

MAKONI RISES TO THE CHALLENGE

Ruling party rift deepens as senior member takes on Robert Mugabe in presidential poll.

By Benedict Unendoro in Harare

Former finance minister Simba Makoni's decision to stand against Robert Mugabe in the March 29 presidential election effectively splits the ruling ZANU-PF party and changes the whole Zimbabwean political landscape, analysts believe.

The move, announced at a press conference on February 5, could not have been better timed. In ongoing primary elections where candidates are contesting places in the combined presidential, parliamentary and local government ballots, the pro-Mugabe loyalists in the ruling ZANU-PF has been dominating a process expertly manipulated by the president and his close circle.



Credit: Lazele

Simba Makoni speaks at a function at a Harare hotel. Picture taken February 7.

Simba Makoni's decision to stand in the presidential election changes the whole political landscape.

Veteran politicians allied to the ZANU-PF faction in which retired army general Solomon Mujuru is a leading figure have been shut out of the running. Makoni is seen as the front-man for this faction, although he is running as an independent and was

NEWS IN BRIEF

- At a February 5 press conference, former finance minister Simba Makoni announced he planned to run against incumbent Robert Mugabe in the March 29 presidential election. Makoni's bid is believed to have the backing of a dissident faction within the ruling ZANU-PF which believes it is time for Mugabe to go. The faction's prime mover is a leading heavyweight, Solomon Mujuru. But as of February 12, no one had come out of the woodwork to declare public support for Makoni, who was swiftly expelled from ZANU-PF.
- Amid speculation that Makoni might reach out to the opposition, the leader of the big of two factions of the

Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, ruled out cooperation. Morgan Tsvangirai said he would still be running for the presidency himself. However, the leader of the other faction, Arthur Mutambara, said talks were under way on a possible electoral pact with Makoni.

- On February 11, a court in Harare cleared the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe of making 2.1 trillion Zimbabwean dollars available to a company in violation of proper procedures. The allegations against the central bank surfaced in a trial of Flatwater executives after the company was accused of illegal dealing in foreign

currency. The firm and two top executives were given fines, but judge Mishrod Guvamombe said that contrary to an "erroneous impression", there was evidence that "everything was above board" in the bank's dealings with Flatwater.

- The Zimbabwean dollar, ZWD suffered a sharp fall in value on the black market, which though illegal is viewed as an accurate benchmark of the currency's real worth. According to South Africa's Independent Online, the exchange rate on the parallel market was 7.5 million to the US dollar on February 12, down from 5.5 million at the end of the previous week.

expelled from the party after announcing his move.

Various described as affable, erudite and debonair, Makoni called a press conference to announce that following consultations with ruling party members and activists countrywide, and also with others outside ZANU-PF, he had decided to challenge Mugabe.

"I have accepted the call and hereby advise the people of Zimbabwe that I offer myself as candidate for the office of president of Zimbabwe in the forthcoming elections," said Makoni.

"Makoni's move is a clear signal that ZANU-PF is finally splitting" — Professor Heneri Dzinoteyeweyi.

Professor Heneri Dzinoteyeweyi, who leads a fringe political party called the Zimbabwe Integrated Programme, ZIP, said, "Makoni's move is a clear signal that ZANU-PF is finally splitting because some people have had enough of Mugabe's dictatorial attitude and intimidation."

For Bill Saidi, a veteran journalist and deputy editor of the privately-owned weekly *The Standard*, Makoni's move was groundbreaking in the sense that for the first time a senior ZANU-PF leader had challenged Mugabe's hold on power.

"He [Makoni] has debunked the popular attitude in Zimbabwe that everyone in ZANU-PF is afraid of challenging Mugabe," said the journalist. "I believe this is an important starting point for Zimbabweans, who have to disabuse themselves of the notion that only Mugabe can rule this country."

Last month, Ibbo Mandaza, a ZANU-PF insider, confirmed to IWPR in an exclusive interview that Makoni would stand against Mugabe in the March election.

Speaking anonymously, he said that ten party provinces were opposed to Mugabe, including that of the president, Mashonaland West. The only province that remained loyal to him was the Midlands, which is home to Rural Housing and Social Amenities Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa, a bitter rival of Mujuru.

But many are sceptical about Makoni's chances. "Obviously I don't believe that he will win, because Mugabe has already put in place the machinery to rig the elections," said Saidi.

"The point to note here is that at least someone in ZANU-PF has finally got the courage to challenge Mugabe. I believe after this dramatic move there will be more people who will stand against Mugabe in the party. The perception that Mugabe can never be challenged is collapsing."

Dzinotiyeweyi predicts that a majority of ZANU-PF members will not support Mugabe — but the question is how overtly they will show their dissatisfaction with him at the elections, because intimidation within the party is so serious.

"In Makoni, ZANU-PF has found a viable alternative, but the only problem is whether their wishes will prevail at the elections," he said.

On the streets of the capital, there was more optimism about Makoni's prospects

Speaking for many, Crispin Barwe, a teacher, said, "I believe change will come from within ZANU-PF. For me, the opposition is still too busy fighting amongst themselves and they are no longer really strong enough to provide a real challenge to Mugabe."

"Makoni seems to be the one who will lead a split within ZANU-PF, or at least be the symbol of change in the party which is run on the basis of patronage and fear. I am sure he knows the system that he is up against because he used to be Mugabe's close cadre and has been in ZANU-PF for more than 25 years."

Educated as a chemical engineer in Britain, and a financial adviser by profession, Makoni, is perhaps the most widely liked figure in a deeply unpopular and corrupt party, analysts told IWPR last month.

Friends and critics alike agreed that Makoni was extremely clever and had a reputation for integrity. They said he was so far untainted by the scandals, looting of assets and human rights violations that have been the hallmark of ZANU-PF leaders over the past two decades.

Sceptics say Makoni's election bid is a tactic to split the opposition vote.

They said Makoni was widely seen as the most presentable choice available for those concerned to end Zimbabwe's international isolation.

However, there are others who are sceptical of Makoni's motives. These suspect that this could be a ZANU-PF ploy to lure votes away from the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Indeed, Makoni's intention to stand puts the MDC in a quandary. The party's main faction, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, has not yet announced whether it is going to participate in the elections and there are indications that there could be an exodus of MDC supporters to the Makoni project.

Tsvangirai has ruled out cooperating with Makoni, and insists he himself will remain a presidential candidate. However, on February 11, the New Zimbabwe website reported that Arthur Mutambara, who leads the other MDC faction, had announced that talks were under way on a possible "united front" — in other words an electoral pact — between his faction and Makoni.

Benedict Unendoro is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

WARNING OF “LOGISTICAL NIGHTMARE” ON ELECTION DAY

With four ballots taking place simultaneously, completing the March elections in a single day while ensuring everyone gets a chance to vote may be well-nigh impossible.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

When Zimbabweans go to the polls on March 29, they will be presented with not one but four ballot papers, adding a possible element of chaos to an already fraught political event.

As well as deciding whether President Robert Mugabe should finally retire or stay on for a further term, voters will choose members of both houses of parliament, plus local councillors.

Analysts fear the sheer volume of activity at polling stations could make a one-day ballot logistically impossible.

The country's election commission says the four ballot papers will be printed in different colours to make the process easier, but analysts fear the sheer volume of activity taking place at polling stations within the space of one day could make the ballot logistically impossible.

After much agitation by the opposition, the Zimbabwean authorities introduced the one-day rule for national ballots in 2004, in an attempt to align electoral laws with those of other countries in the region. The reform followed electoral guidelines produced by the Southern African Development Community, SADC.



MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai addresses supporters at Zimbabwe Grounds in Harare. Picture taken January 20.

Before that, Zimbabwe had held elections over two or even three days. In one case, for example, a ballot ran into a third day after the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, complained of a shortage of polling stations in urban constituencies which meant many people were being denied the right to vote.

The one-day rule for elections was designed to reduce the scope for ballot-rigging over an extended period.

The one-day rule recommended by the SADC was designed to reduce the scope for tampering with ballot boxes and the count, the argument being that malpractice is easier if voting takes place over a protracted period.

The one-day system was used for the first time in Zimbabwe in the March 2005 parliamentary election, won by the ruling ZANU-PF.

The election of March 2008, however, will be the first of its kind, synchronising presidential, parliamentary (House of Assembly and Senate) and local government polls. Because voters will take longer to cast their multiple ballots, the polling stations could rapidly become congested if turnout is high, and one day might simply not be long enough.

“Nobody had foreseen a situation where a single voter would be required to vote for four candidates at one time” — Harare-based political analyst.

A political analyst in Harare told IWPR that the practical problems of conducting multiple ballots had been overlooked when the one-day system was introduced.

“It is now clear nobody had foreseen a situation where a single voter would be required to vote for four candidates at one time. It simply means in the event

Credit: Lazele

of a huge voter turnout, most potential voters will not vote,” said the analyst, who did not want to be named.

“That will create problems which have the potential to turn awry as we have seen in Kenya — except that in Zimbabwe it was the opposition which called for this change.”

Opinion poll concluded that most Zimbabweans, whatever their politics, were against the one-day rule.

This unease over the implications of completing the vote in one day was flagged up in a poll conducted last year by the Mass Public Opinion Institute, MPOI, whose head is Eldred Masunungure, a political science lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe.

The MPOI survey, conducted in urban and rural areas in April and May 2007, showed that 66 per cent of respondents nationally rejected the reform.

“The rejection was across the board — it cut across the traditional lines of polarisation,” according to the MPOI report’s executive summary. “In the rural areas, 64 per cent did not support the reform while 29 percent supported it. The rejection rate was even higher in the urban areas, where seven in ten (71 per cent) rejected it compared to the 25 per cent who endorsed the new procedure.”

Among young people, 65 per cent were against the change, and even more middle-aged voters — 73 per cent — rejected it. Support for one-day voting was highest among the least education population group, and lowest among those who had been to university or college.

The capital, Harare, showed the highest disapproval rate at 75 per cent, followed by the Midlands and Mashonaland West — two regions where opposition to Mugabe is strong. But interestingly, MPOI found that there was “no major difference on partisan lines”, with both ZANU-PF and MDC supporters in the 65 to 70 per cent range opposing the rule.

“In short, it appears the one-day voting innovation has no takers,” concluded the MPOI. “Those who administer elections (specifically the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) may have to take a second look at this, especially given that the 2008 elections will be multiple elections.... Otherwise we foresee many potential voters being disenfranchised because of failure to vote when they want to.”

The MPOI said at the time that it was not too late for the electoral commission to review arrangements for the joint March 2008 polls in the interests of “common sense and fair play”.

But the political analyst interviewed by IWPR said it was now unlikely that the electoral commission would act to counter the risk of chaos on election day, unless ZANU-PF and/or MDC were to ring alarm bells about it.

That does not seem feasible, as both parties have been preoccupied with a confrontation over the timing of the vote itself.

“It’s evidently a logistical nightmare” — analyst.

In a negotiating process mediated by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, aimed at ending the country’s political and economic crisis, the MDC has pressed for the elections to be postponed from the anticipated March date to later in the year, which would allow time for a new constitution to be introduced to ensure a free and fair vote. On January 25, however, President Robert Mugabe eliminated that possibility by setting a firm date of March 29.

According to the analyst, “In the event that there is no review, as the parties are still engaged in negotiations over a new constitution and a postponement of the poll, it might be necessary for the High Court to intervene again, as it did in 2005, to extend the voting period; that is, if there is an appeal against the practicality and unfairness of single-day voting,” he said.

“It’s evidently [going to be] a logistical nightmare.”

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

WATER IN SHORT SUPPLY DESPITE RAIN

Bulawayo authorities' standoff with Harare over utilities takeover aggravates shortage of mains water.

By Joseph Nhlanhla

A young woman stoops by the roadside in one of Bulawayo's poor, high density townships where a huge water-filled crater extends into the road.

The sight of this woman scooping water into a pail highlights the plight of many in this city of more than two million, where mains water cuts have continued this year despite the heavy rains that have been pounding Zimbabwe since last year.

"I use the water for ablution purposes," she said after another round of heavy rains hit Bulawayo recently.

While motorists curse the coming of the rain because of the deep potholes it leaves in its wake, the craters have become a lifeline, of sorts, for others.

Bulawayo is facing its worst water crisis in years, and the city authorities say they are not about to lift the stringent system of water rationing, even though heavy rains are now filling up the reservoirs which supply the city.

At the council-run boreholes, long queues have become the order of the day and tempers flare. Recently a man was struck on the head with a beer bottle as residents fought over who should get water first.

While families have resorted to using rainwater from standing pools, it is too dirty to be used for drinking or cooking.

Officials say the shortages are caused not by the lack of water as such, but by the lack of foreign currency needed to purchase purification chemicals.



Credit: Lazele

Children wait outside Municipal District Office in Budiriro to be given access to tapwater, after residents went six days without water last summer. Picture taken June 30, 2007.

The shortage of potable water in Bulawayo is closely connected with a standoff between the city authorities and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority, ZINWA.

Officials say they don't have the funds to buy water purification chemicals.

ZINWA is a recently-formed agency which is supposed to be taking from municipal authorities as the supplier of water to all urban centres in Zimbabwe. However, its performance to date has been heavily criticised, and Bulawayo City Council — controlled by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC — has resisted the takeover. The government in Harare has made it clear that as long as the takeover is resisted, the local authority will not get any assistance from the centre.

"This is unprecedented," a councillor told IWPR, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The council is now begging for money from companies so it can purchase water purification chemicals. This is a local authority and rightly should get a government grant to deal with such issues."

Council officials say it is government departments based in the city that are the major defaulters, having run up trillions of Zimbabwean dollars — or millions of US dollars — in unpaid water bills.

The city is also under pressure from the National Incomes and Pricing Commission to keep water charges low, as part of the price-fixing policy the government imposed to combat inflation last summer. The authorities in Bulawayo say the resulting low revenue levels have also affected their ability to treat and deliver water.

Further highlighting the extent of the city's water woes, Bulawayo council clinics are now asking expectant mothers to bring their own water with them when they come in to give birth.

“What has compounded the matter for the pregnant women is that they now spend days detained at the clinics as they cannot be released to return home without fully paying the clinic bills,” said a nurse in one the council clinics situated in one densely populated working class suburb.

Expectant mothers are supposed to bring their own water when they come into the maternity wards.

Hospitals and clinics in Zimbabwe have resorted to detaining patients who have not paid their bills, as a way of trying to recoup their costs. But the longer the patients spend at clinics with no running water, the more they expose themselves to infection, which can lead to an even longer stay in hospital, the nurse added.

A city council spokesman said he was not aware that women were being asked to bring their own water.

The lack of water has only compounded the power cuts that have

caused chaos at the city's health institutions. There are reports that the outages have proved fatal for patients at the city's largest state-run hospital after life-support machines have ground to a halt.

Zimbabwe imports electricity from countries like the South Africa, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and owes substantial sums in back-payments to these countries.

In January, ZESA started supplying electricity to Namibia, aggravating the power shortage on the national grid. It might seem strange that an export contract should take precedence over domestic need, but the authorities point out that the Namibians are investing large sums of money in refurbishing Zimbabwe's Hwange coal-fired power station, and the country badly needs this foreign currency injection.

As the energy crisis deepens, both ZINWA and ZESA have refused to accept responsibility.

In other cities where ZINWA has taken over mains water and sewerage, it blames the shortage of

electricity for its failure to maintain the waterworks. For its part, ZESA says it has its own problems, including vandals damaging substations.

“We do nothing but wait for the rain to stop” — Bulawayo resident.

Wherever the blame lies, Bulawayo's residents are experiencing deprivations that many say are the worst they can remember. It is something of a vicious circle — with no electricity or fuel, many opt to cook meals outside on open fires. But with the downpours continuing, it is often impossible to light a fire.

As one resident told IWPR, “We cannot afford paraffin that would enable us to prepare meals, so for us the power blackouts mean long hours without eating anything as we do nothing but wait for the rain to stop.”

Joseph Nhlanhla is the pseudonym of an IWPR reporter in Bulawayo. ■

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