



Most Zimbabweans trust the army but reject military rule, don't feel free to voice criticism

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 195 | Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

The role and capacities of the military are critical elements of a modern state. In functional democracies, the military's institutional boundaries are tightly prescribed, excluding it from the political arena. It must be both trusted and adequately resourced to effectively discharge its mandate of protecting the country from external and internal threats.

Recent events in Zimbabwe thrust the military into a bright spotlight. For the first time since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe in November 2017 experienced overt military intrusion into the country's politics. While denying that it was taking over the government, the military stepped into protracted wrangling over possible succession to long-time President Robert Mugabe, in a series of dramatic events that culminated in Mugabe's resignation (Al Amir, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017).

This expansion of the military role into the civilian political domain occurred in the context of an army that is historically and organically tied to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party but is also bound by the Constitution (2013) to avoid all involvement in partisan politics, as stated in Clause 208:

"Neither the security services nor any of their members may, in the exercise of their functions:

- act in a partisan manner;*
- further the interests of any political party or cause;*
- prejudice the lawful interests of any political party or cause; or*
- violate the fundamental rights or freedoms of any person."*

How does the Zimbabwean population see its military? Afrobarometer survey data collected in early 2017, months before the unexpected events of November, show considerable public trust in the army, but also fear of criticizing the army along with a clear rejection of military rule as an option for Zimbabwe. Citizens think the army is generally capable of protecting the county from external and internal security threats, but there is substantial skepticism about soldiers' training, equipment, professionalism, and respect for citizens' rights.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute, interviewed 1,200 adult Zimbabweans between 28 January and 10 February 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

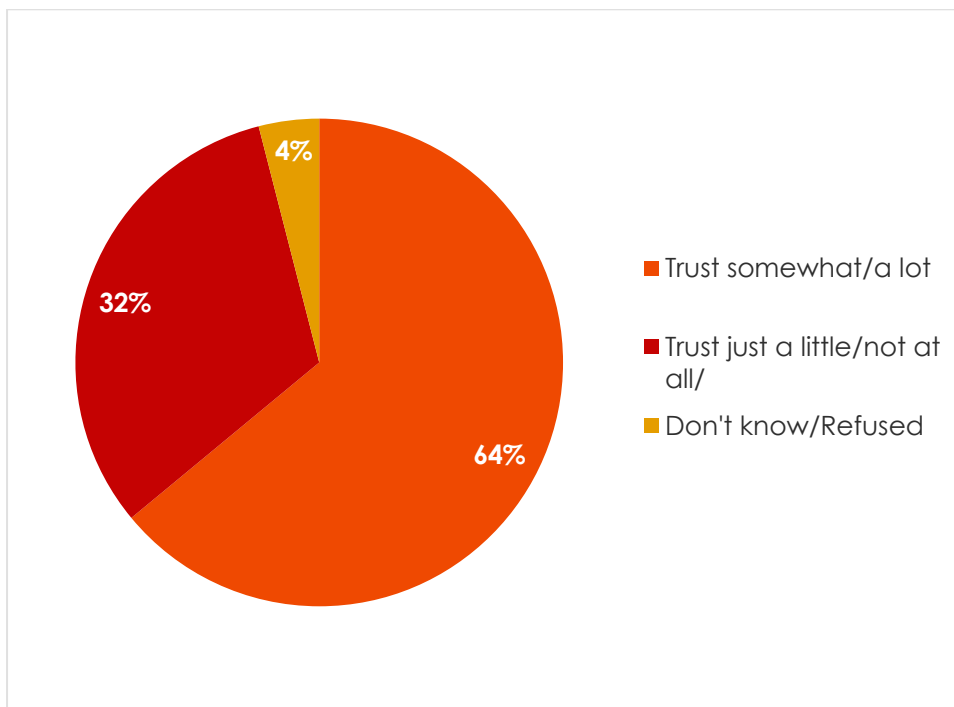
Key findings

- Nearly two thirds (64%) of Zimbabweans say they trust the army “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- More than two-thirds (69%) disapprove – including 43% who “strongly disapprove” – of military rule.
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of citizens say they do not feel free to criticize the army.
- Two-thirds (66%) of Zimbabweans believe that the army is capable of “often” or “always” protecting the country from both external and internal security threats.
- Fewer than half (43%) believe that the army gets the training and equipment needed for it to perform its duties well.
- About half (49%) of the adult population believe that the army is professional and respects citizens’ rights.
- On almost all of these questions, public opinion is polarized by political-party affiliation, including far weaker rejection of military rule among ZANU-PF supporters (just 53%) than among Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) adherents and unaffiliated citizens. One exception is the reluctance to criticize the military, which all sides share almost equally.

Popular trust in the army

Almost two-thirds (64%) of Zimbabweans say they trust the army “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Popular trust in the army | Zimbabwe | 2017



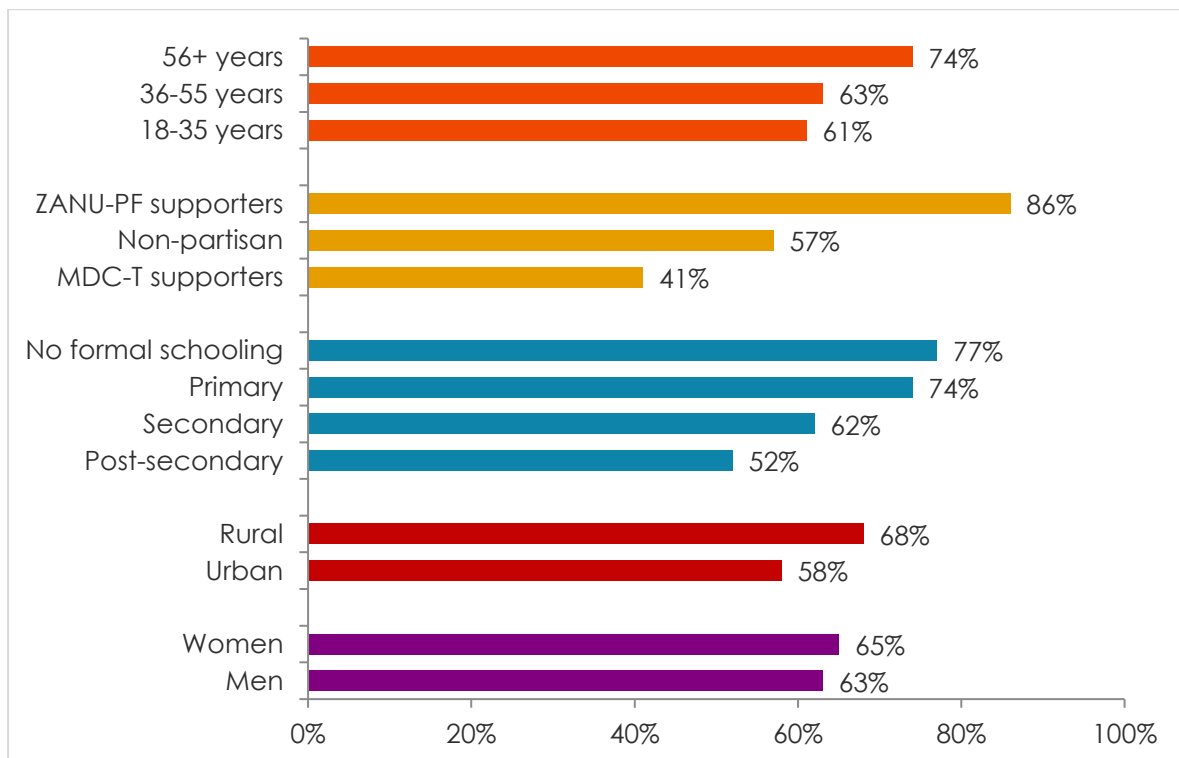
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The army?

Older Zimbabweans are considerably more likely to express trust in soldiers than their younger counterparts. Three-quarters (74%) of respondents aged 56 or above say they trust the army “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to 63% of the middle-aged and 61% of the youth (Figure 2).

A huge partisan divide is evident when it comes to trust in the military. A commanding majority (86%) of ZANU-PF supporters¹ trust the army, more than double the proportion (41%) of MDC-T partisans who share similar sentiments. Among non-partisans, nearly six in 10 (57%) express trust in the army.

Trust in the military is lower in cities (58%) than in rural areas (68%) and declines with respondents' educational attainment: While more than three-quarters (77%) of those without formal education say they trust the army, only 52% of those with post-secondary qualifications agree.

Figure 2: Popular trust in the army | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017

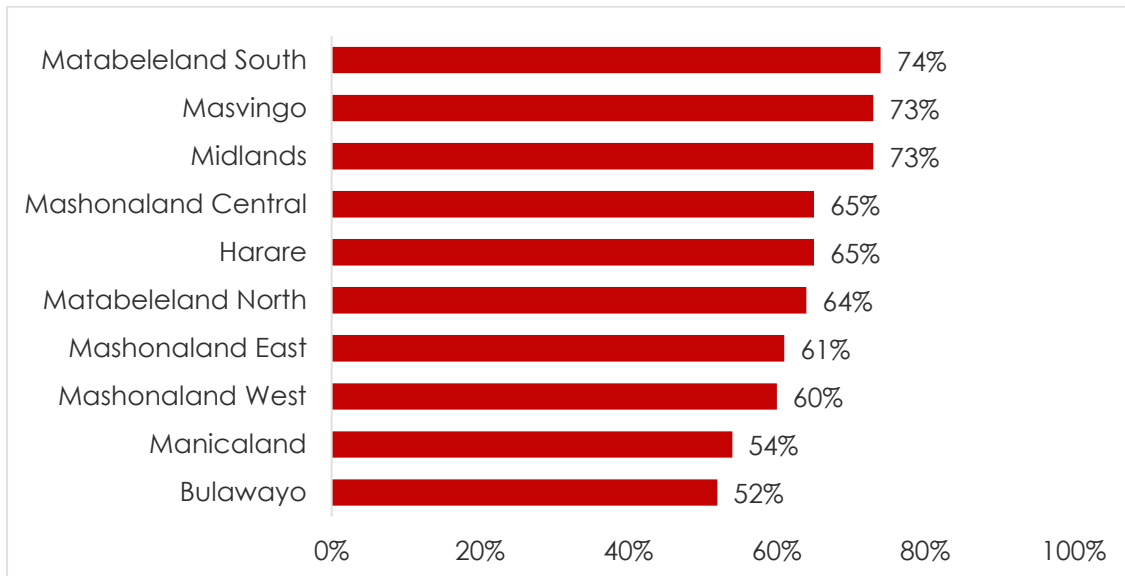


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The army? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

A provincial breakdown reveals that majorities in all 10 provinces express trust in the army (Figure 3). Interestingly, trust is both highest and lowest in the Matabeleland provinces, which experienced the deadly Gukuruhundi disturbances in the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence: 74% in Matabeleland South and only 52% in Bulawayo, with Matabeleland North at the national average of 64%.

¹ Afrobarometer determines party affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

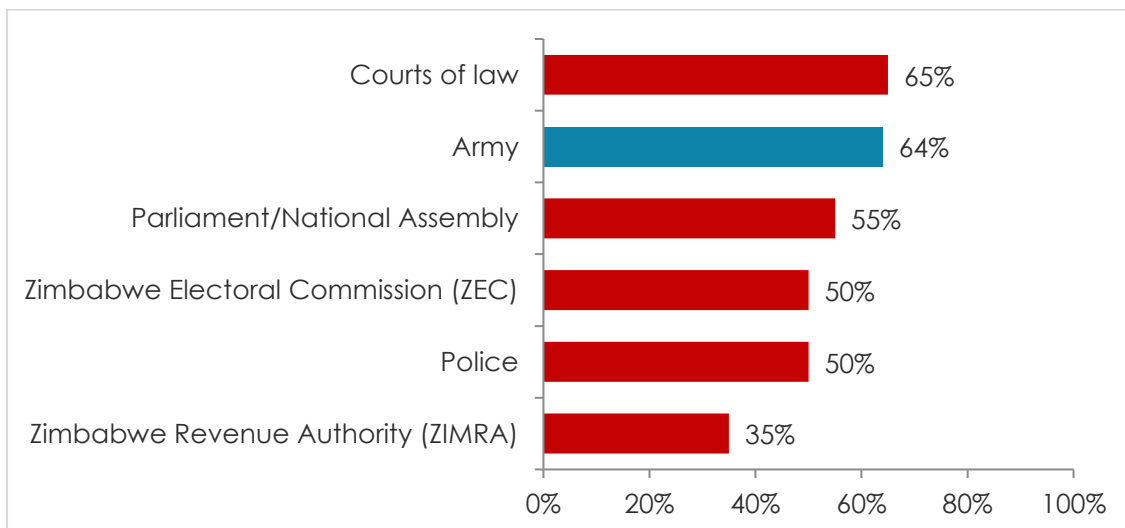
Figure 3: Trust the army “somewhat” or “a lot” | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The army? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Compared to other state institutions, popular trust in the military is relatively high – about the same as in courts of law (65%) and ahead of Parliament (55%), the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (50%), the police (50%), and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (35%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Trust in the army and other state institutions | Zimbabwe | 2017

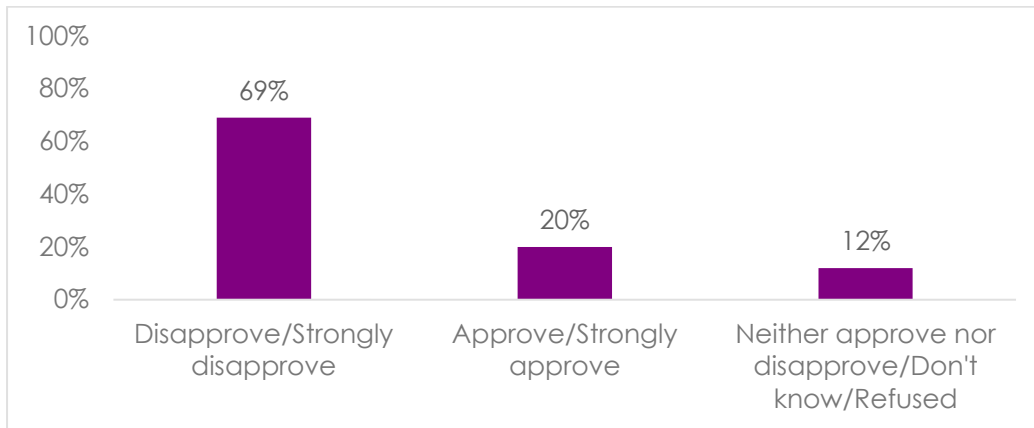


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Public attitudes toward military rule

While trust in the military is relatively high, most Zimbabweans don't want to be ruled by the army. Nearly seven out of 10 citizens (69%) disapprove of military rule, including 43% who “strongly disapprove” (Figure 5). However, a significant one out of three either approve of military rule (20%) or don't take sides on the question (12%).

Figure 5: Citizen views on military rule | Zimbabwe | 2017

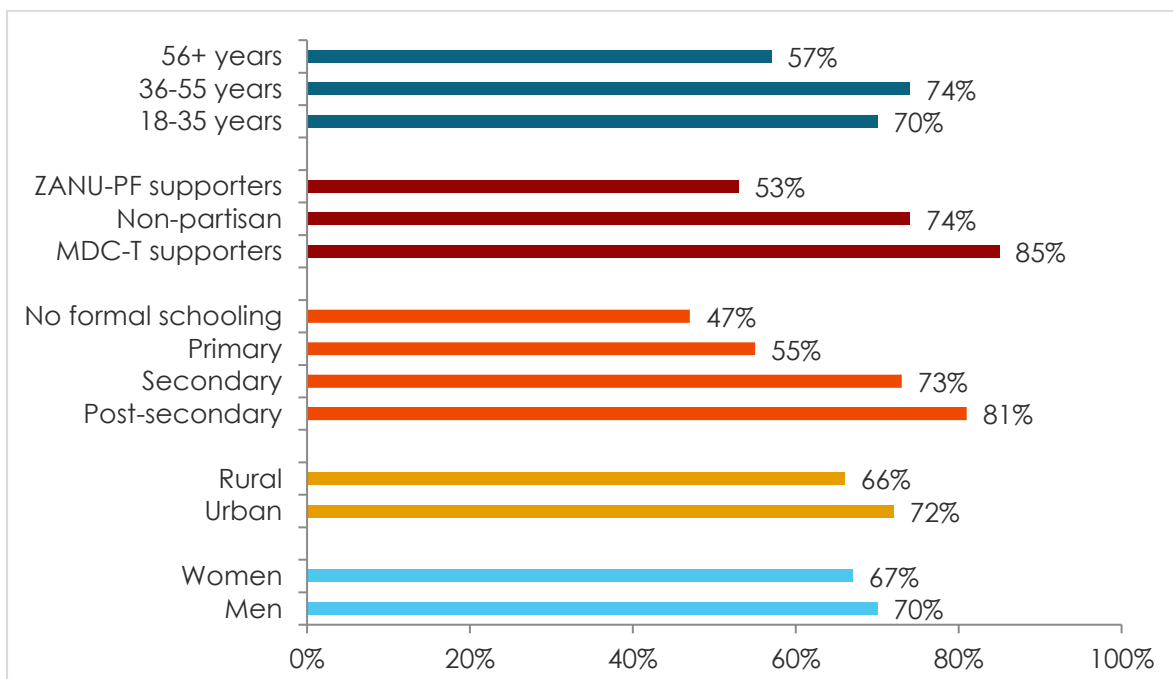


Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: The army comes in to govern?*

Older and less-educated citizens are less likely to reject military rule than their younger and better-educated counterparts. While at least seven in 10 middle-aged (74%) and young (70%) respondents oppose being governed by the army, only 57% of those over age 55 agree (Figure 6). And among those with post-secondary education, 81% reject military rule, but this view is shared by only 47% of those without formal schooling and 55% of those with primary education.

Again a huge partisan divide is evident – 85% of MDC-T adherents vs. just 53% of ZANU –PF supporters who disapprove of military rule.

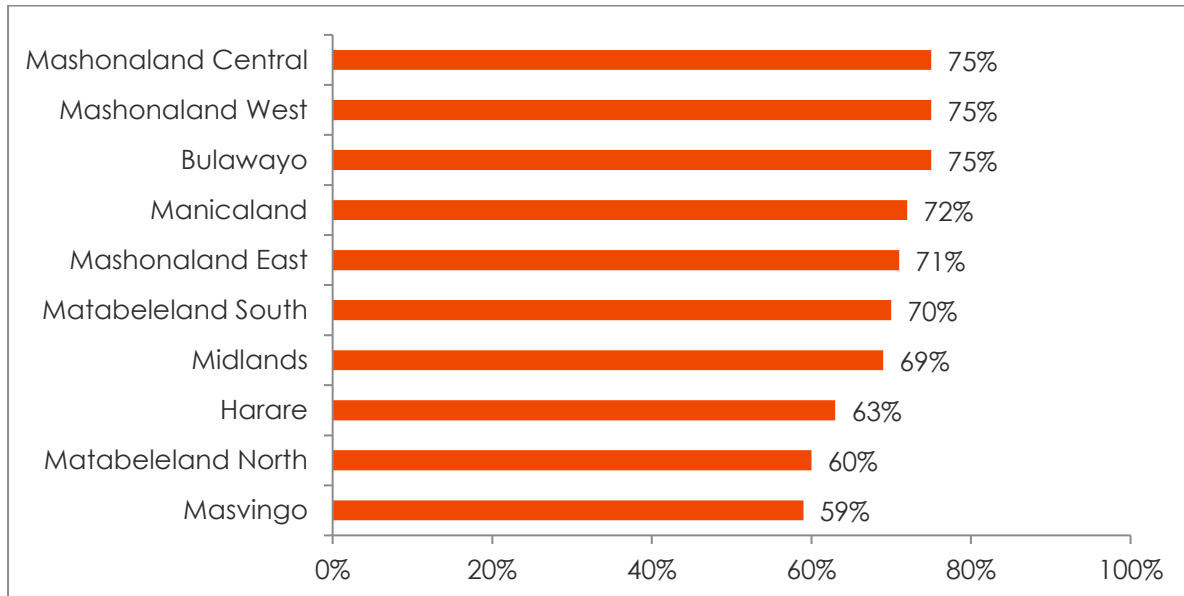
Figure 6: Citizens reject military rule | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: The army comes in to govern? (% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)*

Majorities in all 10 provinces in the country reject military rule, most clearly in Bulawayo, Mashonaland West, and Mashonaland Central (all 75%) (Figure 7). The least forceful rejections of military rule come from Masvingo (59%), Matabeleland North (60%), and Harare (63%).

Figure 7: Citizens reject military rule | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017

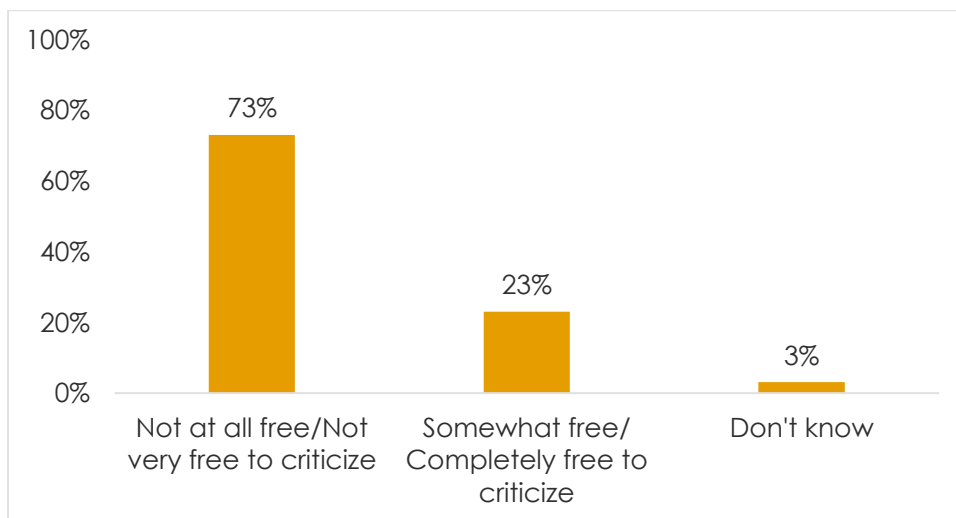


Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: The army comes in to govern? (% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)

Freedom to criticize the army

Trust in the army does not mean freedom to criticize it, survey results show. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents say they feel “not very free” or “not at all free” to voice criticism of the army; fewer than one in four say they feel “somewhat free” (14%) or “completely free” (9%) to express criticism (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Citizens’ perceptions of freedom to criticize the army | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the army?

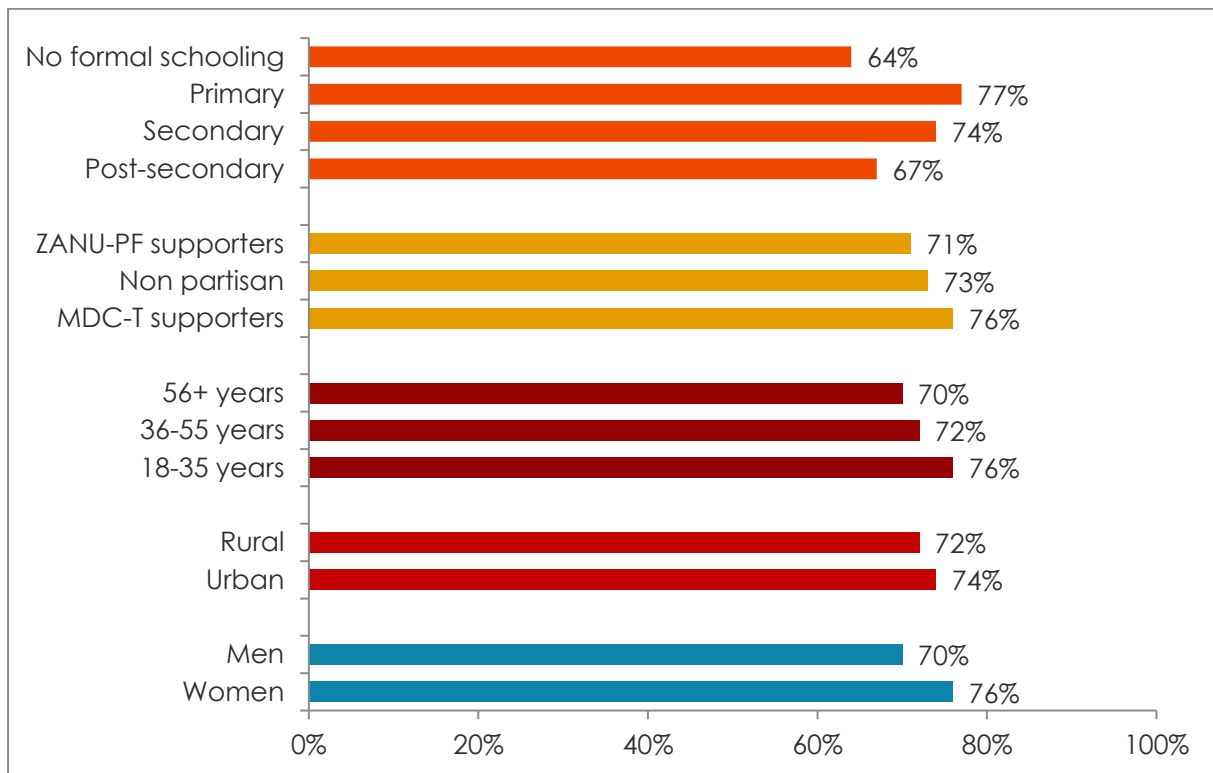
Fear of criticizing the army is fairly consistent across most major socio-demographic groups (Figure 9). Respondents at the extremes of educational attainment – no formal education or post-secondary qualifications – are somewhat less likely to say they feel unfree to voice criticism than those with primary or secondary schooling.

Women (76%) and youth (76%) are somewhat more reluctant to criticize the army than men (70%) or respondents above age 35 (70%-72%).

But fear of criticizing the army knows no partisan boundaries: Only 5 percentage points separate opposition MDC-T supporters (76%) from ZANU-PF adherents (71%).

Respondents in the ZANU-PF stronghold of Mashonaland Central feel the least constrained in criticizing the army (61%), while Midlands residents feel the most unfree (88%).

Figure 9: Not free to criticize the army | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the army? (% who say “not at all free” or “not very free”)

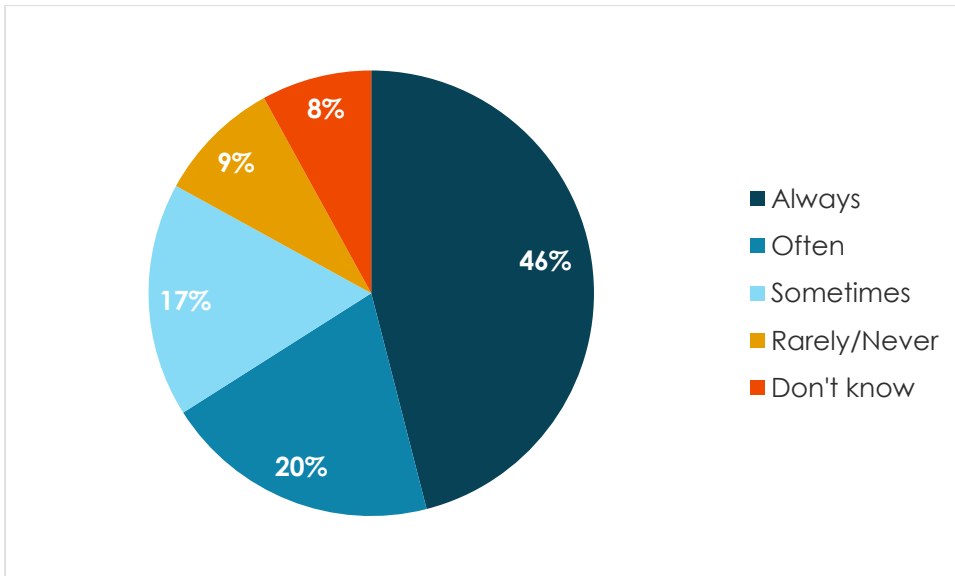
Military’s capacities and professionalism

Zimbabweans generally believe that the military is capable of protecting the country from security threats, be they internal or external. Almost half (46%) say the army can “always” keep the country safe, while an additional 20% believe it can “often” do so (Figure 10). About one in four say the army is only “sometimes” (17%), “rarely” (6%), or “never” (3%) capable of protecting the country.

As might be expected, ZANU-PF supporters are far more likely to say that the army can “often” or “always” protect the country (82%) than MDC-T supporters (55%) or non-partisans (56%). Citizens with no formal education (56%) or post-secondary qualifications (61%) are more skeptical than those with primary (70%) or secondary (66%) education. Other demographic groups differ little on this question. By province, perceptions that the army can

“often” or “always” protect the country range from just 50% in Matabeleland North to 82% in Mashonaland Central.

Figure 10: Military keeps country safe from security threats | Zimbabwe | 2017

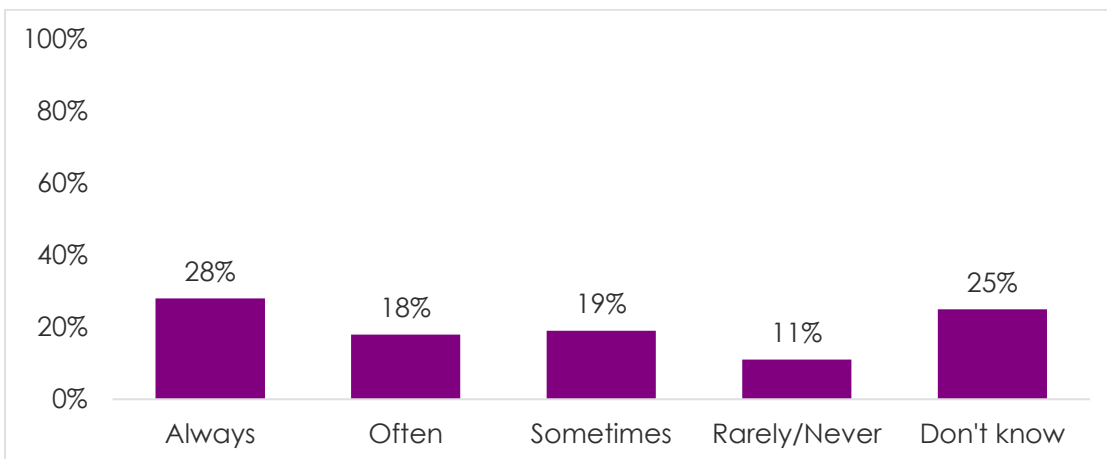


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent do the military of our country keep our country safe from external and internal security threats?*

Zimbabweans express this substantial faith in the army's capability of protecting the country even though fewer than half believe that the army “always” (28%) or “often” (18%) gets the training and equipment it needs to be effective (Figure 11). About one in 10 (11%) say the military “rarely” or “never” gets the necessary training and equipment. One in four (25%) say they “don't know.”

Major socio-demographic groups differ little on this question except for the expected political-party gap showing ZANU-PF supporters almost twice as likely as MDC-T adherents and unaffiliated citizens to say the necessary training and equipment are “often” or “always” provided.

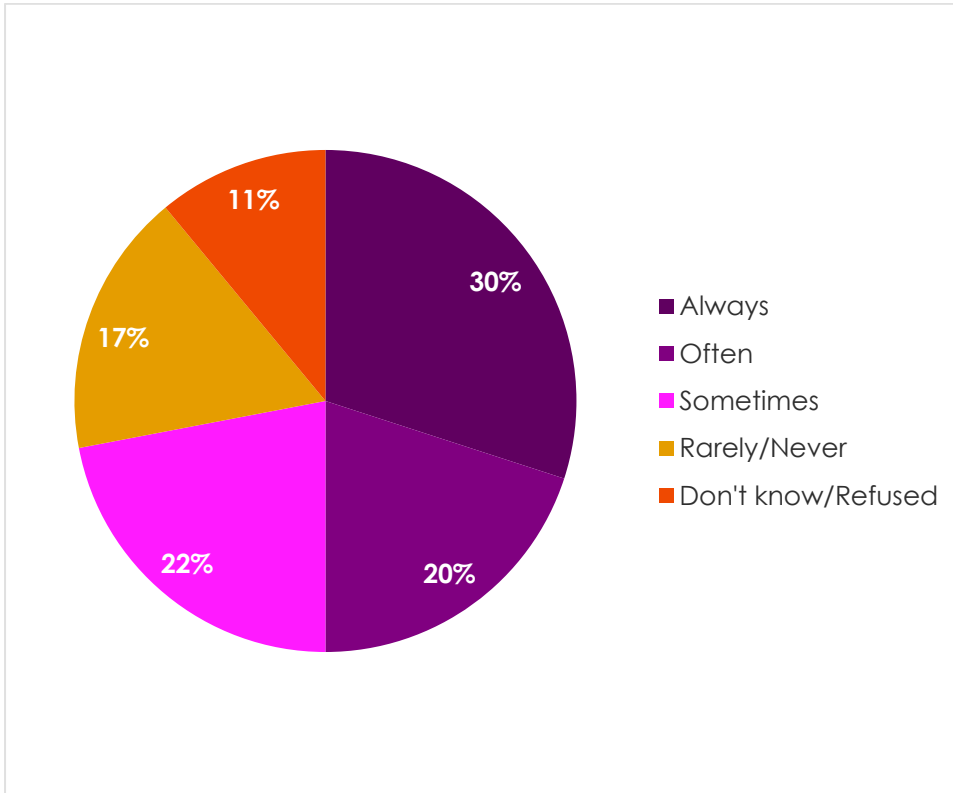
Figure 11: Does military get adequate training and equipment? | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent do the military of our country: get the training and equipment needed to be effective?*

Asked whether the army operates in a professional manner and respects the rights of all citizens, Zimbabweans offer a decidedly mixed assessment: 30% say it “always” does so, 20% “often,” 22% “sometimes,” and 17% “rarely” or “never” (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Military’s professionalism and respect for rights | Zimbabwe | 2017

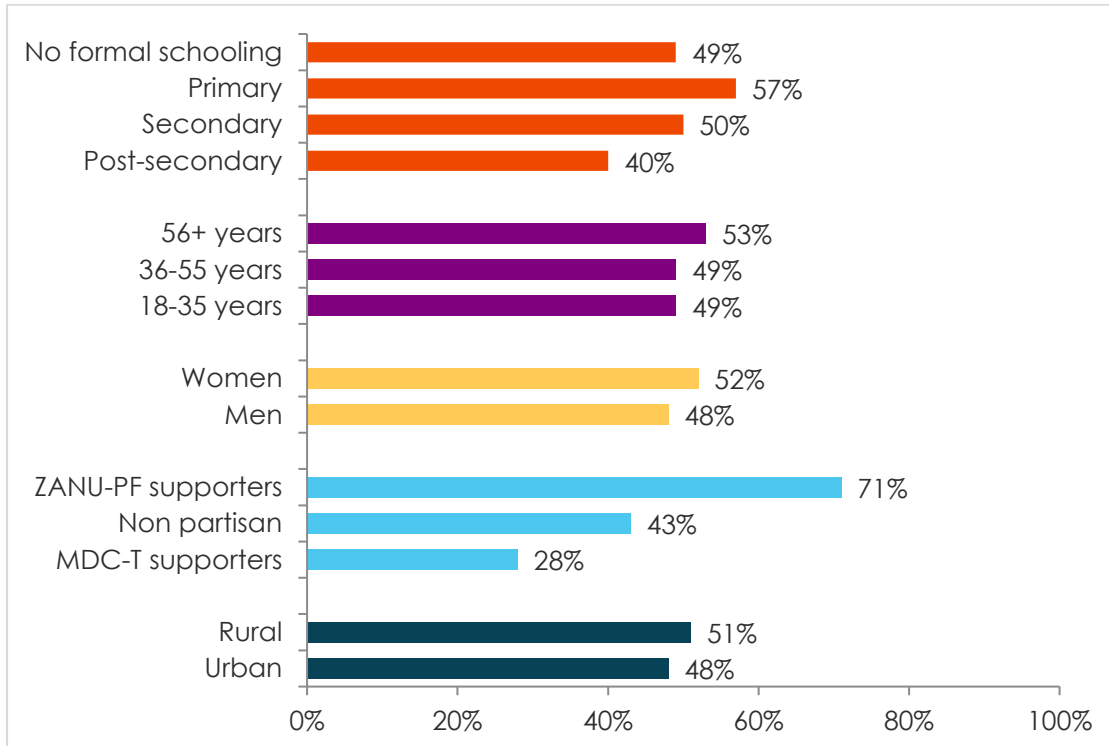


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent does the military of our country operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?*

By key socio-demographic group, the major differences again follow political-party lines: Seven in 10 ZANU-PF supporters say the army “often” or “always” operates in a professional manner and respects citizens’ rights, compared to only 28% of MDC-T supporters and 43% of unaffiliated respondents (Figure 13). Those with post-secondary education are less likely to describe the military as professional and respectful of rights than their less-educated counterparts.

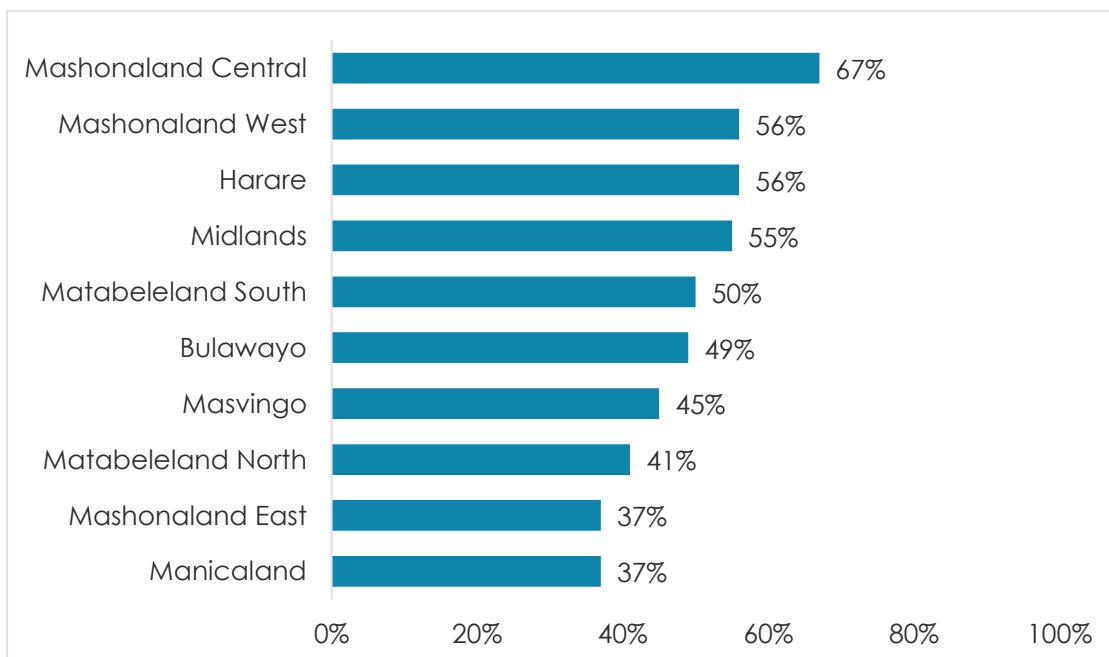
Provinces show significant differences when it comes to assessments of the military’s professionalism and respect for citizens’ rights (Figure 14). In five of the 10 provinces, fewer than half of respondents believe it “often” or “always” conducts itself in this way, including only 37% in Mashonaland East and Manicaland. In Mashonaland Central, two-thirds (67%) of respondents affirm the army’s professionalism and respect for rights.

Figure 13: Military’s professionalism and respect for rights | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the military of our country operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens? (% who say “often” or “always”)

Figure 14: Military’s professionalism and respect for rights | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent does the military of our country operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens? (% who say “often” or “always”)

Conclusion

A majority of Zimbabweans trust the army at least “somewhat,” though most do not want to be ruled by a military regime and do not feel free to criticize the military. Generally Zimbabweans think the army is “often” or “always” capable of protecting the country from security threats, although a majority doubt that the army gets the necessary training and equipment to make it effective. And only half of the population think the military generally acts professional and respects the rights of citizens. The polarization of public perceptions of the military by political-party affiliation is perhaps not surprising but nonetheless striking, especially the relatively weak opposition to military rule among ZANU-PF supporters. So is the one issue on which supporters of both major parties – and of no party – agree almost equally: that they do not feel free to criticize the military.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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