theory, Regional Security Norms, SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, Regime Change, Resource Governance, Sovereigntist, Sovereignty, State Security, United Nations Charter, Use of Force.

# INTRODUCTION

The US' extraterritorial abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro Moros executed under the orders of US President Donald John Trump without explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), represents a profound rupture in the normative international legal architecture that has governed international security relations since 1945 (Franck, 2002; Tladi, 2022). From a Global South perspective, particularly within African intellectual and policy circles, this situation is interpreted less as an anomalous Latin American crisis, but rather an additional confirmation of enduring asymmetries in global governance, where dominant Western powers continue to exercise discretionary force beyond multilateral restraint when dealing with theoretically weaker states (Ake, 1996; Zondi, 2017).

In the Zimbabwean context, *Operation Absolute Resolve* amplifies entrenched anxieties over the selective invocation of democracy, human rights, and transnational law enforcement as instruments of coercive diplomacy or covert regime change, a dynamic acutely felt in countries endowed with strategic natural mineral resources and politically contested sovereignties (Sachikonye, 2011; Raftopoulos, 2009). This research, therefore, situates the *Maduro abduction* within evolving debates on

international security relations and the reassertion of state sovereignty in the Global South, arguing that its symbolic and practical reverberations extend into Afrocentric critiques of international law and inform Zimbabwe's foreign policy orientation, military doctrine, and discourse of postcolonial autonomy in an inequitable global order.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

**International Law, Sovereignty, and Crisis of Legitimacy**

*Legal Breach of the United Nations Charter*

The United Nations Charter firmly prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, permitting exceptions only in cases of self-defence or when explicitly sanctioned by the Security Council (United Nations, 1945, arts. 2(4), 51). Consequently, cross-border operations such as the abduction of a sitting head of state conducted without such authorization constitute prima facie violations of the norms of sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force (Gray, 2018; Tladi, 2022). Efforts to justify such interventions through the language of "*law enforcement*" fail to obscure their inherently coercive and militarized nature, placing them in direct conflict with established doctrines governing jurisdiction, immunities, and the inviolability of incumbent leaders (Akande & Shah, 2011; Fox & Webb, 2015).

This erosion of legal constraints carries particular resonance for post-colonial African states, for whom the Charter's normative architecture has historically functioned as a bulwark against external domination. The selective reinterpretation of these protections suggests the emergence of a hierarchical sovereignty regime in which powerful states arrogate to themselves the authority to reclassify adversarial leaders as criminal actors and pursue them extraterritorially under politicized pretexts (Ake, 1996; Zondi, 2017). The recent recasting of Syrian President, Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa, known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani, former leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), illustrates this dynamic. Once vilified as the figurehead of an organization linked to al-Qaeda, al-Julani has been symbolically rehabilitated in Western discourse once their strategic priorities appeared to align, revealing the instrumental flexibility of legal and moral categories within contemporary geopolitical hierarchies.

*Zimbabwe's Sovereigntist Reading*

Zimbabwean foreign policy has historically been anchored in a discourse of sovereignty, non-interference, and resistance to Western hegemonic influence (Nhema, 2015; Raftopoulos, 2009). Within this ideological framework, the abduction of President Maduro is likely to be read by officials in Harare as evidence of the West's selective application of international law and its proclivity to pursue regime change beyond multilateral legal frameworks (Muzondidya, 2010). Such developments reinforce Zimbabwe's long-standing critique of Western-dominated institutions and strengthen its resolve to advocate for a multipolar global order grounded in sovereign equality and non-interference (Murithi, 2019; Acharya, 2014). Consequently, this discursive shift not only consolidates Harare's strategic alignment with powers such as Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela but also provides renewed impetus for its diplomatic agenda, most notably, its aspirations for deeper integration into emerging coalitions such as *BRICS Plus* and its pursuit of a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for the 2027–2028 term.

**Afrocentric and Geopolitical Dimensions**

*Historical Memory and Neo-Imperial Patterns*

Afrocentric analysis situates contemporary geopolitical interventions within a historical continuum of domination encompassing slavery, colonialism, and Cold War machinations, extending into modern regimes of economic and military coercion (Asante, 1998; Zeleza, 2006). From this vantage point, events such as the abduction of Nicolás Maduro are interpreted not as isolated violations but as manifestations of an enduring imperial logic through which powerful Western governments invoke legal, humanitarian, and anti-corruption narratives to reshape or transform the political trajectories of weaker states, particularly those endowed with strategic resources like oil or rare minerals (Fanon, 1963; Rodney, 1972).

The avowed determination by US President Donald J. Trump and his close associates to control Venezuela and its resource flows thus rearticulates earlier patterns of extractive domination witnessed across Africa and the Caribbean, reinforcing Afrocentric critiques that international law functions as a selectively applied mechanism of neo-imperial governance (Moyo, 2009; Zondi, 2017). In this interpretive frame, *Operation Absolute Resolve* resonates historically with the externally engineered coups and removals of leaders across the Global South, ranging from Idi Amin and Jean-Bédel Bokassa to Manuel Noriega, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Gaddafi, each instance symbolizing the systemic continuity of Western interventionism against sovereign leaders perceived as resisting democratic control (Campbell, 2013; Murithi, 2019).

*BRICS, Global South Alliances, and their Limits*

Venezuela's strategic alignment with countries such as Russia, China, and other anti-hegemonic powers positions the controversy over President Maduro's abduction within broader debates on the reconfiguration of global order, particularly the dynamics of emerging multipolarity and South–South cooperation (Acharya, 2014; Stuenkel, 2016). The strong condemnations voiced by BRICS members and other Global South countries reflect a collective normative resistance to unilateral

regime-change interventions, signalling an evolving discourse of sovereignty and non-intervention that challenges Western hegemonic practices. However, the inability of these coalitions to prevent or reverse the operation exposes the structural limitations of such plurilateral frameworks in translating discursive opposition into tangible security guarantees (Stuenkel, 2016). For African countries like Zimbabwe, this tension invites critical examination of whether engagement in BRICS-type alliances can yield substantive protection against coercive Western power or whether their solidarity remains largely symbolic and economically instrumental (Mafuta, 2020). Ultimately, the disjuncture between rhetorical affirmation of South–South unity and the absence of effective deterrent capacity show a fundamental dilemma confronting contemporary non-Western coalitions in their pursuit of strategic autonomy within an unevenly multipolar world order.

## African Governance and Security Norms
### *AU, Regional Norms, and the Threat of Extra-Territorial Regime Change*

The normative architecture of the African Union (AU) and its regional economic bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC), has evolved into a comprehensive framework proscribing unconstitutional changes of government, encompassing both military coups and mercenary interventions (Murithi, 2019; Williams, 2007). Within this context, any unilateral operation by a major power to abduct a sitting head of state beyond its territorial jurisdiction fundamentally contravenes these established norms, posing the risk of legitimizing extra-territorial "extraction missions" as acceptable instruments of foreign policy (Aning & Atuobi, 2011).

In view of the foregoing, the precedent set by the United States, together with other instances reminiscent of *Operation Absolute Resolve*, positions African institutions in a particularly precarious position. On one hand, these institutions encounter mounting pressure to reaffirm their adherence to the foundational principles of the United Nations Charter; on the other, they must contend with growing demands for structural reforms aimed at reinforcing the Global South's agency in shaping international deliberations regarding the use of force (Murithi, 2019; Dersso, 2012). The sustainability of the African Union's normative posture will, thus, hinge on the extent to which it transcends discursive affirmations to operationalize concrete and coordinated measures. Such measures may encompass strategic convergence within United Nations voting blocs, enhanced legal advocacy in international judicial fora, and collective engagement on coercive diplomacy matters such as the imposition of sanctions, thereby indicating a shift from declaratory diplomacy toward a more autonomous and principle-driven global engagement.

### *Domestic Political Uses And Misuses*

The political discourse surrounding regime legitimacy and external intervention in Africa often reflects a deep-seated contestation between state sovereignty and democratization. Eurocentric perspectives have frequently portrayed African administrations led by assertive ("*strongman*") or "*adversarial*" figures, commonly categorized in propagandist discourse as "*authoritarian*" or "*semi-authoritarian*," as prone to instrumentalizing international crises, such as the Maduro abduction, to advance state securitization (Cheeseman, 2015; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Within this framework, governments implement heightened surveillance, regulation of civil society, and monitoring of foreign funding as defensive countermeasures to external regime-change machinations. Yet while Eurocentric perspectives condemn these measures, the securitization strategies paradoxically mirror political manoeuvres observed in Western contexts, notably within the Trump administration's efforts to consolidate executive authority within the United States.

In related context, African opposition movements and civil society actors frequently repurpose similar geopolitical discourses to contest the legitimacy of externally driven transitions, foregrounding instead the pursuit of endogenous, constitutionally anchored democratic reforms (Sachikonye, 2011). The Venezuelan experience highlights this paradox, where Washington's foreign policy posture has, at times, privileged incumbent regime actors such as Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, under Nicolás Maduro, over officially recognized opposition leader, María Corina Machado Parisca, reflecting an inconsistent foreign policy calculus that elevates national interests over commitments to democratic legitimacy or popular sovereignty. In Zimbabwe, these intersecting narratives resurface in ongoing debates surrounding sanctions, electoral integrity, and security-sector reform, exposing how global languages of intervention and the domestic negotiation of democratic governance remain mutually constitutive and deeply entangled (Raftopoulos, 2009; Masunungure, 2011).

## Zimbabwe's Strategic Lessons and Policy Options
### *Economic Sovereignty and Resource Governance*

The Venezuelan experience illustrates the profound structural risks inherent in extreme dependence on a single extractive commodity, where resource-linked vulnerabilities are magnified by external interventionist doctrines (Humphreys et al., 2007; Ross, 2012). Zimbabwe's resource endowment ranging from lithium and platinum to gold and arable land, presents a parallel scenario insofar as opaque, elite-dominated governance mechanisms threaten to reproduce similar patterns of dependency and exposure (Moyo, 2013; Saunders & Nyamunda, 2016). To mitigate these risks, the Government of Zimbabwe must consolidate a robust security-institutional framework aligned with the

liberation ethos of 1975 and rooted in the principles of *nzira dzemasoja*, which emphasize integrity, accountability, and equitable stewardship of national resources. Such a framework should emulate functional aspects of established state systems, such as that of the United States, where security apparatuses are formally integrated with the management of mineral wealth in ways that reinforce fiscal sovereignty and national development.

Given the above, Harare's strategic developmental agenda necessitates a recalibration of its economic and governance frameworks toward a security-anchored model of resource management, transcending the traditional dependence on raw commodity exports. This approach entails the institutionalization of a *national interest vetting and oversight regime*, in which the military and intelligence services assume a systematic role in screening, monitoring, and enforcing mining and infrastructure agreements. Within this framework, contracts cease to function merely as instruments of economic transaction or governance compliance; instead, they are reconstituted as instruments of national security and strategic autonomy. A structural embodiment of this regime could be an *Inter-Agency Security Council*, an institutional mechanism bringing together defence, state security, home affairs, foreign affairs, finance, and relevant sectoral ministries to evaluate all major resource and infrastructure projects through a national security and resilience lens. This modality replaces the conventional reliance on public transparency as the principal deterrent to corruption with a more assertive model of *coercive and investigative oversight*, employing surveillance, financial intelligence, and counterintelligence capabilities to detect undue influence, sanctions vulnerability, and covert geopolitical manipulation within strategic sectors.

Furthermore, it embeds national resilience standards, spanning cybersecurity, emergency preparedness, and physical access control directly into the legal architecture of concession agreements. Complementarily, governments may integrate formal transparency mechanisms, such as periodic publication and review of contracts and the inclusion of explicit sovereignty and jurisdiction clauses, to operationalize economic nationalism while reinforcing institutional legitimacy (Mavuta, 2021). In effect, this dual-track model of *security-embedded transparency,* both consolidates sovereign decision-making authority and undermines external narratives depicting Zimbabwe's natural wealth as the preserve of a rent-seeking elite, a discourse often weaponized to rationalize sanctions and interventionist policies (Moyo, 2009; Raftopoulos, 2009).

### Security Doctrine: From Regime Protection to Constitutional Defence

The operation targeting Nicolás Maduro exemplifies the emerging strategic paradigm in which the precision and speed of technologically integrated operations, drawing on drones, special operations forces, and cyber capabilities, render traditional large-scale invasions increasingly obsolete (Biddle, 2004; Dunlap, 2014). This evolution indicates a critical imperative for states such as Zimbabwe to reconceptualize their national security doctrines beyond the preservation of individual leadership figures, aligning with broader constitutional and institutional resilience priorities (Nhemachena, 2019).

A reformed defence doctrine would necessarily incorporate explicit anti-decapitation strategies, systematically tested through scenario-based war-mapping that includes potential incursions by foreign special operations forces, cyber disruptions, and rapid extractions of senior government officials. In addition, establishing redundant and geographically dispersed systems of command, control, and communication would ensure the continuity of legitimate authority even under conditions of asymmetric attack. Similarly, the consolidation of vital national-security installations including energy grids, telecommunications, and transport networks becomes imperative, as their compromise can magnify an adversary's operational advantage (Dunlap, 2014).

In Zimbabwe's evolving security panorama, sustained strategic investment in the country's defensive and intelligence institutions is essential for maintaining the integrity, resilience, and sovereignty of the country. Empirical research and comparative institutional analysis suggest that the strength of national security infrastructures is directly linked with the degree of political stability, operational discipline, and counter-intelligence efficacy. Drawing parallels to well-resourced United States entities such as the Department of *War*, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the United States Secret Service, the Venezuelan government's failure to counter its President's abduction suggests how inadequate and inconsistent funding erodes institutional morale and increase susceptibility to foreign infiltration.

The alleged U.S. infiltration of elements within President Nicolás Maduro's inner circle, including his close protection security, serves as a cautionary case that accentuates how compromised security personnel can become conduits for external manipulation or regime destabilization. Such vulnerabilities illuminate a broader structural dynamic, indicating that states which fail to insulate their security sectors through sustained investment and ideological coherence risk internal fragmentation and external subversion, as evidenced in intelligence operations such as the United States' *Operation Absolute Resolve*. Consequently, fortifying Zimbabwe's security architecture through comprehensive capacity building, modernized

intelligence coordination, and an ethical institutional culture is not merely a defensive necessity but a foundational requirement for safeguarding national sovereignty against hybrid threats and geopolitical interventionism.

At the core of Nicolás Maduro's security apparatus lies a structural dilemma, whether its lapses stemmed from intelligence failures, operational mismanagement, or internal betrayal, the underlying issue reflects a chronic deficit in strategic resource allocation. The institutional pathology of underfunded or politically compromised security frameworks often translates into diminished tactical capacity and morale, weakening both defensive depth and state cohesion. In contrast, US institutions such as the Department of *War*, the CIA, and the US Secret Service provide illustrative counterpoints. Each of these, demonstrates how sustained investment in personnel, technology, and operational integration reinforces resilience against both internal subversion and external aggression. Their frameworks, built on multi-layered oversight, advanced surveillance infrastructures, and adaptive counterintelligence doctrines, embody the principle that security efficiency is inseparable from continuous resource commitment and strategic modernization. Analogous patterns are observable in heavily securitized states such as Russia and North Korea, where the maintenance of nuclear deterrence and expansive cyber capabilities exemplifies how concentrated investment in security innovation recalibrates adversaries' strategic calculus by inflating the operational and political costs of intervention. Thus, Maduro's security architecture, when assessed alongside these institutional models, reflects a broader theoretical principle in international security studies that, "*the equilibrium between regime survival and deterrent capacity is largely contingent upon the consistency, depth, and strategic intelligence embedded within a state's resource allocation.*"

### Diplomatic Diversification and Multilateral Engagement

In the evolving panorama of global governance, the Maduro abduction indicates the strategic salience for Zimbabwe of adopting a policy of *balanced non-alignment*, an approach that privileges diversified engagement across Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America over dependence on any singular geopolitical bloc (Acharya, 2014; Murithi, 2019). This recalibration enables Harare to guard against new forms of great-power vulnerability while enhancing policy autonomy within an increasingly fragmented international system.

At the regional level, Zimbabwe is positioned to play a normative leadership role within the Southern African Development Community and the African Union by advancing codified frameworks that prohibit the extraterritorial abduction of sitting heads of state and institutionalize automatic regional responses such as emergency summits and coordinated diplomatic démarches to such breaches of sovereignty (Dersso, 2012).

Extending this advocacy to multilateral fora, particularly the United Nations, Zimbabwe and its Global South allies could promote the development of more explicit international protections against extra-territorial "*law-enforcement*" incursions targeting incumbents, while simultaneously reinforcing calls for Security Council reform and equitable representation in the governance of the international use of force (Aning & Atuobi, 2011; Murithi, 2019).

### Reclaiming Narrative and Legitimacy

From a constructivist and postcolonial perspective, the discursive struggle over how the United States' *Operation Absolute Resolve* is labelled, whether as a "*kidnapping*," "*abduction*," or "*legitimate law-enforcement action*," reveals the constitutive power of narrative framing in producing international legitimacy and authority (Snow & Cull, 2020). Language, in this view, does not merely describe political events but actively constructs their meaning within a global hierarchy of power and recognition. For African states, whose sovereignty has historically been mediated through postcolonial dependencies and epistemic subordination, cultivating strategic communication infrastructures, thus becomes an act of narrative reclamation and ontological security (Melber, 2017).

However, constructivist insights into legitimacy emphasize that external narrative efficacy is sustained by internal coherence. A state's ability to project credible counter-discourses outward hinges on its domestic discursive foundations of trust and accountability. Where ruling elites are perceived as predatory or unrepresentative, global narratives of intervention can become domestically persuasive, re-inscribing postcolonial tropes of "*civilizing rescue*" and delegitimizing indigenous political agency (Cheeseman, 2015; Sachikonye, 2011). As a result, constructivists contend that strengthening rule-of-law institutions, enhancing transparency, and ensuring social inclusion functions as more than administrative reforms; they constitute the epistemic and symbolic labour necessary for sustaining credible sovereignty and resisting the discursive reproduction of dependency within the postcolonial international system.

## CONCLUSION

The extraterritorial abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro by the United States, irrespective of whether it is rationalized as a transnational law-enforcement operation or denounced as a unilateral act of aggression, illustrates the structural fragilities within the international system's professed commitment to sovereign equality and the principle of non-intervention (Franck, 2002; Tladi, 2022). Such an

attack brings into focus the enduring asymmetries that condition the operation of international law, where legality is often subordinated to geopolitical interests and material power.

For Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, the incident functions as a revealing mirror of the continent's own exposure to coercive externalities in an ostensibly rules-based order. An Afrocentric reading of this operation accentuates the need for postcolonial states to reconceptualize sovereignty not as a passive judicial status, but as a dynamic and defensive capability articulated through sovereign resource governance, multi-vector diplomacy, and integrated security frameworks. By interpreting the US' *Operation Absolute Resolve* as a global stress-test for normative consistency and systemic equity, Zimbabwe can draw critical lessons for cultivating a form of *resilient sovereignty*, a sovereignty anchored in endogenous legitimacy, proactive multilateralism, and collective continental agency (Acharya, 2014; Murithi, 2019). Within an increasingly contested international order, such an approach transforms sovereignty from mere recognition into an assertive practice of resistance and redefinition aligned with Africa's longstanding historical struggle for authentic autonomy and global parity.

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