

MUGABE DEAD SET ON FIRST-ROUND WIN

For the first time since 1980, a presidential election could go into a second round, but analysts say President Robert Mugabe will do his level best to stop that happening.

By Mike Nyoni in Harare

Recent assertions by President Robert Mugabe that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change is bound to lose the weekend elections have heightened suspicions that he plans to fix the result.

Mugabe, probably facing his most uncertain electoral outcome to date, told a campaign rally in Chitungwiza, 30 kilometres from the capital Harare, that the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, and its leader Morgan Tsvangirai will never rule Zimbabwe "in my lifetime".

This categorical statement has increased fears that victory for Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party in the March 29 polls is a foregone conclusion and will be secured through ballot-stuffing, voter intimidation, and manipulation of the final figures.



Credit: Lazele

President Mugabe arrives to speak at a campaign rally in Mbare, a high-density suburb of Harare. Picture taken March 22.

President Mugabe is allowing police to "help" voters inside the polling stations.

On March 17, Mugabe introduced the Presidential Powers (Temporary Measures) Act which authorises police to be stationed inside polling stations and to assist disabled voters. This clearly increases the risk that security forces will be in a position to intimidate voters and influence the choices they make. Critics say this move, coming late in the day, is in direct contravention of an agreement to keep police away from voting centres, concluded by ZANU-PF and the MDC

NEWS IN BRIEF

- A study released by the Cato Institute this week predicted that President Robert Mugabe will remain in power after the March 29 elections.
- The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum warned that free and fair elections are impossible in an

environment where Mugabe maintains almost total control over the electoral system.

- Opposition leaders warned that the government is printing millions more ballot papers than there are registered voters, raising fears of a huge vote-rigging operation.

- African National Congress members of parliament who are part of the Southern African Development Community's observer mission to the parliamentary and presidential elections in Zimbabwe will reportedly have more freedom to give an honest assessment of the situation than they have enjoyed in previous ballots.

at the recent talks mediated by the Southern African Development Community, SADC.

Surveys of attendance at pro- and anti-Mugabe campaign rallies show the incumbent trailing Tsvangirai by a growing margin.

In the unlikely event that the results showed a defeat for Mugabe, he would not take it lying down. Zimbabwe Defence Forces commander Constantine Chiwegwa and Police Commissioner Augustine Chihuri recently made it clear they would not accept any other winner.

What is more probable is that the presidential election will go to a second round, for the first time since Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain in 1980.

By law, the winning candidate must obtain over 50 per cent of the votes cast; if no one achieves this, the two leading candidates go forward to a second round within 21 days of the ballot. With evidence that support for Mugabe is waning, it is uncertain whether he will gain the required absolute majority, although it remains unlikely that either of his main challengers — the MDC's Tsvangirai and former finance minister Simba Makoni — will do so, either.

According to Eldred Masunungure, a political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe, Mugabe will make every effort to avoid being embarrassed by being forced into a run-off. He suggested that this makes it all the more likely that the first-round results will be massaged at the national command centre where the final count will take place.

There has been talk that if the first-round voting appeared to be going against him, Mugabe might call a halt to it, or alternatively that he might postpone a re-run.

But as Masunungure put it, "all these are academic discussions and speculation" as the president will take steps to prevent his electoral ambitions going awry.

"Mugabe will not allow himself to go through all this pain. That explains his insistence that no opposition leader or party will win the elections even this late in the hour. He knows he has played his cards well," he said.

Both Tsvangirai and Mugabe have been drawing huge crowds at their respective campaign rallies. There are allegations that Mugabe is coercing adult voters and schoolchildren to attend his events, while Tsvangirai is also bussing in people to boost numbers at his rallies.

Meanwhile, although Makoni — expelled from ZANU-PF shortly after announcing his election bid in February — has no political party of his own, and few resources to boost his campaign, he has unsettled both the Mugabe and Tsvangirai camps, which have attacked him out of concern that he will win over their supporters.

As the election draws near, the lines have blurred between the traditional rural power-base of ZANU-PF party and the MDC's strength in urban areas. In particular, commentators say it has got harder for Mugabe to persuade rural voters that he can save them from economic hardship.

In the past, said one analyst in Harare, Mugabe was able to use food as a vote-winner. "This time, there is nothing to give to the people, and they are starving," he said. "He has been able to distribute farming equipment under the farm mechanisation programme, but people have immediate needs to feed their families."

This analyst noted that in contrast to past elections, this campaign has been marked by a lack of overt violence perpetrated by youth militias and veterans. This fact, he said, had given people more options.

"People are freer now than they have ever been to attend opposition rallies," he said. "One cannot rule out the psychological fear from past experience, but we can see that

people are now venturing out to see for themselves. Others realise voting to get rid of Mugabe is the only option they have left; it doesn't really matter who comes in."

He said there was clear evidence that more people were attending opposition rallies than was the case in the past, and noted that there was little attempt by state media to hide this reality.

"The best Mugabe can do now is to try and intimidate people so that they don't go to vote," said the analyst. "He is already telling people that their vote doesn't count, as he did in Bulawayo."

Addressing a rally in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, on March 23, Mugabe warned those who backed the opposition that they would be wasting their vote.

Bulawayo and the two Matabeleland provinces have voted overwhelmingly for the MDC since 2000.

"You can vote for them [MDC] but that will be a wasted vote," declared Mugabe. "You will be cheating yourself as there is no way we can allow them to rule this country. The MDC will not rule this country. It will never ever happen."

The statement was uncannily similar to proclamations by Ian Smith, the last prime minister of what was then Rhodesia, who said black people would "never in a thousand years" rule the country.

The analyst suggested that Mugabe's options were running out — even rigging the election could get him into trouble with the SADC, whose member states used to back him when no one else did.

"The old man is finished. This time he is in a fix. Not even SADC can save him now that regional economies are bleeding because of Mugabe's policies," he said.

Mike Nyoni is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

MAKONI EMERGES AS POTENTIAL KINGMAKER

Calling the ex-finance minister a “prostitute” and a “frog” is unlikely to encourage him to back another candidate if the vote goes to a second round.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

Presidential hopeful Simba Makoni has provoked the anger of both front-runners in Zimbabwe's upcoming election — opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai as well as incumbent Robert Mugabe.

However, political analysts are warning that while Makoni's rivals may have their swords out for him at the moment, he might turn out to be the kingmaker if the presidential ballot on March 29 is inconclusive and a run-off has to be held.

Makoni might turn out to be the kingmaker if the presidential ballot is inconclusive.

Both Mugabe and Tsvangirai, who leads the bigger of two factions of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, see Makoni, who only announced his intention to enter the presidential race on February 5, as a rank outsider who plans to grab their votes. There are fears on both sides of the political divide that Makoni could appeal to voters in both urban and rural areas, something neither of their candidates is confident of doing.

Tsvangirai's MDC enjoys its strongest following in poor urban areas, while Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF party holds sway mainly in rural areas where a



Credit: Lazele

Simba Makoni addresses an election rally at Zimbabwe Grounds, Harare. Picture taken March 2.

sizeable population, including war veterans, police and army personnel, were given free land under Mugabe's chaotic land reform programme launched in 2000.

Mugabe accuses Makoni of being a “traitor”, “sellout”, a “prostitute” and a puffed-up “frog” for leaving the ruling party at a critical moment ahead of joint presidential, parliamentary and local elections.

Tsvangirai has laid two apparently contradictory charges against Makoni, accusing him variously of being a Mugabe plant designed to confuse and split the opposition electorate, or of being supported by western powers opposed to his MDC party.

The irony of the latter allegation is that Tsvangirai himself has always been accused by Mugabe of being a puppet of Britain and other western powers in pursuit of regime change in Zimbabwe.

Makoni has rejected the allegations made by both camps, without responding in kind.

As the third force in this election, Makoni combines a long history as a government technocrat and ZANU-PF member with a degree of credibility derived from his reputation for being both competent and uncorrupt. However, despite his appeal to many in the political classes who want change, Makoni has not yet built up a substantial power-base of his own.

“Makoni walks in unannounced and upsets the apple cart” — political observer.

A political observer who did not want to be named noted that Makoni appealed to moderates from both ZANU-PF and the MDC, and had refrained from attacking either side.

“They believed they had their strategies worked out, then Makoni walks in unannounced and upsets the apple cart, as it were,” he said.



Credit: Lazele

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai addresses a rally in the eastern city of Mutare. Picture taken February 23.

The observer said Makoni's main problem was that by launching his bid only in February, "he came in too late", and fewer major politicians than expected had voiced public support for him.

"What they should not forget is that they might need Makoni when it matters most" — political analyst Eldred Masunungure.

"It is unlikely now that his backers will come out this late," said the commentator. "In any case, even if they did, many people have already made up their minds and you would need a miracle to sway them now."

This commentator predicted that Tsvangirai would win, with Mugabe second and Makoni trailing in third place.

"For all practical purposes, the presidential race is between Tsvangirai and Mugabe, and short of serious electoral irregularities, Tsvangirai is likely to come out victorious," he said.

However, another analyst forecast that Makoni could play a crucial role even in third place.

"My assessment is that Makoni will come out third in the elections," said Eldred Masunungure, a lecturer in political sciences at the University of Zimbabwe. "The real race is between Mugabe and Tsvangirai. They both have appeal, parties and a solid infrastructure for their campaigns, all of which Makoni does not enjoy."

Yet, Masunungure said, Makoni could still draw off support from the disillusioned supporters of both ZANU-PF and the MDC.

"This should help explain the anger of both Tsvangirai and Mugabe at Makoni's sudden entry into the race, which has obviously badly upset their

campaign strategies," he said.

The analyst warned that expressions of hostility could prove short-sighted for both main candidates.

"What they should not forget is that they might need Makoni when it matters most, in the event that none of them gets more than 50 per cent of the vote as required by law," he said, adding that he thought it unlikely any candidate would win the absolute majority needed to obviate a run-off between the two leading contenders.

"That is where Makoni's vote becomes decisive. He becomes the kingmaker because both candidates will then depend for their fortunes on whom Makoni chooses to throw in his lot with," he said.

In making that choice, Makoni might be swayed by the level of abuse he received from either side, said Masunungure.

"You don't want to work with someone who calls you a prostitute or a frog" — Masunungure.

"This is where these gratuitous insults become counterproductive, as they might influence Makoni's decision," he explained. "Politically they [insults] may not matter, but they affect the way you relate. You don't want to work with someone who calls you a prostitute or a frog, who denigrates you as a foreign imposition, implying that you can't think for yourself."

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

BULAWAYO YOUTH JOIN OPPOSITION BANDWAGON

In a country with a tradition of political violence, the sight of opposition supporters openly proclaiming their allegiance marks a significant change.

By Yamikani Mwando in Bulawayo

While human rights groups report a rise in politically-motivated violence in the run-up to the March 29 elections in Zimbabwe, recent displays of defiance in Bulawayo — the hotbed of political opposition — have met with a surprisingly muted response.

In the past, it was considered foolhardy to be seen wearing an opposition t-shirt.

In past elections, it was considered foolhardy for anyone in an urban area to be seen wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the face of an opposition candidate. And according to local and international human rights watchdogs, it was worse in rural areas, where traditional leaders working for ZANU PF would monitor the political affiliation of villagers and decide how whole communities should vote.

The Zimbabwe Peace Project, a local human rights group, reported in January that there was an upsurge in politically-motivated violence across the country, and identified ZANU-PF supporters as the major culprits. Earlier in March, the New York-based watchdog Human Rights Watch issued a report saying abuses were on the increase, as opposition supporters



Credit: Lazele

MDC youth members dance at a rally in Harare. Picture taken January 12.

bore the brunt of violence meted out by ZANU-PF members.

But in Bulawayo, the country's second city and a stronghold of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, things appear to have changed. In advance of the elections, many young people are calmly walking around in pro-opposition t-shirts and plastering MDC posters on the walls, with no apparent fear of reprisals.

Young people are for the first time openly identifying themselves with the opposition, without suffering the consequences.

In the 2000 election, when support for the newly-emerged MDC was high, images of Tsvangirai and the party's "open palm" symbol printed on t-shirts were enough to invite the wrath of ZANU-PF activists. Human rights

groups reported that people wearing opposition party regalia were among those most victimised in election violence.

Young people have taken up the opposition's call for action.

However, urban areas where support for the opposition is strong are now full of young people openly identifying themselves with the anti-Mugabe forces, with apparent impunity.

In his nationwide rallies, Tsvangirai has acknowledged that the young are those hardest hit by problems such as high unemployment and rampant inflation, and has told them that this election is their struggle.

Young people previously seen as apathetic seem to have taken up the call, prompted into political activism by the increasing economic hardships they face.

"I don't know why, but this time we have not been harassed," said Terence Bafana, a young unemployed man wearing a Tsvangirai t-shirt.

"This time we have not been harassed... there seems to be some change among ZANU-PF supporters" — unemployed Bulawayo man.

Pasting an MDC campaign poster next to a ZANU-PF one bearing the face of President Mugabe, he said, "I would not have done this in the past, but there seems to be some change among ZANU-PF supporters this year."

In Matebeleland, where even ex-members of the local ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union)

who are now part of ZANU-PF are failing to attract support, the absence of a backlash against the opposition has further galvanised young people into action as the polls near.

"In the past we would have put up the posters at night for fear of backlashes from ZANU-PF supporters. Now we are pasting these posters side-by-side with Mugabe's supporters," the youthful and Bafana said.

A political commentator with a Bulawayo-based pressure group attributed the greater mood of tolerance among ZANU-PF supporters to an awareness that the party could be defeated in the polls.

"Everybody, including diehard ZANU-PF footsoldiers, seems to be accepting that this is not Robert Mugabe's year, and any attempts to actively take part in acts of intimidation could prove to be a dire mistake if Mugabe loses," the analyst told IWPR.

At the same time, the analyst suggested that voter intimidation may be continuing unreported in remote rural areas.

ZANU-PF diehards seem to understand that intimidating voters could be "a dire mistake" if Mugabe then loses the elections — analyst in Bulawayo.

"In the end, you get a ZANU-PF victory and people wonder what happened, but this party will simply claim they enjoy massive support in the rural areas," he said.

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

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