

Bulawayo Youth Join Opposition Bandwagon

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

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 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 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.

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.

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.

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.

"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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