

PRE-ELECTION SWEETENERS FOR VOTERS

Already wielding the big stick, the government has eased economic restrictions in hope this will buy votes for Robert Mugabe.

By Happiness Chikudo in Harare

As Zimbabweans continued flocking to the banks to offload foreign currency in the wake of a major monetary reform, traders thronged border crossings last week to import scarce commodities after the government scrapped duties on some food imports.

Analysts are agreed that President Robert Mugabe has introduced these economic measures with a view to securing victory for him in the forthcoming second round of the presidential election.

In the first round, held on March 29, Mugabe lost to Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, but



New 500 million-dollar banknote issued on May 15. Picture taken May 20.

Economic liberalisation designed to win over voters ahead of June 27 ballot.

election officials ruled that neither candidate had won the 50 per cent majority needed for outright victory.

On May 15, the government's Herald newspaper announced that the second round would be held not within

NEWS IN BRIEF

- On May 15, the Herald newspaper announced that the second round of the presidential election would be held not within 21 days as prescribed by law, but instead within 90 days of the date the results were announced. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission said the next day that the vote would take place on June 27.
- The Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, on May 19 publicly accused the Zimbabwean military of plotting to use snipers to assassinate opposition leader and presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai. As a

result, Tsvangirai delayed his return from an extended lobbying trip abroad.

- Also on May 19, the MDC said the death toll of supporters and activists killed in recent violence had risen to 43. The party accuses the ruling ZANU-PF of an orchestrated campaign to win back ground lost in the March 29 ballot by intimidating and displacing voters suspected of voting against the Mugabe regime.
- In a speech to ZANU-PF's central committee on May 16, President

Robert Mugabe acknowledged that the March 29 polls had ended in a "dismal result" for the regime. While accusing the MDC of doing well only because it was backed by Zimbabwe's enemies abroad, he noted that his team "went to the election completely unprepared, unorganised, and this against an election-weary voter". ZANU-PF was "bickering and divided", and its leaders from the top down "all share the blame", he said, adding, "We have a crucial run-off ahead of us. We must use it to repair the damage and shortcomings which we suffered."

the normal 21 days from the date the first-round result was announced, but instead within 90 days, with a deadline of July 31. The following day, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission announced that the vote would be held on June 27.

ZIMBABWEAN DOLLAR PLUMMETS

For the past two weeks, the banks and other financial institutions have been busy as people rush to exchange foreign currency, especially United States dollars, for Zimbabwean money.

Since the Zimbabwean dollar has become increasingly worthless in recent years, this was a major turnaround.

It followed an announcement by Gideon Gono, governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, RBZ, on May 2 that the currency would no longer be traded at a fixed rate.

People rushed to exchange Zimbabwean currency at the banks after the central bank chief announced a radical shift in policy.

Gono acknowledged that the current exchange-rate mechanism was not working. Until that point, the official rate had been held at 30,000 to the US dollar since September 2007. Before Gono's announcement, the Zimbabwean currency was trading at upwards of 100 million to one American dollar on the illegal black market.

He said the foreign exchange market had to work properly if the country was to achieve economic stability and cut inflation. Year-on-year inflation was somewhere over 150,000 per cent at the last count.

The central bank chief noted that over 80 per cent of Zimbabwe's imports were items of crucial importance like

machinery and spare parts, electricity, fuel, chemicals and "other essentials" — in which he presumably included the major food purchases that have been necessitated by the collapse of the country's agriculture.

The immediate result of freeing up the exchange rate was a massive loss of value for the Zimbabwean dollar as it hurtled towards its true market value.

Central bank announcement sent people rushing to the banks to exchange money.

Gono made his announcement on a Friday, when the rate was still posted as 30,000 to the US dollar. When trading resumed on Monday, May 5, the official rate leapt to nearly 169 million, not thousand, to one.

That meant that all of a sudden, the authorities had access to significant amounts of hard currency that would previously have passed them by. Illegal currency trading was all but wiped out as black marketeers struggled to keep pace with the banks. People who would previously have sold foreign currency on the black market because the banks offered such a ridiculously low rate were now opting for safer and legal transactions on advantageous terms.

By May 16, one American dollar was worth 255 million or so of the Zimbabwean currency.

HIGH IMPORT DUTIES SWEEP AWAY

On May 13, government spokesman Sikhanyiso Ndlovu announced a second major policy reversal. Import duty charges on basic commodities including cooking oil, rice, salt and margarine were scrapped with immediate effect until August 12.

The 90-day suspension was needed in order to ensure there was a "constant supply of imported basic commodities that have been augmenting local supplies", said Ndlovu.

He explained that high tariffs, which in some cases reached 100 per cent of an item's value, was reducing the amount of goods imported into Zimbabwe. Until then, that had seemed to be precisely the point of punitive duties — to stop scarce foreign currency going abroad to buy imports, and to attempt to reduce a trade deficit caused by the depressed export capacity of this unproductive economy.

Basic items like foodstuffs, soap, toothpaste and washing powder have been in short supply on the official market since last July, when Mugabe ordered all businesses and industries to cut the prices of goods and services almost in half. This crude anti-inflationary measure proved counterproductive as goods disappeared from the shelves in panic-buying and shops could not afford to restock.

Second major policy change lifted import duties on vital commodities.

Since the restrictions on acquiring foreign currency curbed the ability of commercial firms to buy from abroad, much of what was available in Zimbabwe was supplied to markets and street vendors by informal cross-border traders.

The suspension of customs duties immediately sparked a stampede to the borders with neighbouring South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana and Zambia, as people used their new freedom to buy goods abroad either to stock up at home or to resell as a way of making some extra income.

POLITICAL CALCULATION

The liberalised economic environment created by the currency flotation and this week's lifting of customs duties clearly has a political backdrop.

The increased impoverishment of much of the Zimbabwean population is perhaps the main driver of wide-scale public discontent with Mugabe, and the reason why he performed so poorly in the March 29 polls. Despite its apparently iron grip on the country, his ZANU-PF party was defeated by the MDC in the parliamentary election, even losing seats regarded as safe.

Authorities need to recapture support even in traditionally safe seats.

Now the security forces and ZANU-PF militias have been deployed in a campaign of violence in a bid to break support for the opposition ahead of the second round.

The currency and duty measures add a carrot to the stick now being wielded by the authorities.

"How do you explain that the waiver on duty was for three months with effect from May 12 until [the election deadline of] August 12?" said a ZANU-PF insider, speaking on condition of anonymity. "This date allows the president to polish his election machinery."

Ernest Mudzengi, a political analyst with the National Constitutional Assembly, a non-government pressure group, agreed.

"He has his eyes on the presidential run-off," he said, referring to Mugabe. "It is also an admission by the government of Mugabe that the command-economy policies have failed dismally and that the country has not been able to feed itself for the past eight years. It is all an election

gimmick to hoodwink voters as the country braces for a run-off."

An increased supply of foreign currency in the banking system will allow the government to import food and pay Zimbabwe's neighbours for electricity supplies, assuaging hunger and avoiding embarrassing blackouts in the midst of a crucial election. Many regional states have grown impatient with the government's late payment of electricity bills.

Mudzengi suggested that access to foreign currency would help the authorities bankroll their election campaign.

According to John Robertson, an independent economic and political analyst, "The government needs foreign currency for a lot of things, among them to repay the FCA [foreign currency accounts] of embassies and international organisations that were raided by the RBZ before the March 29 elections."

Mugabe "has his eyes on the presidential run-off" — political analyst Ernest Mudzengi.

In his May 2 statement on monetary policy, bank governor Gono admitted that for several months, corporate firms, foreign embassies, non-governmental organisations and some international organisations had experienced "delays" in accessing their foreign currency accounts at the central bank.

Robertson added, "While the main reason might be to replace FCA accounts taken from embassies, gold producers and others, the element of the elections cannot be ruled out. The ZEC [Zimbabwe Electoral Commission] has already said it is broke. Gono needs to find hard currency for a lot of things, including running the election and importing food."

EXTRA GIFT FOR FARMERS

In his statement, Gono also gave notice that the fourth phase of the "mechanisation programme" — which provides farm machinery in rural areas — would be unveiled in July. Ahead of the March 29 elections, Gono used RBZ funds to hand out tractors, ox-drawn ploughs and other farming equipment.

"Gono needs to find hard currency for a lot of things, including running the election and importing food" analyst John Robertson.

ZANU-PF has traditionally drawn its support from rural voters, while the MDC was seen as more urban-based — at least until the recent elections, when it out-performed the ruling party even on its home ground.

Nelson Chamisa, spokesman for Tsvangirai's faction of the MDC, said the pledge to unroll the next phase of farm mechanisation programme "can't be a coincidence".

"It is part of ZANU-PF vote-buying. We have maintained that Gono has, and is still, funding ZANU-PF's violent campaign. The state security agents beating up opposition supporters in the rural areas are paid from RBZ coffers," he said, as the MDC announced that the number of its supporters killed in election violence had reached 32 by May 13.

The authorities are clearly calculating that a combination of intimidation, well-funded electioneering and sweeteners for the population will secure a landslide for Mugabe.

Happyness Chikudo is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

ATTACKS TO CREATE NO-GO AREAS FOR MDC

Violence by ZANU-PF supporters focused in areas where opposition won unexpected support in first-round elections.

By Jabu Shoko in Harare

Supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party are targeting opposition activists in an attempt to intimidate voters in the forthcoming re-run of the presidential election.

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, says people working for it are being picked off, especially in constituencies where it won seats for the first time in the March 29 polls. A lawyers' group noted that employees of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, were also being arrested in these contested areas.

The recount of the parliamentary ballot confounded expectations by leaving the original results intact, with ZANU-PF controlling 97 against the 99 won by the main MDC faction, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. Arthur Mutambara's MDC faction won ten seats, and has indicated it will work with Tsvangirai's group, though contrary to media reports, the two have not formally reunited.

When the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, finally released the result of the presidential election on May 2, it ruled that neither Tsvangirai nor the incumbent Robert Mugabe had surpassed the 50 per cent mark needed for victory. It said the opposition leader got 47.9 per cent, beating Mugabe's 43.2 per cent but still necessitating a run-off vote to decide the winner.

Tsvangirai has agreed to contest a second round, now scheduled for June 27, even though his party



Credit: Lazele

Moud Chokururama mourns her son Beta as he is laid to rest at Warren Hills cemetery in Harare. Beta was abducted and killed by suspected ZANU-PF supporters. Picture taken May 27.

calculates that he won outright with 50.3 per cent of the vote.

The Mugabe administration has everything to play for, especially in those rural areas which were regarded as ZANU-PF's heartland but which turned against it and voted MDC in the parliamentary ballot.

Opposition activists targeted in areas where ZANU-PF lost unexpectedly.

The opposition says Mugabe has already unleashed a campaign of violence designed to drive out MDC activists and force the rural population back into line behind ZANU-PF. It says more than 30 of its supporters have been killed and thousands of others assaulted by the security forces and irregular groups like the war veterans.

Information trickling in from the countryside indicates that some of the areas worst affected by the campaign of violence are regions traditionally seen as Mugabe strongholds — the three Mashonaland provinces, Manicaland and Masvingo.

Speaking two weeks ago, Chamisa outlined five recent killings which included a woman shot dead by soldiers in Manicaland, two male MDC supporters attacked by ZANU-PF paramilitaries in Mashonaland Central, and a polling agent for the opposition who died after an assault by war veterans and other Mugabe loyalists in the Midlands, an area where support for the ruling party support is weak.

"Thousands of people have been displaced while hundreds have been seriously injured and are hospitalised in various hospitals across the country, as the violence by ZANU-PF militia and youth continues to increase at alarming levels," said Chamisa.

"Before they raided our headquarters, the place was more of a casualty

department or a refugee camp than an office, as it was filled to capacity with villagers that had fled their rural homes. These people have nowhere to go and their villages have been declared no-go areas for them and their families."

Wayne Bvudzijena, the national police spokesman, said he was still collecting statistics relating to political violence.

The experience of Davias Matiza, 50, from the Mutoko South constituency in Mashonaland East, mirrors that of many MDC supporters. He will not forget the events of April 12, when he only just managed to flee after an attack on his home.

"These people have nowhere to go and their villages have been declared no-go areas for them and their families" MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa.

"Armed ZANU-PF thugs burnt down my house. I managed to escape and boarded a bus. The thugs, however, followed me and surrounded the bus and demanded me out of the bus," he told IWPR, speaking from a safe house where he has joined scores of other opposition supporters who have fled the reign of terror in rural areas.

"By the grace of God, I again managed to flee from the scene through the window and run for my dear life. A Good Samaritan gave me a lift to Harare and then I found my way into the MDC head office, but I understand the ZANU-PF thugs and war veterans are still after my life."

Two MDC polling agents in the same Mutoko South constituency were not so lucky. Patience Mapuranga, 30, and Mahwisai Chizanga 40, recalled how ZANU-PF militia accused them of supporting the opposition, kicked



Credit: Lazeele

Result of a beating by alleged ZANU-PF supporters. Picture taken May 13.

them and beat them with whips and barbed wire, and left them for dead.

Both Mapuranga and Chizanga suffered serious injuries and needed specialist treatment in Harare, about 150 kilometres away.

"We reported the matter to the police, but the police officer handling the issue was also assaulted and accused of supporting the MDC," said a tearful Chizanga, who is in hiding.

"It is a calculated strategy to create no-go areas as the ZANU-PF strategy for the run-off" — Useni Sibanda of the Christian Alliance.

Useni Sibanda, co-ordinator of the Christian Alliance, a loose grouping of church organisations which is seeking funds to feed, clothe and accommodate displaced opposition supporters, said Mugabe was trying to push the MDC out of certain areas by targeting its activists on the ground.

"It is a calculated strategy to create no-go areas as the ZANU-PF strategy for the run-off," said Sibanda.

"Between 80 and 90 per cent of the people that have fled due to violence in the rural areas were polling agents for the MDC. So what this means is

that come the run-off, the MDC will not have anyone in the rural areas willing to represent them, let alone campaign for them."

Irene Petras, executive director of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, ZLHR, said arrests, intimidation and violence targeting the both MDC activists and ZEC polling officers were designed to secure a Mugabe victory.

ZLHR is representing schoolteachers who have been arrested and charged with violating electoral legislation in areas where the opposition won. Many teachers served as ZEC election officers during the March 29 polls.

Election officers intimidated to allow security forces to "manage the electoral process to benefit one presidential candidate" — human rights group.

It described these detentions as "an attempt to ensure that, in the event of a presidential run-off, such officers will refuse to participate, thus allowing the state to justify its use of law enforcement agents, intelligence officers, war veterans and graduates of the National Youth Service Training Programme to manage the electoral process to benefit one presidential candidate, to whom they owe their political and human survival".

ZLHR has called on members of the security forces and other regime activists to "moderate their behaviour" as they should be aware it is illegal to arrest interrogate ZEC officers, and they could face serious consequences for doing so.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

ZANU-PF SEES POLICE AS CAPTIVE VOTE

Fears that postal ballots cast by uniformed services will be misused.

By Joseph Nhlanhla in Bulawayo

Zimbabwe's security forces have been deployed in a campaign of intimidation and violence against opposition supporters. Now the police are themselves in the spotlight, as ZANU-PF election strategists try to ensure that officers vote en masse for President Robert Mugabe, who is contesting a second-round election against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

An inside source in the police told IWPR that the almost 30,000-strong force had come under pressure to back Mugabe. The source, an assistant inspector in Bulawayo who spoke on condition of anonymity, said personnel had been instructed to use their postal vote without fail.

Police are allowed a postal vote when they are serving away from home.

Police insider says force is under pressure to vote for Mugabe.

"We were told that Mugabe already has [secured] about 28,000 votes from police officers, and whoever decided not to ask for their postal ballot would be dealt with," said the officer.

He said police officers had been informed that failure to cast their ballot by post would leave them vulnerable to what he described as "torture we already know".



Credit: Lazele

Polling officers seal ballot boxes in Harare North constituency during the first round of elections. Picture taken March 29.

"We cannot even think of how to escape this. Resigning from the force is not one of the wisest things to do right now," he said.

"Resigning from the force is not one of the wisest things to do right now."

In the March 29 election, postal voting proved contentious, with critics arguing that the process was open to manipulation. The parliamentary ballot handed a majority to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, but the presidential election conducted simultaneously produced what electoral officials — after a long delay — said was an inconclusive result that necessitated a second round.

In the first round, some members of the security forces chose not to cast their votes, as a way of registering their discontent.

Although top commanders of the various services are among Mugabe's most hawkish supporters, many rank-and-file members are increasingly disgruntled with their pay and conditions in Zimbabwe's hyperinflationary economy. Desertions from the uniformed services have increased in recent years, and many have joined the exodus of public-sector employees to neighbouring countries.

Rank-and-file members of the security forces increasingly unhappy with their conditions, and many have deserted.

The assistant inspector added that he understood the directive had been extended to the army, air force and prison services, all of which come under the powerful Joint Operations Command, JOC. If this happens, it could provide a captive vote

numbering about 100,000, possibly enough to secure the presidency for Mugabe.

However, a senior journalist, who did not want to be named, argued that postal votes are not easy to manipulate. Like conventional ballot papers, they are secret, he said, "so it is difficult to see how the police can be forced to vote for Mugabe unless there is outright interference and the ballots cast are simply replaced with those in favour of Mugabe on their way to whatever command centre they are destined for."

The JOC has taken charge of the day-to-day running of the country and is set on ensuring that Mugabe retains power whatever the cost.

The first round was conducted in an atmosphere unusually free of violence, but since then, the regime's disappointment with the results has sparked a wave of violence in which the police and army have been deployed alongside ZANU-PF activists and paramilitary groups.

Human rights organisations say more than 30 people have been killed so far, with thousands of others displaced.

Top security chiefs working hard to ensure Mugabe stays in power.

Many of the attacks have been in areas once regarded as ZANU-PF strongholds but where the opposition won surprise victories. The violence has principally targeted the MDC's activists and supporters on the ground, and the aim is clearly to remove its ability to mobilise in these areas and coerce voters into switching back to Mugabe in the second round.

As well as the police and military, prison services chief, Paradzai Zimondi, is said to be actively involved in the campaign. Last week, the Zimbabwe Peace Project group alleged that ZANU-PF militias were

operating out of Zimondi's home in Mashonaland East province.

ZANU-PF's election strategy is reportedly being run by party hardliners like Emmerson Mnangagwa, with JOC commanders providing men on the ground as well as involving themselves in the day-to-day running of the country.

Dumiso Dabengwa, a former Zimbabwean interior minister who is now a ZANU-PF dissident, recently told journalists in Bulawayo that the country was being ruled by a de facto military junta. The suggestion that the JOC, not Mugabe, is now in charge following the first-round fiasco, has also been made by the MDC and other critics.

Tsvangirai's return to Zimbabwe — delayed by reports of an assassinate him — following a six-week diplomatic tour, is likely to mark the beginning of another bruising bout of election campaigning.

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

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