



YOUTH VOTE BLOW FOR MDC

Young people show little interest in backing the opposition in next year's elections.

By Jacob Nhlanhla in Bulawayo

Signs of apathy among young Zimbabweans who make up the majority of voters have begun to emerge as the country prepares for crucial polls next year, with many regarding the outcome as a foregone conclusion.

In what were regarded as watershed elections in 2000 — the first national poll that pitted the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, and Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF against each other — young Zimbabweans emerged as the largest voting bloc.

They came in huge numbers to cast their votes for the then-newly-established MDC. Young Bulawayo residents worked hard to mobilise other voters in the run-up to the election, even though they risked retribution from ZANU-PF activists notorious for meting out violence against their political opponents.



Credit: Lazele

MDC activists detained after a police raid on party headquarters are pictured outside Harare magistrate court. Picture taken March 31.

Many young people believe the outcome of the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections is a foregone conclusion.

But the hopes and enthusiasm of youngsters who took part in the election were dashed when ZANU-PF emerged victorious — albeit by a narrow margin which many observers attributed to vote-rigging.

It was an electoral defeat that not only shook the opposition but also the

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ The governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Gideon Gono, has announced that he will soon impose a limit on the amount of cash that individuals and businesses can deposit in bank accounts. The move is seen as preparatory to issuing a new currency.

■ Zambian Airways will stop direct flights to Harare this week, becoming the second airline to pull out of Zimbabwe in less than a month. British Airways ended direct flights

on October 30, saying the route was no longer financially viable.

■ After shortages of basic foods like bread and milk, Zimbabwe is now running out of banknotes. The soaring inflation rate — the world's highest at 15,000 per cent — means locals are being forced to use more banknotes to buy less.

■ Zimbabwean police last week said they had begun retraining

officers in crowd control and management ahead of next year's elections. They denied bringing in army instructors to help with firearms training.

■ The International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organisations or IFHHRO has warned that deepening economic problems could drive Zimbabwe's beleaguered health sector further into the ground unless drastic action is taken to stem the decline.

young men and women who had queued for hours under the blistering sun to “vote for change”, as the slogan went.

“I was based in Harare then, and I took the long train trip to Bulawayo to vote in my constituency where I had been registered as a voter,” recalled a former student who is now a practicing journalist. “But along with others, our disappointment was written all over our faces when the election results came out.”

Although ZANU-PF narrowly took the majority parliamentary seats, and the opposition quickly alleged electoral fraud, observer missions were divided: African teams endorsed the results, while their western counterparts criticised the poll for being held in a climate that was neither free nor fair.

The MDC’s prospects have never looked so bleak, as young people seem keener to escape the country than to bring about change.

Nonetheless, presidential elections in 2002 pitting Mugabe against the MDC’s Morgan Tsvangirai saw enthusiasm again rekindled. But this time the youth, probably still the biggest voting bloc, approached the poll with calculated caution.

“While some thronged the polling stations, others were already complaining that there was no need to waste their time as Mugabe would win,” the Bulawayo-based journalist told IWPR.

And win Mugabe did. He claimed 56 per cent of the vote. The opposition again alleged electoral fraud. The electorate’s frustration with the ballot’s failure to usher in a peaceful political transition led to widespread disillusionment and apathy.

In 2005, the MDC got its biggest electoral drubbing with ZANU-PF claiming 78 out of 120 elected seats. The MDC lost the seats it had won in 2000.

The opposition has complained that the authorities are disenfranchising young people by denying them ID papers.

As the nation prepares for what are seen as potentially bruising polls next year, the MDC’s prospects have never looked so bleak, as it seems many young people are more concerned with escaping the country than trying to bring about change.

“Young people are fed up,” said the journalist who asked not to be named. And the frustration is palpable among the thousands who risk life and limb crossing illegally into neighbouring Botswana and South Africa in search of jobs.

At the same time, the opposition has complained that the authorities have put in place measures to disenfranchise young people by denying them national identity documents that will enable them to register and cast their votes next year. The registrar general, whom critics say has ruling party links, denies these allegations.

“Just when the people have hope in opposition politics, something seems to come up to put a damper on these hopes” — lecturer in Bulawayo.

“What’s the use?” a student at Bulawayo Polytechnic said of the elections in March next year. Reflecting the sentiments of many here in this city of more than two million, he added, “There is so much confusion today in the MDC. For me, voting is a waste of time. Who do I vote for? The signs are that Mugabe will win.”

Certainly, all the signs are that ZANU-PF and Mugabe will win the combined parliamentary and presidential elections, despite the plunging popularity of both.

A journalism and media studies lecturer at the local National University of Science and Technology put this down to the poor state of opposition politics in the country.

It seems the only thing ZANU-PF has to worry about is whether a low turnout will discredit the 2008 elections.

“Just when the people have hope in opposition politics, something seems to come up to put a damper on these hopes for a new beginning for the country,” he said, referring to the current squabbles in the Tsvangirai-MDC faction.

The MDC split into two factions in 2005 over the divisions which emerged within the ranks on whether to take part in an election to the Senate, parliament’s upper chamber.

As Zimbabwe prepares for next year’s ballot, it seems the only thing ZANU-PF has to worry about is whether a low turnout will discredit the elections.

Jacob Nhlanhla is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist. ■

COURT STRIKE LEAVES DETAINEES STRANDED

Industrial action by judges and prosecutors highlights fundamental problems with the law in Zimbabwe.

By Yamikani Mwando in Harare

The month-long pay strike by magistrates and prosecutors has added another dimension to the breakdown of the rule of law in Zimbabwe.

Legal experts are raising concerns that the constitutional rights of suspects are being violated as the strike means they continue to be held pending trial in the country's congested jails.

Independent judges were hounded off the bench when they refused to endorse land takeovers.

Critics of the Zimbabwe government have accused President Robert Mugabe of disregarding the rule of law ever since the controversial seizure of white farmland began in 2000.

Local and international observers claimed that rule of law simply does not exist in Zimbabwe. The authorities have dismissed such remarks as politically loaded, saying they came from opponents of land reform.

Independent judges were hounded off the bench when they refused to endorse the takeovers, while veterans of the 1970s liberation war and other government supporters ran roughshod over the rights of both white farmers and other Zimbabweans who supported opposition parties.

The outcry reached a crescendo when abductions and killings went unpunished by the courts. Yet the Zimbabwean authorities insisted the rule of law was still in force.

Prosecutors and magistrates have now been on strike since the end of October, bringing the wheels of justice to a complete standstill.

Zimbabwe is one of many African countries with poor regard for detainees' rights, and the strike has only compounded their plight, lawyers say.

Holding cells are becoming increasingly congested as police continue to arrest suspects, while there are no courts to try them.

Meanwhile, the government says it will only review the magistrates' demands for higher wages next year.

"There are constitutional violations here," a Bulawayo lawyer, who did not want to be named, told IWPR.

"While the police can extend the time they hold a suspect within the provisions of the law, the strike has meant suspects and inmates on remand are held for longer times than provided for by the constitution. This means government may be sued for these violations."

But the lawyer said it would be a daunting task to pursue such cases, as litigation brought against the government has tended to exist only in theory, with the authorities dismissing such attempts out of hand.

To compound the freefall of the justice system, law officers are leaving the country in droves because of the low pay.

The strike has also made the situation much worse for political prisoners, with the opposition Movement for

Democratic Change, MDC, complaining that members arrested on dubious charges are languishing in holding cells as they cannot be brought before the courts.

"We have a system here that has no regard for people's rights," a Bulawayo official from the main faction of the MDC told IWPR.

Zimbabwe's law society has criticised the government for failing to avert the strike, but officials say the justice ministry has exhausted its budgetary funding and can only address the matter in January, after the 2008 budget has been announced.

Government could face lawsuits from detainees held for longer than is allowed.

In past years, ministries have received supplementary allocations after overspending because the country's voracious inflation erodes the value of the local currency.

While the Zimbabwean authorities have always insisted they uphold the rule of law, many of those held without trial do not share that confidence.

"The government must deal with the strike with urgency, as our work is also being hurt by the industrial action," the Bulawayo lawyer, reflecting a mounting sense of frustration across the country's legal fraternity.

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

FALL IN HIV INFECTION UNDER SCRUTINY

Zimbabwean health workers sceptical of official figures showing decreasing prevalence.

By Yamikani Mwando in Bulawayo

A South African weekly screamed recently, “At last, good news from Zimbabwe!” The headline was for a story on a substantial drop in the rate of HIV infection throughout the country.

On October 31, the authorities announced that the number of people living with the HIV virus had fallen from one in four of the adult population to one in seven over the past four years.

It seemed that at last there was something the authorities were doing right at a time when President Robert Mugabe’s ruling ZANU-PF is accused of destroying a once vibrant economy and running down the health sector.

According to a United Nations statement, the Zimbabwe ministry of health and child welfare, assisted by a group of international experts, based the figures on HIV infection in pregnant women attending antenatal clinics. Major agencies, including the World Health Organisation, WHO, and the UN children’s agency UNICEF, were involved in the study.

But frontline health workers have told IWPR that they have seen little evidence of a downturn in levels of infection, with a number suggesting that if anything the situation is becoming worse.

In rural Matopo, which lies outside Zimbabwe’s second largest city of Bulawayo, and in areas surrounding Matabeleland South, they say they



Credit: Lazele

Former US ambassador Christopher Dell presents Health Minister David Parirenyatwa with anti-retroviral drugs intended for 40,000 Zimbabweans. Picture taken May 13.

have recorded a rise in the number of young men and women in their twenties succumbing to HIV-related illnesses.

Frontline health workers say they have seen little evidence of a downturn in the HIV infection rate.

“It is difficult for many people to understand how the [official] decline is calculated,” a health worker attached to a Catholic non-governmental organisation told IWPR. The Catholic church runs clinics and health centres in two Matabeleland provinces and monitors HIV infection trends across the country.

“In Matopo, we now have elders postponing funerals because they say [burying people] has become the only thing they do throughout the

week, and they need to rest,” he said.

“A lot of young people are dying in these areas. You just have to be there to see the impact this disease has had on rural communities.”

Meanwhile, Bulawayo city council says it is running out of graves, owing to the high incidence of AIDS-related deaths.

Government officials accuse the Movement for Democratic Change-dominated council of working hard to discredit the Mugabe presidency by presenting a picture that the government is losing the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Local health workers who have analysed the latest report documenting the fall in HIV infection suggest it might be explained by the continued emigration of millions of Zimbabweans to neighbouring countries, which has made it difficult to adequately monitor infection trends.

They also point out that deaths from AIDS-related illnesses are growing because of the soaring cost of anti-retroviral drugs.

“We now have elders postponing funerals because... they need to rest” — health worker.

At a communicable diseases centre run by the Bulawayo city council and funded by USAID, officials say out of around 180,000 people in need of anti-retroviral therapy in the city, only 70,000 are on the programme.

“It’s really terrible,” a doctor working there told IWPR.

In communities where living with HIV and AIDS were previously well-kept family secrets, increasing numbers of people are coming out about their condition.

They do so in the hope that somebody knows somebody who may be able to procure drugs for free, and allow them to jump the queue of those waiting for places on treatment programmes.

The doctor welcomed this new openness, saying that it would help to get a more accurate picture of infection rates.

“What is encouraging is that there seems to be an interest now among

patients to come out into the open about one’s condition — unlike in the past, when many remained closeted patients and died without being documented.”

“What is encouraging is that there seems to be an interest now among patients to come out into the open” — Bulawayo doctor.

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

The Zimbabwe Crisis Report is an initiative of IWPR-Africa’s Zimbabwe Programme. This programme promotes democratization and good governance with Southern Africa and contributes to the development of a culture of human rights and the rule of law. Focusing on Zimbabwe the programme has three core components —

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The key purpose is to increase awareness in the Southern African region of the Zimbabwean situation and the implications for regional peace, security and economic development.

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