

Attacks to Create No-Go Areas for MDC

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

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.

Last week's announcement on 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 not yet announced whether he is prepared to contest the second round, since his party calculates that he won outright with 50.3 per cent of the vote.

Assuming Tsvangirai does agree to run, 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.

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 20 of its supporters have been killed and thousands of others assaulted by the security forces and irregular groups like the war veterans.

"Over 20 MDC activists have been killed in just one month," said Nelson Chamisa, spokesman for the Tsvangirai faction. "Only over the past two days, five MDC activists have been killed by ZANU-PF militia soldiers. 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."

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.

Chamisa said the five most recent killings 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.

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.

“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 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.

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.

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.

Location: Zimbabwe

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/attacks-create-no-go-areas-mdc>