

Bennett Comeback Angers President

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Mugabe enraged by court's decision to allow jailed white MP to contest election.

President Robert Mugabe has reacted with alarm to the most remarkable political comeback story of Zimbabwe's parliamentary election campaign.

Roy Bennett, a white farmer and the highly popular member of parliament for Chimanimani, who is currently serving a one-year jail sentence with hard labour, has been given the green light to contest his seat from his prison cell.

Bennett, who represents a largely rural and nearly 100 per cent black constituency in the mountains of the same name in eastern Zimbabwe, was jailed after he charged across the floor of parliament last November and shoved Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa to the ground.

Chinamasa had just subjected Bennett to a torrent of racist abuse and called his ancestors thieves and murders. As he fell on top of the justice minister, who emerged unbruised, Anti-Corruption Minister Didymus Mutasa joined the fray and kicked Bennett in the ribs.

The MP for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC – who was born, raised and educated in Zimbabwe – said afterwards, "One's not proud of it. But I am a person. I have feelings and after the vehement personal [and] racial attack that Chinamasa was making against me, I saw red and reacted. I was insulted on numerous previous occasions when my workers were being killed, raped and beaten."

In October, parliament voted 53 to 42 to punish the 48-year-old MP by imprisoning him for a year for an offence that would normally have merited a small fine in a normal criminal court.

Since then, he has been sharing a 3.5 by 2.5 metre prison cell with 14 other inmates. His immediate sleeping partner is dying of AIDS and vomits throughout the night. Meanwhile, the speaker of parliament, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has overruled efforts to have Bennett's sentence dismissed by an ordinary court of law.

Despite his imprisonment, the people of Chimanimani have asked Bennett to stand again as their candidate. And after a desperate legal battle, this week the country's new Electoral Court, in its first decision, upheld Bennett's right to contest the election from his cell.

The move has enraged President Mugabe, who has become accustomed to obedience from the country's courts. On March 17, he described Judge Tendai Uchena's decision as "madness" and said his government would appeal against the ruling.

"I don't understand the court's decision. We can't be held to ransom by a man who is in prison. That is absolute nonsense," he said.

And in an ominous declaration, Mugabe told his supporters to ignore the court ruling. "Proceed as if nothing has happened," said the head of state, who has a record of ignoring judicial decisions and ruling by decree.

Judge Uchena further angered the president by postponing the Chimanimani poll for a month to give Bennett's constituency manager, James Mukwaya, and his team a decent period in which to campaign.

Welcoming the court verdict, Mukwaya said, "Roy Bennett is a man of the people. He is white in complexion but there is no difference between [him] and the blacks in Zimbabwe.

"He did not choose himself to stand as the candidate of Chimanimani in 2000. It was the people who went to him and asked him to stand as their MP. And during his tenure in office in the past five years, he showed the people of Chimanimani how an MP should work."

For the first 20 years of Zimbabwe's independence, Chimanimani was a stronghold of Mugabe's ruling ZANU PF party. But as economic conditions deteriorated, Bennett - who had a record of close cooperation with local cultivators and spoke fluent Shona - was approached to stand as the MDC candidate. He was elected in 2000 by 11,410 votes to 8,072, a remarkable victory in a general election that most international observers had declared neither free nor fair.

Bennett's popularity has been a mixed blessing for him. In the past four years he has suffered a number of attacks with a clear political motivation.

Just before polling day in 2000, ZANU PF activists - operating under the direction of the feared Central Intelligence Organisation, CIO - invaded Bennett's cattle and coffee farm, Charleswood. They forced Bennett's 42-year-old wife, Heather, and their 350 employees to attend a ZANU PF political rally where they were made to dance and sing songs in praise of Mugabe.

The pregnant Mrs Bennett was threatened with death, and forced to the ground with a spear held to her throat. "That night the pain began," she said. "I lost the baby. It was a boy." Several farm employees were beaten with iron rods and axe handles.

Bennett hurried back more than 300 kilometres from Harare to be told his family would be killed unless he withdrew his MDC candidacy. He refused. He was immediately served with a government notice to vacate his farm, and the Zimbabwe army began occupying it.

The soldiers moved into Bennett's farmhouse and began hacking cattle and game animals to death. They refused the owner access to his coffee crops which were in a special government-designated Export Processing Zone and earned more than a million US dollars a year in foreign exchange. More than 100 tonnes of coffee were destroyed, together with the painstaking preparations for another three years of planting.

Local people were outraged by the assault on Bennett's family and his workers. They sent a n'anga - a traditional healer, or witchdoctor - to cleanse and protect the farmhouse, the farm buildings and a tourist lodge that had been built with foreign investment in the nearby mountains.

For Zimbabweans, a blessing or curse from a n'anga is no laughing matter. Of the fifteen ZANU PF activists who were in the first invasion wave on Charleswood, 13 are now dead. And in May 2004, the district administrator - a key political figure who organised the assault - was found dead in his shower.

Bennett, who has not set foot on his farm for nearly five years, has taken the case to court eight times. On each occasion he has won court orders confirming his ownership of Charleswood and his right - and that of

his employees - to be left in peace.

But the officials involved have simply ignored these rulings. Two of Bennett's workers, Stephen Toner and Shemmy Chimbaraa, have been shot dead by soldiers and others have been beaten and raped.

Heather Bennett, who will now campaign for her husband in Chimanimani, said, "Roy's enduring popularity is one of the things that infuriates the government. He defies everything they try to portray as happening. He's a white farmer liked by labour forces."

And from Mutoko Prison, 145 kilometres north of Harare, Bennett issued a statement vowing never to give up, even if it costs him his life.

"I know my constituency is 100 per cent behind me," he said. "I was humbly elected by the people of Chimanimani to represent them in parliament. I knew full well the ramifications of taking on a repressive ZANU PF regime, as did the people who voted me in.

"We as a district have been targeted and harassed for our beliefs. I am not seen as a white commercial farmer but as a fellow Zimbabwean, and as long as the people want me to represent them for national change and good governance, I will never give in.

"No amount of intimidation, oppression or threats will work. There are some things in life worth taking a stand for."

Dzikamayi Chiyausiku is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Mutare.

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