

Diaspora Resigned to Mugabe Victory

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Exiles urge their countrymen to vote, even though many suspect the president will rig the vote in his favour.

In a small London recording studio, Mandisa Mundawarara listens as a Zimbabwean exile calling from Canada urges his countrymen to vote in the upcoming Zimbabwe elections on March 29.

The caller is just one among an estimated three to four million Zimbabweans who have left the country, mainly during the past seven years of political and economic turmoil there. He urged other Zimbabweans to vote against President Robert Mugabe, who he, like many others, feels has led the country into its current shambolic mess.

The radio station is a product of Zimbabwe's worsening state. It began in 2001 to give a voice to Zimbabweans both within and outside the country. Based in London, the station is broadcast in Zimbabwe for two hours every day, and has provided coverage of the run-up to the harmonised elections.

Mugabe, the 84-year-old president of Zimbabwe, has headed the country since its independence from Britain in 1980. On March 29, he faces his toughest election since then when he faces both Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, as well as Simba Makoni, a defector from his own ZANU-PF party who is running as an independent.

Critics have pummeled the ruling party with criticism about the fairness of the run-up to the elections. Human rights groups, other governments and Mugabe's two major opponents have accused him of intimidating the opposition, restricting his opponents' access to the state-controlled media, and using food supplies to glean political advantage, by only providing it to ZANU-PF supporters.

Many exiles also fear the incumbent president will do whatever he can to avoid faring badly in the poll.

"The election doesn't need to be rigged on March 29," said Lance Guma, a SW Africa journalist. "It's already happening."

On the eve of the elections, Mugabe's opponents and others have questioned why nine million ballots have been printed for the country's 5.9 million voters.

Tich Sibanda, a journalist from the station, points out that in the last elections, a rural district in Zimbabwe with a population of 5,000 recorded 42,000 votes when the results had been tabulated.

"How can you have faith in such a situation?" he said. "Everyone knows Mugabe will lose an election that is free and fair."

In spite of fears among the diaspora community that the vote will be rigged, there's an optimistic buzz around the SW Radio Africa studios, as Zimbabweans from all over the world use the station as a platform to urge their countrymen to make it as hard as possible for Mugabe to cling on to power by fixing the polls.

Zimbabwe began its long road towards economic and humanitarian decline in 2000 after Mugabe seized thousands of white-owned farms and gave them to party loyalists.

The economy soon ground to a halt, and Mugabe printed currency relentlessly, leaving an economy stricken with the world's highest inflation rate.

"People seem convinced that they are going to see change and are placing a lot of hope in these elections," said Mundawarara. "All Zimbabweans are having the urge to do something, even if it's symbolic."

That urge is not unique to the diaspora in Britain. Everywhere from Ottawa to London, Zimbabweans are holding mock elections on or around March 29.

"The reason is really to demonstrate how a peaceful election should be where people are electing their candidates freely and where the election is conducted transparently," said a Zimbabwean calling from Canada.

While at one time there were discussions on allowing the diaspora to vote, this right never materialised.

A Zimbabwe opinion poll released earlier this month showed Tsvangirai in the lead with 28 per cent of the vote, trailed by Mugabe and Makoni on 20 and nine per cent respectively. Twenty-four per cent of the poll's respondents declined to reveal their choice.

Yet even if one of the opposition leaders triumph, Zimbabwean exiles are unlikely to return in large numbers anytime soon.

"A very small amount of Zimbabweans will go back," said Mundawarara, adding that returns would be gradual.

"Many people have settled elsewhere and made homes elsewhere," he said. "They will retain their allegiance to Zimbabwe but in the near and middle future they will not go back. The reality is a lot of times people have nothing to go back to."

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