

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RUNOFF UNLIKELY

If election shows signs of heading for second round, Mugabe is expected to take steps to ensure it doesn't.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

The belated entry of Zimbabwe's former finance minister Simba Makoni into the presidential race has prompted speculation that a second round of voting will be needed after the March 29 polls.

But some argue that the ruling party will determine the outcome through control and abuse of the electoral process, removing the need for a run-off.

Makoni is one of four candidates who will contest the presidential poll, set to take place on the same day as senate, house of assembly and local government elections.



Credit: Lazele

President Mugabe arrives at a rally in Mashonaland East Province to drum up support for the March 29 elections. Picture taken March 6.

There is speculation that Makoni's presence at the polls will necessitate a second round.

Before Makoni came into the picture, it was essentially a two-horse race for the presidency between the country's leader since independence 84-year old Robert Mugabe, and Morgan

NEWS IN BRIEF

- On March 10, the European Union and the United States raised concerns about the fairness of this month's elections, noting that observers had not been invited from these countries to monitor the vote. Foreign affairs minister Simbarashe Mumbengegwi has said foreign monitors have been picked for their "objectivity and impartiality in their relationship with Zimbabwe".
- Southern African Development Community, SADC, executive secretary Tomaz Salomao is expected in Harare this week to launch the regional bloc's observer mission to the elections at the end of the month. But the SADC Parliamentary Forum — excluded from observing general elections three years ago — said it was yet to be invited.
- Zimbabwe's out-of-control inflation could hit a new record 150,000 per cent, the stock exchange-listed Radar Holdings said in a commentary accompanying its financial report, released at the weekend.
- President Robert Mugabe has shored up his election campaign by handing over millions of US dollars' worth of imported vehicles, machinery and cattle paid for with money seized from private companies and local and international aid agencies, business sources say. Last week, the president told supporters efforts were being made to expedite maize imports from Zambia because some areas were short of food.
- A new equity law passed by President Mugabe to ensure blacks get a majority stake in public-owned firms will plunge Zimbabwe into deeper economic crisis, analysts predicted on March 10.

Tsvangirai, head of the main faction of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

However, there has been speculation that Makoni's candidacy will split the vote, triggering a second round.

According to a constitutional amendment of 2002, 51 per cent of the vote is now required to win the presidency instead of a simple majority as was previously the case.

Makoni could reduce MDC vote in the towns and ZANU-PF support in the countryside.

Some observers believe Makoni may snatch votes from the MDC in urban areas, and undermine the ruling ZANU-PF in the countryside where it holds sway. The candidate, who has no party of his own, is seen as representing moderates from both sides.

Zimbabwe's former information minister, political scientist Jonathan Moyo, suggested that all three leading candidates could struggle to clear 51 per cent of the vote.

"If you look around where Tsvangirai is popular and likely to get support, where Makoni is popular and likely to get support, where Mugabe is popular and likely to pick more votes, none of them is guaranteed 51 per cent," said Moyo on an online news site.

However, a political science lecturer interviewed by IWPR on condition of

anonymity said Mugabe would never "allow himself to be humiliated" by a second ballot.

All three main candidates could fail to win an absolute majority.

"A run-off is only possible when the whole electoral system is transparent and all the parties have access to the entire process — from the casting of the vote, through to counting, to the announcement of the final result," he said.

He argued that the authorities would use their control of administrative bodies to manipulate the results.

"The election results are decided by the command centre which is under the full control of the ruling ZANU-PF party, and to which Makoni and Tsvangirai and their agents have no access," he said.

Opposition made a mistake by failing to demand access to election command centre.

The political scientist said the opposition party missed a chance in the recent negotiations with ZANU-PF, mediated by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, when it failed to demand access to the

command centre where the final results of all national elections are processed.

The SADC negotiations, which began in March last year, are intended to achieve an agreement between ZANU-PF and the MDC to put an end to the country's eight-year political and economic crisis.

He said that if a close challenger to Mugabe emerged during the poll, it would be easy for the command centre to use postal votes from abroad to widen Mugabe's lead. He suggested it was easy to exploit the postal voting system to influence results.

MDC "took too long" to decide whether to take part in elections — political scientist.

The political scientist added that the opposition had shot itself in the foot by failing to resolve the internal differences which led it to split in 2005. He also argued that because the MDC delayed its decision to take part in elections, many of its supporters may have missed the chance to register to vote.

"They took too long to decide whether or not they wanted to take part in the elections," he said. "As a result, it is possible that a number of people who wanted to vote for them didn't in fact register as required by law."

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

MUGABE TURNS HIS BACK ON MAKONI ALLIES

President distances himself from top officials suspected of backing his rival's election bid.

By Hativagone Mushonga in Harare

Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe now trusts no one and is sidelining top army and intelligence officers whom he suspects of involvement in Simba Makoni's bid to oust him in the presidential election later this month, say senior ZANU-PF sources.

The sources say that Mugabe is relying on junior officers to report to him instead of to army chiefs. Director-general of the Central Intelligence Organisation, CIO, Happyton Bonyongwe, and his deputies have not been spared, either. Their junior intelligence officers are now said to be reporting directly to Mugabe.

Bonyongwe might face the axe because Mugabe is no longer sure where his allegiance lies, given his close links to former army commander General Solomon Mujuru, believed to be the chief architect of the Makoni project, say the sources. CIO director Elias Kanengoni — convicted of the attempted murder of political activist Patrick Kombayi in 1990 — is tipped to take over from Bonyongwe.

Kanengoni and his accomplice Kizito Chivamba were sentenced to seven years behind bars for shooting and injuring Kombayi, then the national organising secretary of the now-defunct Zimbabwe Unity Movement. However, the pair never spent a minute behind bars as Mugabe immediately pardoned them.

Mugabe's close security unit has now been tasked with attending public meetings and press discussions



Credit: Lazele

Defence Forces chief Constantine Chiwenga (right) standing beside the podium where President Mugabe is attending independence day celebrations in Harare. Picture taken April 18, 2007.

organised by Makoni, who shocked the ruling ZANU-PF party when he announced on February 5 his intention to challenge Mugabe in the March 29 election to the presidency, parliament and local government. This unit reports directly to Mugabe and not to the CIO director-general and his deputies.

Mugabe has junior military and intelligence officers reporting to him direct as he does not trust their superiors.

Although the army chiefs' tenures were extended, they are still being linked to the Makoni election challenge, which claims to have the backing of at least 90 per cent of ZANU-PF's politburo members and senior army and top central intelligence officers who want to oust the 84-year-old leader.

It is not clear why Air Marshal Perence Shiri's term of office, which

expires in April, was not extended together with those of other service chiefs but he is believed to be a close ally of Mujuru. Both hail from the same rural area in Chikomba in Mashonaland East.

The tenures of General Constantine Chiwenga, chief of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, and Lieutenant-General Phillip Valerio Sibanda, Zimbabwe National Army commander, were extended to 2013.

A politburo member requesting anonymity told IWPR that if Makoni did not have the backing of Mugabe's top intelligence officers, his announcement would not have shocked Mugabe and ZANU-PF the way that it did.

"Where was Mugabe's intelligence when the idea was mooted to front Makoni? Several meetings were held over a very long period with most of Mugabe's trusted comrades. What angers the old man is that he was being surrounded by people who were plotting to get rid of him," he said.

"I don't think many can truly stand up now and deny that they were never involved at one stage or the other. When Makoni's people are talking about having the backing of senior army and intelligence officers, this is not a figment of their imagination.

"By clinging to power Mugabe is betraying the essence of the liberation struggle" — ex-Defence Forces commander Vitalis Zvinavashe.

"Truthfully, I don't think the old man trusts anybody. People know that now and that is why they are all rushing to denounce Makoni and distance themselves from him. I know that the ones doing so and making the most noise are the guilty ones and they feel the need to exonerate themselves fast before President Mugabe turns on each one of them."

At a recent rally in Bulawayo, former home affairs minister Dumiso Dabengwa came out in support of Makoni. He is the biggest heavyweight yet to have openly backed him.

Press reports have linked the following to the Makoni project — Mashonaland East governor Ray Kaukonde, former Zimbabwe Defence Forces commander Vitalis Zvinavashe, and former Masvingo provincial chairman Dzikamai Mavhaire.

Women's League head Oppah Muchinguri has distanced herself from Makoni and is said to be part of Mugabe's new inner circle. Despite reports that they were backing Makoni, ZANU-PF chairperson John Nkomo and Vice-President Joseph Msika have distanced themselves from him.

Zvinavashe, who retired a few years ago and is a successful businessman and a member of the ZANU-PF politburo, has always made public his feelings on the need for new leadership. "When we went to war we did not fight for a single person but for all of us. But what the president is

doing now defeats the whole purpose of our having gone to war," he told a Zimbabwean news site in January.

"By clinging to power Mugabe is betraying the essence of the liberation struggle. I may also want to be president one day, but if one clings on to power for too long, how do you expect youngsters to be leaders of tomorrow? The president has played his part and should go immediately, to give a chance to others whom we feel have the guts to shape a good Zimbabwe."

Mugabe launched his ZANU-PF election manifesto in Harare on February 29, questioning the loyalty of some parliamentary candidates representing the ruling party. The veteran Zimbabwean leader who is seeking a new five-year term at the polls at the end of the month, described those of Makoni's backers who were still in ZANU-PF as "two-faced".

"The traitors and sell-outs, the political witches and political prostitutes... must be confined to the dustbins of history" — Mugabe on his enemies.

At the launch, Mugabe also accused former colonial power Britain of using Makoni to sponsor a rebellion against him in the ruling party.

"You who are with us here, I hope we can trust you," Mugabe told the crowd of about 4 000, including ZANU-PF candidates, at the Harare International Conference Centre.

"The traitors and sell-outs, the political witches and political prostitutes, political charlatans and the two-headed political creatures must be confined to the dustbins of history."

In giving a vote of thanks at the launch, Vice-President Msika distanced himself and a few other ZANU-PF heavyweights, including

Dabengwa, from Makoni. But Dabengwa defected to the Makoni camp a day later.

Makoni has repeatedly stressed that he is working with people in ZANU-PF to bring political change to Zimbabwe. Speaking at the rally in Bulawayo on March 1, Dabengwa confirmed that Makoni did indeed have the backing of some of top ZANU-PF officials.

"Our condition today arises primarily from the failure of national leadership" — Dumiso Dabengwa.

"We gave him our support and we found that there was no way out but to take this step," he said.

Dabengwa became the first ruling party heavyweight to come out in support of Makoni. "Our condition today arises primarily from the failure of national leadership," he said.

Dabengwa, who is 69, said that for a long time he had tried to work with fellow politburo members to facilitate a "smooth transition" after realising that the ZANU-PF leadership "was getting old".

He said one such discussion took place in Cape Town, South Africa, where he met Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Patrick Chinamasa and Makoni and they agreed that it had become urgent to replace the aging leadership. Chinamasa's heart must have skipped a beat when he heard his name — he was always believed to be one of the few remaining staunch supporters of Mugabe in the politburo.

IWPR's source in the politburo member said Mugabe feared being dumped at the last minute by his comrades, which might be the Makoni's camp strategy for getting rid of the president.

Hativagone Mushonga is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

TSVANGIRAI LACKS “KILLER PUNCH”

Critics say the opposition leader hasn't got what it takes to defeat Mugabe.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

Although many here believe the main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai is the biggest threat to President Robert Mugabe's 28-year rule, there is little consensus on how he will fare in the coming elections.

The Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, has been the most popular opposition group since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, at one time winning 57 seats in parliament against the ruling ZANU-PF's 61.

But Tsvangirai enters the presidential race later this month on the back foot, at the helm of a party weakened by splits and a shrinking support base.

Supporters of the trade-unionist-turned-politician believe he will win the March 29 harmonised elections ahead of Mugabe, while critics say he has made too many tactical errors and lacks the “killer punch” to finish the job.

Some go so far as to claim that Tsvangirai is being sacrificed by enemies within his party, who believe it will be easy to push him out once he loses the presidential race, given that he has never won a popular election.

Tsvangirai controversially lost the vote for the parliamentary seat he contested in his home area of Buhera only a year after the launch of the MDC in 2000. He went on to lose the presidential race against Mugabe in 2002 by 400,000 votes, in a result he described then as “daylight robbery”. The election was marred by violence and allegations of vote-rigging and resulted in the imposition of sanctions by the West on Mugabe and his ministers.



Credit: Lazele

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai (left) speaks to his party's secretary general, Tendai Biti. Picture taken January 16.

According to the MDC constitution, a party leader can serve only two terms as president of the party. Tsvangirai is in his second term, which ends in 2010, unless the constitution is amended to allow him to stay on — a likely scenario if he wins next month's elections against both Mugabe and his former finance minister-turned-independent candidate Simba Makoni.

Tsvangirai enters the presidential race with his party divided and his support haemorrhaging.

But since 2000, the MDC has been weakened by internal squabbling, violence by the state and a mass exodus of a majority of its young supporters who have left the country. Tsvangirai himself is accused of leadership failure by allowing the party to split into two factions in late 2005 over the reintroduction of a bicameral system.

Until very recently, the presidential race was mainly between Mugabe and

Tsvangirai, with the other MDC faction leader, Arthur Mutambara, largely written off as a serious contender.

However, the announcement a month ago by Makoni that he was entering the contest altered the political landscape overnight and injected new energy into the elections, with reports of thousands of people rushing at the last minute to register to vote on March 29.

Even though he does not have a political party, Makoni is being taken so seriously that state propagandists have made it their business to attack him at every opportunity since he announced plans to challenge Mugabe for president a month ago. Mugabe himself called Makoni's decision to challenge him against the party constitution “disgraceful” and accused him of being worse than a prostitute.

The MDC has downplayed Makoni's impact on the electoral outcome, with Tsvangirai saying he was not interested in an alliance with Makoni.

However, party supporters say Makoni threatens to split the opposition vote in its urban strongholds, already

weakened by Tsvangirai's failure to unite with Mutambara, who is now backing Makoni.

There are now appeals for Tsvangirai to defer to Makoni as the main opposition candidate who would forge a united opposition to take on Mugabe in the election. Analysts say Makoni has appeal across the political divide in Zimbabwe and also internationally, and would therefore will be able to reunite the nation once Mugabe is out of the picture.

They say Tsvangirai has made too many errors of judgement, undermining him as a credible leader.

"This is a do-or-die election for Tsvangirai," said an analyst in Harare. "It is an election he cannot afford to lose, especially if his MPs win in their so-called 'safe' urban constituencies. That would seriously weaken his authority in the party."

The analyst said it was possible that if Tsvangirai lost the election, he would not get the support to amend the party constitution to remain head of his faction. "Then that would be the end for him," said the analyst. "There would be many people ready to challenge him for the leadership of the party, depending on how well they perform in their own constituencies."

He suggested that the same people who were rejecting unity with other opposition groups stood to gain if Tsvangirai was defeated by either Mugabe or Makoni.

"The trouble is that, at least from a distance, Tsvangirai's close friends have become his worst enemies. They believe they own him and he is unable to function without their advice, which means once they begin to see opportunities for the presidency they can sacrifice him," said the analyst.

"At the moment, they are giving the impression that he is able to split the opposition vote and still win, a very difficult undertaking given Mugabe's huge rural constituency where at least 70 per cent of the population still live."

The analyst added that it had to be born in mind that Makoni would also be taking votes away from Tsvangirai in urban areas.

"In any case, we cannot rule out rigging of the vote should Mugabe feel really threatened," he said. "That in itself minimises Tsvangirai's chances of winning."

The fairness of the polls was cast in doubt after the failure of the talks between ZANU-PF and the MDC, initiated by the South African Development Community, SADC. According to the MDC, the

negotiations became deadlocked over the time frame for elections; the implementation of electoral and media reforms and the process of drawing up a new constitution.

The opposition complains that by unilaterally proclaiming the date of the elections, Mugabe reneged on the letter and spirit of the talks. It has warned that the results of the elections will be contestable, given that they will not be free and fair, it claims.

Zimbabwe's economy has been in freefall for the past eight years and observers see little chance of a change of fortunes if Mugabe wins the polls. But most believe any other outcome is unlikely, and doubt Tsvangirai can pull off a victory this time round.

Joram Nyathi, a veteran Zimbabwean journalist working in Harare, said that despite Tsvangirai's evident popularity, he lacked leadership when it mattered most.

"Most of the tactical errors he makes, like dividing his party's women's assembly just before a crucial election, are the result of bad advice. Every serious political leader in Africa knows that women deliver the vote, not men. But clearly Tsvangirai lacks the killer instinct to finish off a job well done," he said.

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