

MDC'S POSITION SHORT ON CLARITY

As the opposition agonises over tactics, the Zimbabwean president pre-empt's any compromise by setting an election date.

By Marvelous Chigora in Harare

The Zimbabwean opposition seems to have been caught off balance by the announcement that joint presidential and parliamentary elections will go ahead on March 29.

When President Robert Mugabe announced the poll date on January 25, he demolished all hope that the election might be delayed until a new constitution was agreed.

The postponement was a key demand that the opposition had been pressing for in the negotiating process mediated by the South African Development Community, SADC, aimed at ending the country's political and economic crisis. The mediation effort is being led by South African president Thabo Mbeki.



Credit: Lazele

Police bar MDC supporters from marching through Harare in support of a new constitution. Picture taken January 23.

The decision came as the divided opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, already appeared to be struggling to find a clear strategy.

Shortly before the election date was announced, the party had decided

to devote its energies to organising mass action to push for a new constitution. It announced a "freedom march" through the streets of Harare to press for a constitution that would guarantee free and fair elections, and for a postponement of the election.

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ On January 25, President Robert Mugabe announced that joint presidential and parliamentary elections would go ahead on March 29. The decision destroyed all hope that the authorities might accede to the opposition's demand for a postponement to allow time for a new constitution to be introduced.

■ In response to the move, the two factions of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change began talking to each other about coordinating their response. The two factions are said to be considering fielding a single candidate list in hope of standing a

better chance of defeating Mugabe in the presidential vote and the ruling ZANU-PF in the parliamentary poll.

■ Zimbabwe's electoral commission said voters would be given four separate ballot papers to elect a president, members of the two houses of parliament, and local councillors. The papers will be printed in different colours to make them clearly identifiable.

■ The leader of the main MDC faction, Morgan Tsvangirai, went to South Africa to ask that country's president Thabo Mbeki, who is

mediating in talks between ZANU-PF and the opposition, to be more forceful in pressing Mugabe to accept compromise.

■ Meanwhile, Mbeki sent his chief negotiator Sydney Mufamadi to Zimbabwe in what the London-based SW Radio Africa called "last-ditch attempts to rescue the stalled talks". The radio said that in the face of the deadlocked negotiating process, Mbeki was close to going public and telling the Southern African Development Community, on whose behalf he is leading the mediation effort, which of the sides was obstructing process.

Police refused permission for the march, and waded in with riot gear to break it up when supporters assembled on January 23. Morgan Tsvangirai, who leads the bigger of two MDC factions, was detained briefly to stop him taking part, but he and others were able to attend a large rally in a Harare stadium later the same day.

The MDC decided to resort to mass mobilisation because it felt the ruling ZANU-PF was backtracking on agreements reached during the SADC-brokered talks.

Since this new approach came only two months before what was already anticipated as a likely poll date, some observers asked why the MDC had waited so long before identifying this as their strategy.

After Mugabe's announcement, everything changed again. The MDC said it would make a formal decision later this week on whether to take part in the ballot or stage a boycott. Earlier this month, Tsvangirai said his faction would not run in the election if ZANU-PF refused to accede to its demands at the talk.

It has been hard to discern a sense of urgency in the MDC in the face of crucial elections.

The two factions have also indicated that they are getting closer to a position where they might reunite. The groups led by Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara divided in late 2005 over the issue of participating in an election to a newly-reconstituted upper house of parliament.

Watching the opposition parties, it has been hard to discern a sense of urgency ahead of these crucial elections.

Lovemore Madhuku, who chairs the National Constitutional Assembly, a non-government group that has consistently pressed for an all-new

constitution, has accused the MDC of opportunism, arguing that the document it had drafted had been seen only by the two MDC leaders, the SADC negotiators and a few others – but not by members of the public who were being asked to go on marches.

“How can they ask people to press for a [constitution] that they have not seen? This shows they are not serious” - Lovemore Madhuku.

In any case, he said, the MDC had undercut its own position by tactically aligning itself with ZANU-PF on some issues, notably when its members of parliaments supported a controversial constitutional amendment in September, and subsequent changes to repressive security legislation.

“They are not serious on these issues. They are not even targeting ZANU-PF but civil society, whose support they lost after they endorsed Constitutional Amendment No. 18 and agreed to cosmetic changes to the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and Public Order and Security Act,” said Madhuku.

“They are just opportunists. What they are calling for is a new constitution that is not people-driven. How can they ask people to press for a document that they have not seen? This shows they are not serious. What would people be supporting? Even civic society has not seen that document.”

Nelson Chamisa, spokesman for the Tsvangirai faction, has said the “transitional constitution” agreed with ZANU-PF during the talks was drafted is only intended to ensure fair elections, after which a genuinely “people-driven constitution” will become possible.

Non-partisan observers have accused the MDC of vacillating between reaching an accommodation with the Mugabe government over the

constitution, and calling for mass protests and possibly boycotting the election altogether. According to these critics, the MDC's position is neither focused nor transparent.

“The reason the MDC wants the elections postponed, we are told, is because they want the transitional constitution to take root. In other words this is not about a referendum to give the people of Zimbabwe a chance to craft their constitution. It is all about swapping horses to State House,” said a recent editorial in the Zimbabwe Independent.

“How can a make-or-break document about the future of Zimbabwe be drawn in secrecy and we are expected to merely endorse it?”

A journalist who writes for an international media outlet added that the MDC should tell people what it really stands for and focus on those issues. As the journalist, who did not want to be named, told IWPR, “victory will not be given on a silver platter”.

“The MDC needs to accept that there is no way that ZANU-PF will level the playing field so that the MDC can take over” - journalist.

“The MDC needs to accept that there is no way that ZANU-PF will level the playing field so that the MDC can take over. It has to come up with strategies that can work in this environment,” he said. “Opposition parties have won in worse environments, even in a war situation, and boycotts are not the solution.”

As the Zimbabwe Independent put it, “Given the dithering and prevarication in opposition ranks, one gets the impression that it is the Americans who are voting in March and Zimbabweans in November.”

Marvelous Chigora is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

MUGABE UNDER THREAT FROM ZANU-PF DISSIDENTS

Powerful figures in the ruling party are building up momentum for a direct challenge to the president.

By Nonthando Bhebhe in Harare

A powerful ZANU-PF insider has confirmed that plans to replace President Robert Mugabe as the ruling party's presidential candidate in the March election are at an advanced stage.

In December, Mugabe appeared to have dealt with his critics within ZANU-PF once and for all when he secured unanimous endorsement as the party's official candidate at an extraordinary congress of members.

It had been thought that the party meeting would see his nomination at least debated if not challenged, but that possibility was taken off the agenda in advance. Ahead of the meeting, a key ally, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the party's secretary for legal affairs, said the congress would not be looking for a new presidential candidate since ZANU-PF's rules made it clear that the First Secretary – in this case Mugabe – must automatically be put forward for election.

Now, however, IWPR has learned that high-placed dissenters within the party are revisiting the issue, and are gathering support for a challenge to Mugabe.

IWPR's source, a key party insider who asked not to be named, said that within a matter of weeks, Mugabe would be removed as the party's official candidate and replaced with former finance minister Simba Makoni.

He said nine out of the ten provincial branches were now opposed to Mugabe and wanted a change in leadership before the crucial election.



Credit: Lazele

ZANU-PF's Emmerson Mnangagwa entering the parliament building. Picture taken September 20.

This even includes Mugabe's home province, Mashonaland West.

The only divided province, the source said, is Midlands, which is home to Mnangagwa.

Nine out of ZANU-PF's ten provincial branches said to be opposed to Mugabe as a candidate.

Always regarded as Mugabe's preferred successor, Mnangagwa is a bitter rival of retired army commander General Solomon Mujuru, who has led the drive to oust the president and is now believed to be the kingmaker behind Makoni.

"All those that were opposed to Mugabe standing as the party's presidential candidate are backing Makoni as the preferred candidate for the elections. Everyone agrees that if ZANU-PF goes to the elections with Mugabe, it will lose - hence the need to change the leadership now," said the party insider.

"Most of the politburo members, including the powerful former army commanders Mujuru and General Vitalis Zvinavashe and influential former ZAPU-PF member Dumiso Dabengwa, want Mugabe out of the race. The majority of cabinet ministers are also opposed to Mugabe as the candidate."

He added that the few undecided senior members included security minister and ZANU-PF secretary Didymus Mutasa and the party's national commissar Elliot Manyika.

"We can safely say 90 per cent of the population is opposed to Mugabe, and obviously ZANU-PF will not win under his leadership. It is an inevitable outcome. What is happening now is that the majority ZANU-PF membership and all other forces we are talking to will support these initiatives."

The state-run Herald newspaper has carried a barrage of insults directed at what is termed the "Makoni project", indicating that the news has made Mugabe's backers jittery. The remarks

have come from columnist Nathaniel Manheru, believed in reality to be the Mugabe spokesman George Charamba.

This is not the first time that Makoni's name has been mentioned as a potential successor to Mugabe. In the past he has failed to make headway because, while he is an expert on financial and economic matters, he has been regarded as a political lightweight in the brutal world of ZANU-PF politics.

Simon Makoni is being backed as a contender by Solomon Mujuru, a powerful figure within ZANU-PF.

His future has always depended on the backing of more powerful party barons.

Mujuru is now said to be the driving force behind him. Analysts say Mujuru is not interested in becoming president himself, but wants to be the power behind the throne.

A long-running battle for the succession has divided ZANU-PF into a camp led by Mnangagwa and supporters of Mujuru.

Although he retired as head of the army more than a decade ago, Mujuru has endured as one of the most feared and powerful figures in Zimbabwe. Under the nom de guerre Rex Nhongo, he led Mugabe's guerrilla army during the 1970s war of independence against white-ruled Rhodesia.

He went on to become a wealthy and hardnosed businessman, and is rumoured to own several farms seized from white farmers under Mugabe's ill-fated land reform programme launched in 2000.

The retired general was responsible for the rise of his wife Joyce Mujuru to the ZANU-PF presidium in 2004, blocking the way for Mnangagwa. Joyce Mujuru was appointed deputy head of the party when it amended its constitution to make it mandatory for one such post to be held by a woman.

As far back as 2006, IWPR was told by a source close to Mujuru that discussions with Makoni were under way. Efforts to woo him started when the general realised his wife was not the ideal candidate to succeed Mugabe, who was then hinting that he might step down.

"The general knows that what he wants is a winner," said the source at the time, explaining that this meant a figure who could not only beat Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in an election contest, but also defeat Mnangagwa and win acceptance from ordinary Zimbabweans.

The technocrat Makoni is perhaps the most popular figure in ZANU-PF.

A highly-educated technocrat, Makoni is perhaps the most widely liked figure in a deeply unpopular party.

Both friends and critics agree he is extremely clever and has a reputation for integrity, once again a major asset when much of the establishment has been tainted by corruption scandals and human rights violations.

Makoni could just be the most presentable choice available for those in the establishment who want to end Zimbabwe's international isolation. He is popular among the business community, where it is felt he has the

charisma, ability and intellect to mount a serious challenge to Tsvangirai, and he is also seen by many as a match for Mugabe.

The Mujuru/Makoni faction has reportedly ruled out any alliance with the MDC, preferring to continue with ZANU-PF's ideological line under a new leadership.

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Compared with most of the senior ZANU-PF candidates Makoni, 58, is a youngster. While the old guard was fighting the liberation war in the Seventies, he was studying chemical engineering in Britain, where he obtained a PhD. He also represented the exiled ZANU in Europe. He was forced out of government in 2002 by ZANU-PF old-timers who saw him as a threat to their interests. A senior party official once described him as being "too hot to handle", and "too clever and too young" for the older members.

In the Nineties, Makoni served for ten years as executive secretary of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference, the precursor to the Southern African Development Community. This gave him international experience and a great deal of exposure, and he returned to Zimbabwe a far sharper and more polished politician.

He is currently an investment consultant working widely in Africa.

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe. ■

QUESTIONS OVER REPORTED PROGRESS IN ZIMBABWE TALKS

Observers can see none of the improvements claimed from the negotiations on resolving the long-running political stand-off.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

South African president Thabo Mbeki has once again reported progress in the talks he is mediating between Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition in an attempt to end the country's eight-year political and economic crisis.

However, analysts say that any headway made in the negotiations brokered by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, is as imperceptible and inaudible as the so-called "quiet diplomacy" Mbeki has used in dealing with President Robert Mugabe.

On January 17, Mbeki met Mugabe for four hours at State House, and then talked separately with both leaders of the divided opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, at the South African embassy in Harare.

The South African leader told journalists after these private meetings that he was satisfied with the commitment of all political leaders to resolving the long-running crisis.

"You cannot doubt the level of commitment of the Zimbabwe leadership to ensuring that the country's problems are solved," said Mbeki, standing next to Mugabe, who will be 84 next month.

"This [negotiating process] is work in progress and I must say that there has been very good progress. There is definitely a lot of light."

Both sides in the negotiations have refused to comment on the content



Presidents Thabo Mbeki (left) and Robert Mugabe meet for talks at State House in Harare. Picture taken November 22.

Credit: Lazele

and outcome of their meetings with Mbeki, insisting on the blanket of secrecy they swore to at the start of the SADC-initiated negotiations in April last year.

Earlier in the week, Mbeki told visiting Irish prime minister Bertie Ahern that while a breakthrough was close in the talks, there remained certain "sticking points".

During the negotiations, the opposition have called for a new constitution, reform of the country's electoral laws and the right to vote for all Zimbabwean expatriates, as well as an end to political violence and repression before the elections scheduled for March.

After Mugabe categorically rejected introducing a new constitution before the elections, the MDC asked instead for a transitional document designed to ensure free and fair elections.

However, the opposition recently complained that Mugabe's ZANU-PF party had backtracked on agreements to come up with such a transitional

constitution and to postpone the elections to allow reforms to electoral and security laws to take place in advance.

An analyst in Harare said that it was hard to see what progress Mbeki could be referring to.

"Perhaps they know something we don't know," said the analyst, who also noted the continuing reports of violence around the country.

"Since they began, the talks have been cloaked in secrecy except for leaks and occasional complaints by the opposition about ZANU-PF's failure to meet fully its commitments. The progress is as imperceptible as the effects of Mbeki's 'quiet diplomacy' on Mugabe. There is nothing on the ground."

The MDC also came in for criticism.

Sources close to the meeting between Mbeki and the MDC leaders say the opposition "capitulated" without a whimper when they were informed that Mugabe had dismissed their calls for a

new constitution and for a delay in holding the elections until June.

Few of the MDC's other demands have been met by the ruling party. ZANU-PF has so far agreed on only cosmetic amendments to repressive laws such as the Public Order and Security Act, which empowers police to unilaterally ban opposition rallies if they have a reason to believe these might result in violence.

Less than two months before the polls, there is still no sign that government plans to relax its grip on the state media and allow the opposition to campaign freely.

From the look of things, said one observer, the MDC had backed down from its previous militant approach.

"Either they have capitulated or they believe that indeed ZANU-PF can't beat them in free and fair elections," he said.

According to this analyst, who did not want to be named, the MDC have drawn encouragement from recent events in Kenya, where violence erupted after the opposition accused the incumbent president Mwai Kibaki of stealing the election.

Nelson Chamisa, spokesman for the MDC faction led by Morgan Tsvangirai,

recently told a rally in the poor suburb of Dzivaresekwa that there would be a bloodbath worse than that in Kenya if there is a feeling after the March elections that the vote was rigged.

The analyst concluded that the MDC may believe the threat of angry protests will be enough to deter the authorities from vote-rigging in the spring elections.

"They believe ZANU-PF will be loathe to go that route when events in Kenya are still fresh and Mugabe has not got over the tag of illegitimacy which he has worn since his controversial re-election in 2000."

"We want to take the struggle outside the boardroom and into the streets" – Biti.

Meanwhile, the MDC announced demonstrations for January 23 to push for a new constitution and also to test ZANU-PF's commitment to non-violence.

The opposition movement, which insists it remains committed to the

SADC talks, has planned a total of 300 rallies to take place this month, starting with three in the capital Harare.

"The march of a million men and women that we intend to hold on January 23, 2008 is a dipstick in an oil tank to gauge the seriousness I have alluded to earlier on," said Tendai Biti, who is secretary-general of the Tsvangirai faction and is representing it at the Mbeki-led negotiations.

"I have to point out that this intended march is in no way prejudicial to the SADC mediation efforts," he said. "I have to place it on record that the MDC remains committed to the SADC talks and we remain hopeful that something will come out of that process."

"This is part of Zimbabwe's democratisation process," said Biti.

"Now that we have been in the boardroom [with the ruling party] for this long, we want to take the struggle outside the boardroom and into the streets, where we will gauge whether there was any seriousness and commitment to the SADC dialogue on the part of ZANU-PF."

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

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