

Exiles Demand Say in SADC Mediation

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Plans underway for series of demonstrations and petitions demanding their inclusion in the process. The Southern Africa Development Community, SADC, initiative to solve the socio-economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe is coming under pressure from representatives of the estimated four million Zimbabwe exiles lobbying to have their say in the mediation process.

Zimbabwe civic organisations based in South Africa are busy preparing position papers for the exiles. Although the groups are sceptical about the likely success of the mediation efforts led by South African president Thabo Mbeki, they are nevertheless pushing for involvement in the talks and are keen to see pre-election constitutional reforms.

Mbeki has thus far been involved in several mediation processes to solve the Zimbabwean crisis without yet managing to get President Robert Mugabe to the negotiating table.

Plans are underway for a series of demonstrations and petitions at the Union Buildings, Mbeki's offices in the capital Pretoria, to demand his attention. Activists in the diaspora have started a mobilising mission to confront Mbeki on their proposed participation in the talks. National Constitutional Assembly, NCA, a volatile pressure group calling for a new constitution in Zimbabwe, has made it clear that any process that excludes exiles would be invalid.

Position papers from exile groups have already been sent to Mbeki demanding a new constitution as part of the road map to end a seven-year-old impasse between the ruling ZANU-PF party and opposition groups.

Tapera Kapuya, the co-ordinator for NCA-South Africa, said that unless the mediation process facilitated an inclusive "national process of building sustainable democratic systems, based on respect of fundamental rights and dignity of all Zimbabweans, negotiations or mediation efforts serve nothing. [Instead they] buy time for those strangling the nation and its people".

At an urgent SADC summit held in Tanzania in March, Mbeki was appointed as mediator in the Zimbabwean crisis. The constitutional question is central to this mediation: the ZANU-PF push to have legislative, administrative and executive elections in 2008 necessitates an amendment to the constitution. ZANU-PF wants the latter to simply harmonise parliamentary and presidential elections in 2008, but the opposition wants a complete overhaul of the constitution to safeguard democracy and human rights and curb the powers of the ruling party and president.

"Whilst supporting the mediation efforts being led by South Africa, the NCA believes that without [ensuring that] all Zimbabweans establish a people-driven and democratic constitution as a basis for ... democracy the culture of anti-democratic practice will persist at extreme human cost to Zimbabwe and the region. The exiles are part of Zimbabwe and their concerns must be addressed during the mediation process," added Kapuya.

Millions of Zimbabweans have fled the country to neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa, because of political persecution and economic turmoil. The number of exiles swelled after the population displacements in the wake of the government's Operation Murambatsvina (Drive Out the Rubbish) in 2005.

The exiles have for the past seven years been sidelined from taking part in national issues. They make substantial contributions to the country's ailing economy by sending foreign currency back home to relatives - although most of the money ends up on the black market. The Mugabe-led government has not hid its hatred of the exiles who have been called saboteurs and terrorists bent on destroying the country. In the 2002 presidential election, the exiles were denied their right to cast votes outside the country.

The People Policy Committee, a network of Zimbabweans in exile, has already submitted a position paper to Mbeki on the way forward to solve the crisis. The committee is urging Mbeki to broaden his scope to include the exiled community in his mediation process.

"The position of the PPC is that the genealogy of the current problems in Zimbabwe is traceable to the national constitution. Any diagnosis and prescription of the crisis which precludes the constitution is flawed and therefore irrelevant," the PPC said in a statement.

Zimbabwe Solidarity Forum, a network of South African organisations supporting the struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe, are providing Zimbabweans exiles with a platform to come up with strategies to fight against the regime and are working on a project to unite all Zimbabwe exiles and get them to speak with one voice.

Muchaneta Kucheka, now based in Durban, South Africa, who fled a Zanu-PF orgy of violence in 2002, believes that exiles should be given more clout, "We are the ones who escaped Mugabe's persecution and we should be included in the talks to air our views. Any negotiated settlements in the mediation talks should take into account the millions of Zimbabweans who have left the country because of the crisis.

"They should look at how the exiles are going to resettle in the country and participate in the elections.

"We are going to gate-crash the talks because the exiles have been watching from the sidelines for too long. The constitution should cater for all Zimbabweans whether you are in the country or outside."

But the exile community may hit a brick wall as Mbeki is focused on ZANU-PF and the MDC. He has already set the mediation process rolling by initiating contact with the two parties. Since the start of the Zimbabwe crisis seven years ago, Mbeki's office has not given an ear to the millions of Zimbabweans in exile, despite the fact that they have flooded into the country, says Kucheka.

Mbeki's conduct over Zimbabwe has been criticised by many local and international organisations who perceive him to be siding with Mugabe.

The secretary general of the Zimbabwe Political Victims Association, Oliver Kubikwa, said, "We are going to push for Mbeki to lay down the groundwork for constitutional discourse. The past has taught us there is nothing Mbeki can do against Mugabe repression.

"In fact Mbeki is supposed to draft a programme on how the Zimbabwe political players can come up with a new constitution before the election. A new and well-drafted constitution will definitely solve the whole conflict facing the country. It will provide a platform for fair and free elections and there will an independent judiciary to arbitrate on issues of conflict arising from elections," said Kubikwa.

The exiles are calling on Mbeki to expedite the process as the Zimbabwe crisis continues to cause untold suffering of Zimbabweans, both inside and outside the country. Thousands of Zimbabweans are still flooding to South Africa, putting their lives at risk by crossing the crocodile-infested Limpopo River. Some Zimbabweans have lost their lives to lions in South Africa's Kruger National Park in their bid to escape their crisis-ridden country.

Once in South Africa, most Zimbabwean exiles face difficult circumstances. They live in poverty and are exploited by employees who pay them paltry wages. Professionals such as nurses, teachers, engineers and journalists have had to abandon their careers to do menial jobs. Those who are activists also face the long arm of Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organisation, CIO, according to MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

Speaking from a safe house in Johannesburg during a short visit to the country last week, Tsvangirai said agents from the CIO were targeting activists in exile and were responsible for at least one kidnapping.

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