

OPPOSITION PRONOUNCES DEATH OF TALKS WITH RULING PARTY

While the Movement for Democratic Change blames the authorities for derailing negotiations, some observers say the opposition should be focusing on election campaigning rather than fighting unwinnable battles.

By Meshack Ndodana in Harare

Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, has formally declared that its talks with the ruling ZANU-PF have failed.

At a February 21 press conference in Johannesburg, both factions of the MDC made it clear the mediation process, led by South African president Robert Mugabe on behalf of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, had died a death because of the Zimbabwean government's preemptive move to call elections before measures to ensure they were free and fair could be put in place.

Although the election date was the subject of the SADC-led negotiations,



Credit: Lazele

MDC chairman Morgan Tsvangirai addresses the press at party headquarters in Harare. Picture taken in April 2007.

The MDC formally declared the talks dead because the March election date had derailed attempts to ensure a free and fair vote.

President Robert Mugabe on January 25 unilaterally proclaimed March 29 as the date for presidential, parliamentary and local elections.

The negotiations were initiated by the SADC in March last year to ease political tensions between ZANU-PF and the MDC and to try to reverse Zimbabwe's eight-year economic decline.

NEWS IN BRIEF

- Zimbabwean presidential hopeful Simba Makoni said on February 25 he would not form a coalition with the main faction of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. He has, however, already formed a loose alliance with the other MDC faction, led by Arthur Mutambara.
- President Robert Mugabe celebrated his 84th birthday on February 23 at

a rally aimed at boosting support before elections next month.

- MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai has launched his faction's campaign programme, which will see him criss-cross the country until election day on March 29.
- Zimbabwe's biggest state-run hospital, Parirenyatwa hospital in Harare, has stopped performing

surgical operations due to a lack of anaesthetics and equipment as the country's general economic breakdown worsens.

- The state broadcaster has stopped carrying radio and television public-service spots produced by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, a civil society group which deployed thousands of election monitors in the 2005 general election.

The secretary-generals of the two MDC factions, Welshman Ncube and Tendai Biti, who led their respective delegations in the negotiations, said in a joint statement that the election date “lay at the heart of the deadlock” in the talks with ZANU-PF.

The MDC said ZANU-PF had “reneged” on a number of transitional mechanisms that had been agreed at the talks, while Mugabe’s announcement of a firm date was a sign the party had “repudiated the principles and the spirit of the dialogue”.

“At the core of the deadlock were issues of the date of the election, the time-frame for the implementation of the agreed reforms, and the process and manner of the making and enactment of a new constitution,” said the statement.

ZANU-PF has “repudiated the principles and the spirit of the dialogue” — MDC statement

During the talks, the two sides had reached agreement on amendments to electoral, security and media laws, a draft constitution, and issues to do with violence, sanctions, land, and food aid. The MDC had called for the elections to be put off to a later date to allow these arrangements to take root and gain public acceptance.

This view stands in stark contrast to Mbeki’s claim that the date was a peripheral procedural matter. In the opposition’s view, the timing of the election and the reforms that should precede it were “not matters of procedure but of substance”, as holding the vote too early would prevent other agreements being implemented, and consequently “the dialogue would therefore not have resulted in the resolution of the Zimbabwe crisis”.

The request for a delay was brushed aside by Mugabe, who said the MDC had known as early as last year that the elections were scheduled for March. He said the opposition was preoccupied with internal rivalries, and was seeking to shift the blame for its lack of preparedness onto the government.

President Mugabe accused the MDC of using the election date as a pretext to divert attention from its own lack of preparedness.

The MDC said Mbeki met Mugabe in Zimbabwe as late as January 15 to try to break the deadlock over the election date, including a proposal to push back the elections to as late as 2010. Mugabe is said to have rejected this, insisting the election date was “non-negotiable”. He also rejected the idea of a new constitution, which the MDC had said should be in place before the elections to level the playing field.

MDC to take part in the ballot under protest.

The statement made clear that the MDC would participate in the elections, but only under protest, and concluded by warning, “Tragically, the results of the... elections will be contested.”

The MDC’s scathing comments came as the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance, ZCA, a network of church and civic bodies, announced that it had lost hope in the talks.

The ZCA blamed the failure of the talks on what it called “a lack of clear objectives and accountability on the part of those involved. The SADC talks

failed to produce tangible results in terms of creating a conducive atmosphere for free and fair elections.”

Political analysts who spoke to IWPR criticised the MDC for expending so much energy on matters that were already impossible to change, such as the election date.

One commentator based at the University of Zimbabwe said the opposition needed to get into gear and prepare for the elections.

Best thing for MDC is now to mount “a vigorous campaign” for the election — Harare-based analyst.

“The best they can do for themselves is to mount a vigorous campaign for their supporters to vote,” said the analyst, who did not want to be named. He said it would be “suicidal” for the MDC to contemplate a boycott this late in the day, pointed out that “there are already other smaller parties and individuals ready to take the MDC’s place”.

Another political analyst said the MDC should be focusing on the electoral process and specifically the “command centre” in charge of running the ballot.

“This is where the results will be decided,” he said. “The MDC is wasting time focusing on dates and talks which have already failed. The voting will be done in Zimbabwe and that is where rigging will take place if the opposition loses its focus.”

The two MDC factions had, he said, “weakened their position and squandered public sympathy by failing to unite to fight a single common enemy”.

Meshack Ndodana is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Harare. ■

MUGABE DEFIES DOWNFALL PROPHECIES

President continues to confound those who believe the odds are stacked against him remaining in office much longer.

By Nonthando Bhebhe in Harare

While the vast majority of Zimbabweans are struggling to survive, President Robert Mugabe still has a strong support base which is willing to risk everything, including their lives and businesses, to ensure that the octogenarian leader remains in power.

Though many have prophesised his imminent demise, Mugabe has remained resolute and continues to defy conventional political wisdom.

Predicting Mugabe's downfall is a risky business. When many people, including local and international observers, thought he had lost control of his party and would not be endorsed as its presidential candidate in next month's elections, he has proved that he still had unwavering support from his comrades.

Constitutional lawyer Lovemore Madhuku told IWPR that Mugabe's supporters were not imaginary.

"Mugabe still has a lot of supporters and if you look at the election trend, you will find that he has maintained the same number over the last three elections. I also meet with [the ruling party] ZANU-PF — he has a lot of supporters, like it or not. The support he has is real and not fiction."

Despite resentment of Mugabe's prolonged stay in power mounting among senior ZANU-PF officials, they have not managed to remove him from the helm of the party. In fact, party



Credit: Lazele

Delegates at the ZANU-PF congress sing the praises of President Mugabe. Picture taken December 14.

officials suspected of favouring his ouster have risked alienation from grassroots supporters, who see them as traitors trying to destroy the liberation movement party.

Many people have wondered why and how Mugabe has continued to survive, considering the country's deepening poverty and economic crisis.

Best thing for MDC is now to mount "a vigorous campaign" for the election — Harare-based analyst.

Didymus Mutasa, the powerful national security minister and ZANU-PF's secretary for administration, said in early December that Mugabe had done "so many wonderful things" for Zimbabwe that it was likely that delegates to the party conference would appoint him president for life.

"There is a realistic chance that someone among the delegates or one of the provinces could come up with a proposal that he remains the party's presidential candidate," said Mutasa. "He has done so many wonderful things for this country and its majority population and he is not showing any signs of tiredness. So if it is raised, as I am sure it will be, why not?"

That is the general feeling among Mugabe's staunch supporters, who are quick to laugh off any suggestions that this election might signal the end of his 28-year rule.

But what has he done to make his supporters want to declare him life president?

Mugabe has created so much fear among his people that no one has the guts to stand up to him face-to-face.

No one, said one ZANU-PF politburo member, would dare to stand up and register his or her opposition for fear of reprisals — as happened in 1998 to Dzikamai Mavhaire, a feisty politician from the southern Zimbabwe town of

Masvingo, who moved a motion in parliament calling for a review of the constitution and advocated limited presidential terms, and said, "Mugabe must go!"

Mavhaire was suspended from the party and consequently suffered financial ruin. As a member of parliament, he had been assured of a vehicle and free fuel as well as help for his farm. These benefits disappeared, as did any chance of winning government contracts.

Mugabe has perfected divide-and-rule tactics that fuelled factionalism within the ruling party — ZANU-PF official.

Ever since, other ruling party deputies have been too frightened to discuss anything to do with the constitution, lest the presidential axe fall on them.

Mavhaire's confidant, the late Edson Zvobgo, was dropped by Mugabe from government and party office in 2000 for his criticisms of the head of state's ruling style and for suggesting he retire. Zvobgo, who never hid his own presidential ambitions, died a heartbroken man in 2004 at the age of 68. He was a founder member of ZANU-PF and had served in several government posts, including that of minister of justice.

Another ZANU-PF official, who asked that his name be withheld, said Mugabe had over the years perfected divide-and-rule tactics that fuelled factionalism in the party.

He said Mugabe had been switching support over the years among possible successors, who include rural housing minister and party legal secretary Emmerson Mnangagwa, Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono, ZANU-PF national chairman John Nkomo and Vice-President Joice Mujuru, wife of the powerful General Solomon Mujuru.

The official said Mugabe has undoubtedly used the confusion he created over the succession issue to convince his supporters of the need for him to continue as president to ensure a smooth handover of power.

With what happened in Kenya, where more than a thousand people died after the December elections, still vivid in people's minds, many ZANU-PF supporters and ordinary Zimbabweans are reluctant to dump the 84-year-old leader, who seems to have strong backing from the army and other security agencies.

Breaking away from Mugabe is not an option for many who have benefited from his patronage and do not want to risk losing everything by opposing him.

Because of this reason, many ZANU-PF senior officials backing independent presidential candidate Simba Makoni have chosen to support him clandestinely, while continuing to pledge loyalty to Mugabe in public.

"We are reminded constantly of what it means to break away and the picture does not look very good" — wavering member of ZANU-PF politburo.

"Why risk losing my farm and everything that I have gained by breaking away from ZANU-PF? Many of my colleagues have started jumping ship and going back to Mugabe's camp. We are reminded constantly of what it means to break away and the picture does not look very good," said another politburo member, who asked for anonymity.

It is not only the ruling party's supporters that want Mugabe to remain at the helm, but also some powerful businesspeople, who are pumping billions of Zimbabwe dollars into Mugabe's election campaign.

IWPR met with a group of ten such businesspeople at an exclusive club, where they were plotting the support they could give to ensure that Mugabe remains in office.

Some of them, particularly those who emerged during the country's worst-ever economic crisis, say returning the economy to normal would be detrimental to their businesses.

"Personally, I want the old man to continue" — Mugabe supporter from the business sector.

"Personally, I want the old man to continue. I like the old man because I owe him everything that I have amassed. Look at me and look at how rich I have become because of the opportunities that opened up when the economy started crumbling," said one of the group.

"I will vote for him and put my last dollar to ensure that he wins the elections."

Another said, "If the situation normalises, a lot of men will cry and lose everything. So we can't afford that. We would rather pump money into President Mugabe's campaign so that the situation remains abnormal.

"Zimbabweans have developed a culture of getting a quick buck and I know most people will not be able to go back to formal employment and wait for a pay cheque. People will find it difficult to cope when the situation improves."

Zimbabwe has experienced a precipitous economic decline since 2000, when the government started seizing white commercial farms. Since then, unemployment has reached nearly 85 per cent, with the world's highest inflation rate.

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

MAKONI SUPPORTERS FEAR MUGABE BACKLASH

Many ruling party members are seemingly too scared to declare support for presidential challenger.

By Meshack Ndodana in Harare

The ZANU-PF heavyweights expected to back Simba Makoni's presidential bid in next month's election in Zimbabwe have failed to come out in support of him because they fear President Robert Mugabe will turn on them.

Former finance minister Makoni was expelled from ZANU-PF earlier this month when he announced his intention to stand against Mugabe in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in March.

Makoni, who predicts that he and his fellow independent candidates will win the elections in a landslide, has said his immediate priorities on being elected would be to resolve shortages of food, power, fuel and water, and abolish the various exchange rates that fuel black-market currency trading.

He has also announced plans to establish a non-partisan organisation to haul the country out of its current economic crisis, which has left the country with an inflation rate of 66,000 per cent, high unemployment and food shortages, and a collapsing infrastructure.

Although 73 candidates have so far joined Makoni's camp and nominated themselves as independent candidates in next month's elections, most of them are political lightweights.

Analysts say that fear of reprisals by the ruling party machinery has deterred those ZANU-PF stalwarts who were reported to be contemplating standing with their expelled colleague as independents.



Credit: Lazele

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

The party is known for punishing defectors, and those who are thrown out have found it hard to recover their former glory, even after being readmitted. According to the ZANU-PF constitution, a party member loses membership if he or she stands as an independent.

Mugabe has wasted no time in delivering a body blow to the Makoni project.

Makoni's biggest backer, retired army commander General Solomon Mujuru, is now under investigation for various allegations of corruption concerning his vast business empire.

The charges were levelled at the general, who according to reports may now be under house arrest, immediately after it emerged that he was fronting Makoni's election bid.

According to media reports, Mujuru has already been called in for questioning on corruption charges which were presented by the Central Intelligence Organisation to the police for investigation.

Some of Mujuru allies, such as Zimbabwe's attorney general Sobusa Gula-Ndebele, have already felt Mugabe's wrath.

Gula-Ndebele has since been removed from office and is facing charges of misconduct related to a case involving former banker and close Mujuru ally James Mushore, who is accused of breaching the country's foreign exchange laws.

Although Gula-Ndebele is alleged to have abused his office to help Mushore, commentators believe the case against him is politically motivated. Mugabe suspended the attorney general last month and appointed a tribunal to investigate allegations of his alleged misbehaviour.

Guruve North member of parliament David Butau, who was in charge of finances for Mujuru, has now fled to the UK amid allegations of exchange control violations.

The charges made against these men have been interpreted as attempts by Mugabe to deal with those he believes are trying to oust him.

Only a few brave people — mostly those who have already been marginalised in ZANU-PF — presented their nomination papers on February 15, when the courts sat to receive candidates for the crucial elections.

However, no big names put themselves forward. A number of senior figures in Mugabe's party are believed to support Makoni's challenge but are thought to be waiting to assess his prospects closer to polling day before openly backing him.

Makoni has not revealed the names of any major supporters in ZANU-PF since he announced his decision to contest the election. Sources in his camp said although the heavyweights will not come out in the open, they will continue to campaign for him behind the scenes.

The candidate urged his supporters not be intimidated.

"I invite the many Zimbabweans who share the vision I have ... to join me and stand as independents in the forthcoming election under our banner. Please enter the race," he said.

The Makoni camp was busy at the weekend checking which of the registered independent candidates had put their names down in support of the ex-finance minister. As of late

February 18, a total of 62 independent parliamentary candidates and 11 aspiring senators had joined his project.

However, so far only a couple of prominent ZANU-PF members have taken up Makoni's challenge.

Fired former legislator and publisher Kindness Paradza, whose newspaper The Tribune was shut down by the government, and former education minister Fay Chung, are among those who have joined Makoni to fight the election.

Margaret Dongo, a former legislator and the first woman to rebel against Mugabe and form the Zimbabwe Democratic Party, is also backing Makoni and contesting the election as an independent candidate in Chikomo.

Other politicians standing as independents include the apparent brains behind the Makoni project Ibbo Mandaza, who is going for the Mazowe West parliamentary seat. ZANU-PF founding member Edgar Tekere is vying for Mutare, while Major General Kudzai Mbudzi is standing for the Masvingo West seat.

The independent candidates will fight it out in the parliamentary elections with candidates from ZANU-PF, as well as from the main faction of the

opposition party Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, headed by Morgan Tsvangirai.

Makoni has also forged an alliance with Professor Arthur Mutambara's smaller MDC faction. The opposition leader will back Makoni, and in return, he is expected to urge his supporters to vote for candidates from the Mutambara faction.

Makoni's camp is contesting most constituencies, with the least support expected from Mugabe's home province of Mashonaland West and the Midlands provinces, from where Mugabe's preferred successor Emmerson Mnangagwa hails. A source in Makoni's camp told IWPR the day before nominations that not as many independent candidates as hoped had been fielded in these two provinces.

"There is a lot of fear felt by our supporters in those provinces, although there is interest. It seems the people in Mashonaland West feel they might be punished more and have more to lose since they have gained the most from Mugabe's patronage. They also understand how ruthless the man can be," said the source.

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