



RENEWED MDC STRIFE BODES ILL FOR ELECTIONS

Deterioration in relations between opposition factions likely to hand ZANU-PF victory on a silver platter.

By Norman Chitapi in Harare

The divided opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, has all but sealed its fate ahead of next year's combined parliamentary and presidential elections, after the leaders of its two factions engaged in an all-out attack on each other in the state media in late July.

However, analysts are split on the likely impact of the announcement by the Arthur Mutambara-aligned camp that unity talks between the two factions had irretrievably collapsed after MDC founding president Morgan Tsvangirai refused to attend a joint press conference to announce a code of conduct which had set up a mechanism to reduced tensions between the rival groups.



Credit: Lazele

Arthur Mutambara announces his MDC faction's decision to go it alone in elections. Picture taken July 28 2007.

The analysts predict that a divided MDC will hand the ruling ZANU-PF party victory on a silver platter in next year's election. They all believe the opposition will perform far worse in the ballot than it has done since it was founded eight years ago.

There are also fears that the party could scuttle South African president Thabo Mbeki's mediation efforts after he made it a precondition that he would only deal with a united MDC.

Mutambara accused Tsvangirai of sabotaging efforts to present a

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ The pace of monthly price rises indicate that year-on-year inflation could hit 100,000 per cent by the end of 2007, the International Monetary Fund said on July 30. The IMF cited the failure of President Robert Mugabe's government to rein in public spending and put in place a policy package to end the economic crisis.

■ The Zimbabwean government has reversed a decision that would have outlawed imports and exports of basic commodities without permits, with effect from August 1. The order would have made it illegal for

Zimbabweans to import groceries worth more than 250 US dollars without government approval.

■ President Mugabe has berated journalists for what he said was their lack of objectivity. He was speaking on August 6 at a meeting of leaders from Asia and Africa taking part in the Langkawi International Dialogue, aimed at fostering closer ties between the two regions.

■ Manufacturing firms in Zimbabwe's second biggest city, Bulawayo, are facing closure after

city authorities said they would tighten water rationing over the next two months. Bulawayo has been battling serious water shortages in recent years because of successive droughts.

■ The Interception of Communications Act, signed into law by President Mugabe last week, is unconstitutional and can be successfully challenged in the courts, legal experts said over the weekend. They said the government would find it difficult to adequately monitor communications, particularly emails.

common front against ZANU-PF. He accused his counterpart of being “weak and indecisive” and lacking the ability to think strategically.

He also announced that his faction was pulling out of the “Save Zimbabwe Campaign”, a conglomeration of some 20 civic organisations, political parties and student and labour unions, which he said was being used to advance Tsvangirai’s personal interests.

While Tsvangirai has made it clear he is not interested in the reunification of the two factions, which split in 2005, he did not attack Mutambara directly when he spoke at a rally in the poor suburb of Kuwadzana on July 29.

“We need unity of all progressive forces in this country,” he said. “The enemy is not Tsvangirai. The enemy is President [Robert] Mugabe.”

Analysts said Mutambara’s attack on Tsvangirai was playing into ZANU-PF’s hands and did nothing to help the cause of the forces fighting Mugabe’s regime.

Tsvangirai “weak and indecisive” — Arthur Mutambara.

“We know there is no love lost between the two opposition camps,” said a political observer in Harare, adding that he believed Mugabe was “ready for the picking”, given the worsening economic situation triggered by the recent onslaught against business. However, the observer pointed out, “One cannot rule out ZANU-PF’s dirty tricks in this whole affair. Why is the state media suddenly interested in reporting what is happening in the MDC when all along it has refused to do so? After all, coverage of opposition parties by the state media is one of the key issues being raised at the stalled talks in South Africa.”

The observer said the fact that the two factions were attacking each other in

public was a clear sign that they were going their separate ways and were therefore likely to split the vote, which would favour ZANU-PF.

“One cannot rule out ZANU-PF dirty tricks” — Harare-based observer.

“One of the key conditions of the talks between the two factions was to present a common front against ZANU-PF. This meant that they would field a single candidate in next year’s presidential election,” said the observer. “What is now happening is that the single-candidate principle they were talking about is dead and buried. There is no way any of them can turn around and support the other as the leader of a united MDC.”

They would be unlikely to field candidates against each other in the parliamentary constituencies, but would instead compete on a proportional representation basis, he said.

A retired journalist in Harare said Zimbabweans would be the biggest losers in the war of egos between opposition leaders. He said it was evident to everyone else that a divided MDC could not win against ZANU-PF — no matter what the conditions on the ground. But this did not seem to matter to the leaders.

“I would be surprised if their combined seats surpass 25 per cent of the total vote in next year’s elections,” said the journalist.

At the weekend rally, Tsvangirai announced that his faction would launch its presidential and parliamentary campaign on September 9 at Zimbabwe Grounds in the poor suburb of Highfield, the same venue where many civic and opposition activists, including Tsvangirai, were arrested and severely beaten in police custody in March. The crackdown prompted an emergency Southern African Development

Community, SADC, summit in Tanzania, which led to Mbeki being asked to mediate the crisis.

“Neither faction enjoys any significant support in rural areas and if they split the vote in urban areas where they have traditionally been strong, ZANU-PF will pick up those seats again. This is definitely bad news for Zimbabwe, whatever motives the opposition leaders might have,” said the journalist.

More significantly, it would be difficult for the opposition to extract any concessions from Mbeki at the mediation process, he added.

Mugabe has always been reluctant to talk to the MDC, and especially to meet Tsvangirai face-to-face.

“Now that they have proved unwilling to stand together in defence of their own interest, it will be more difficult for ZANU-PF to take them seriously,” said an African diplomat based in Harare. “It will be even more difficult for Mbeki to argue with ZANU-PF that they are a serious party.”

“This is definitely bad news for Zimbabwe, whatever motives the opposition leaders might have” — journalist.

The SADC in March this year mandated Mbeki to mediate in Zimbabwe’s eight-year political stalemate and economic recession, which has seen annual inflation spiral to over 4,500 per cent. Unemployment is estimated at over 80 per cent.

The country has been plagued by shortages of almost all basic commodities, a situation aggravated by a unilateral order by government at the end of June for products and service providers to reduce prices by 50 per cent. The move led to panic buying, leaving most shops empty.

An MDC member who attended Tsvangirai's rally noted that the MDC was setting itself up for failure. "Up to now, not many people know whether or not the MDC will be participating in next year's elections. Then you have this confusion about the format the party wants to adopt in combating ZANU-PF. Why should these things be happening at the last minute when the party should be mobilising supporters and urging them to register to vote?" he said.

"The long and short of it is that the MDC is digging its own grave... they are unlikely to recover"
— party member.

"The long and short of it is that the MDC is digging its own grave. Once they lose next year's election, whatever the electoral conditions, they are unlikely to recover again. People have given them enough chances and have been hoping that they would take advantage of the mediation effort by Mbeki to improve electoral laws, and even get some concessions on a new constitution. They have blown all that."

He noted that government had removed the ban on political gatherings and that both factions of the MDC were allowed to hold rallies whenever they wanted to. Whether government was genuinely trying to accommodate opposition views was still unclear, but it was up to the MDC to test the extent of this commitment, he said.

"They cannot do this when they cannot put their own house in order first," said another analyst. "In all probability, ZANU-PF is just trying to cleanse itself — to be seen to be improving conditions in the country to win legitimacy in any future elections. It cannot be blamed for the MDC's immaturity."

Norman Chitapi is the pseudonym for an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

PARLIAMENT TO SHAPE NEXT YEAR'S ELECTION BATTLEGROUND



Credit: Lazele

Queue at a Harare polling station during the 2005 parliamentary election. Picture from 2005.

Proposals cover expanded legislature, changes to constituencies, and even the eventuality that President Mugabe might opt to retire.

By Benedict Unendoro in Harare

The future of President Robert Mugabe is the underlying theme to two bills which will be debated in the Zimbabwean parliament during its current session, the last before elections are held in March next year.

A set of amendments contained in the two bills will define many of the rules for the presidential and parliamentary elections which are likely to be held simultaneously next March. It also makes provision for what would happen if Mugabe chose to stand down.

Opening parliament on July 24, President Mugabe said, "Your task as parliamentarians during this session is a mammoth one."

Constitutional amendments would give Mugabe some breathing-space if he decided to step down.

The most controversial bill on the agenda would amend the constitution to allow both houses of parliament to sit jointly as an electoral college to select a replacement should a sitting president resign, die, or be impeached or otherwise incapacitated. The replacement would serve until the end of the elected president's term in office.

The change would give Mugabe some breathing-space in the event that he decided to step down as head of state, since his immediate successor would be handpicked rather than a potentially troublesome figure who came to power through direct elections.

Some politicians — including those in the faction-riven ZANU-PF — see the change as opening up an exit route that Mugabe might conceivably use. Opposition politicians, however, say it is just a ruse to wrong-foot dissenters within ZANU-PF, and in reality the president is unlikely to retire swiftly once — as seems likely — he wins next year's polls.

**“Mugabe wants to remain in power.... So the bills will be tailored in such a way that this is fulfilled”
— MDC member Absolom Choga.**

Under the same 18th Amendment Bill, the number of seats in the lower house of parliament would rise from 120 to 210 while the number of senators in the upper chamber would go from 66 to 84.

Finally, the bill would establish a human rights commission for Zimbabwe.

The second bill due to be tabled would set out the management of the electoral process, from drawing constituency boundaries and registering voters to running the elections themselves. This law is not expected to change past practice where Mugabe loyalists have overseen the whole process.

“The two bills have inherent dangers lurking in them,” said Absolom Choga, a member of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC. “Mugabe wants to remain in power and is the ruling party's candidate in next year's presidential elections. So

the bills will be tailored in such a way that this is fulfilled, prolonging the country's political and economic crisis.”

Choga sees the two bills as complementary. The electoral bill will ensure that the additional seats in both houses of parliament will go to the ruling ZANU-PF party, while constituency boundaries will be gerrymandered for partisan reasons. The additional seats are being created in those areas where Mugabe's support is solid, while the number of opposition-friendly constituencies is being reduced.

Choga said he agreed with former information and publicity minister Jonathan Moyo, who wrote in the Zimbabwe Independent recently that in expanding the two houses of parliament, Mugabe was simply extending his own patronage system.

The MDC has already complained that the ongoing registration of voters is being done in a way that makes it impossible for its supporters to sign up, thereby skewing the elections before they are held.

Rural chiefs tasked with vetting prospective voters are blocking known opposition supporters.

“We have encountered a plethora of obstacles,” said MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa last month. “People suspected of being sympathetic to the MDC are being denied the chance to register... this is a nationwide problem.”

Chamisa said that in rural areas, chiefs and other traditional leaders, who were well known for their loyalty to Mugabe and ZANU-PF, had been given the job of screening and vetting people wishing to register, and they were blocking known opposition supporters.

Lovemore Madhuku, chairman of the National Constitutional Assembly, a non-government organisation which has pressed for an all-new democratic constitution, last week described the 18th Amendment Bill as “treacherous and contemptuous.”

**Proposed amendments
“treacherous and
contemptuous”
— Lovemore Madhuku.**

“Zimbabwe needs a constitution that entrenches human rights and freedoms, ensures a free and open society and an electoral system that gives citizens power to elect leaders who are responsive to their needs,” he said.

Madhuku also suggested that the constitutional amendment would scupper the mediation effort led by South African President Thabo Mbeki on behalf of the Southern African Development Community to negotiate a political settlement between the Zimbabwean government and the opposition.

“The amendment goes against the spirit of dialogue. The basis for dialogue is to replace unilateral decision-making with consensus and the inclusion of the opposition,” said Madhuku. “The amendment has its origin entirely in the ZANU PF politburo.”

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai last week urged Mugabe to withdraw the bill as a sign he was serious about the Mbeki-led talks.

Moyo, who is now the only independent legislator in parliament after losing his government post in a falling-out with Mugabe, urged mediators not to ignore the 18th Amendment Bill, otherwise they risked “dropping, if not losing, the ball”. That, he warned, “would most certainly result in embarrassing failure with catastrophic consequences”.

At the same time, he said the bill could offer “the best opportunity for a meaningful compromise towards the much-needed transition from crisis to sustainable development under a democratic dispensation”, provided ZANU-PF and the MDC could discuss the proposal in a mature way.

Moyo recommended that a workable version of the bill would stipulate an independent registrar to oversee voter lists; accountable and representative commissions to manage constituency demarcation and the elections themselves; freedom for anyone to conduct voter education; and access to media for all political parties and candidates well in advance of any vote.

“The amendment has its origin entirely in the ZANU PF politburo” — Madhuku.

The current session of parliament will also see discussions on a third contentious bill, which would effectively allow the government to nationalise foreign-owned companies by requiring that 51 per cent of the shares in any firm are owned by indigenous Zimbabweans.

When the government ordered retailers to slash their prices last month in a bid to curb inflation, Mugabe warned businesses that they could face nationalisation if they did not comply.

Analysts say that although Mugabe may see the bill as a way of bolster support in the business sector ahead of next year’s elections, it would in reality lead to the flight of investors, doing further damage to the country’s economy.

Benedict Unendoro is the pseudonym of a reporter in Harare. ■

GONO DEFUSES UN PULL-OUT THREAT



Credit: Lazele

Motorists queue to spend their fuel coupons following news that they were being cancelled. Picture taken July 21 2007.

Central banker’s intervention results in UN agencies being offered exemption from ban on purchase of fuel with foreign currency.

By Norman Chitapi in Harare

Zimbabwe’s Reserve Bank governor Gideon Gono has intervened to avert a possible pull-out of United Nations agencies which were threatening to leave the country because of the government’s decision to scrap a scheme which allows fuel purchases to be made in foreign currency, according to diplomats.

Gono organised a meeting between the UN agencies and President Robert Mugabe, who reassured them that a particular international fuel procurement company would be exempt from the July 18 ban, which removes one of the last ways available for people to buy fuel, a diplomatic source told IWPR.

“All United Nations agencies — United Nations Development Programme, World Food Programme, United Nations Children’s Fund, World Health Organisation — wanted to pull out. A meeting had to be quickly organised with the president who reassured them that they would not be affected and would continue to get their fuel from their suppliers,” said the source.

“The fuel directive was the last straw. We are already working under very difficult circumstances” — diplomatic source.

The source added that some embassies were threatening to relocate to South Africa. “The fuel directive was the last straw. We are already working under very difficult circumstances,” he said.

Zimbabwe has been facing an acute fuel shortage for the past eight years, part of a wider economic crisis, which many blame on the Mugabe government.

“This is nothing short of madness” — motorist at petrol station.

The scheme allowed fuel purchases with foreign currency coupons either from private oil companies or individual importers. All businesses have now been ordered to redeem fuel coupons within two weeks.

Diplomats and employees of international aid organisations also rely on the scheme to purchase fuel.

The government gave no reason for its decision to end the scheme, but has accused people of buying coupons and reselling them at astronomical prices, contributing to skyrocketing inflation.

The decision follows a June 26 government directive in which Mugabe ordered retailers to slash prices by 50 per cent to June 18 levels, in a bid to counter inflation.

Gono, who analysts say is growing increasingly frustrated with

government's ad hoc economic policies, reacted with anger to the announcement that the fuel scheme would be scrapped.

“Everything needs to be properly dissected, looking at the pros and the cons so that we do not make rushed decisions,” he said.

“We have hindered people from going about their normal business.”

The announcement has prompted panic-buying as motorists scramble to fill their vehicles' tanks and buy extra fuel in other containers. Some companies, which already had huge reserves for their own use and for their employees, brought up to five 210-litre drums to service stations to redeem their coupons.

“This is nothing short of madness,” said Nhamo Msando, a motorist at the Caltex service station in the suburb of Bluffhill, commenting on the huge containers people were bringing to collect their allocations. “Where are we expected to stock all this fuel?”

“The number 18 will soon become a swear word in Zimbabwe,” chipped in Stephen Moyo, who had three drums on the back of his truck. “On June 18 it was the price of basic commodities; today it is fuel. What will they have for us on August 18?”

An owner of a construction company said the fuel move would prove detrimental to the economy, “I rely on these fuel coupons. I have projects in Ruwa, Norton and all over Harare. I was so angry when I read the minister's announcement. Out of everything that has happened, this has angered me the most.

“How does government expect us to conduct business without fuel?” — company owner.

“How does government expect us to conduct business without fuel? And again, it has made an announcement before putting in place contingent measures to ensure that there is a constant supply of the fuel.”

A political analyst said the government was leaping from one problem to another without any idea of what it wanted to achieve.

“It is a rollercoaster and we are on autopilot. The government cannot hope for economic recovery through these disruptive measures,” he said.

Norman Chitapi is the pseudonym of an IWPR reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

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