

## **Government Ballot Preparations a "Joke"**

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Mugabe shows little sign of implementing regional leaders' electoral conduct guidelines aimed at ensure a free and fair ballot.

The legitimacy and international acceptance - or not - of Zimbabwe's sixth parliamentary elections on March 31 hinge on whether the ruling ZANU PF party respects and applies guidelines on electoral conduct laid down by leaders of countries in the region six months ago.

Heads of state of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, including Zimbabwe's president Robert Mugabe, signed the Mauritius Protocol on the Indian Ocean island of that name last August.

Drawn up specifically as a result of international condemnation of the conduct of the last Zimbabwean parliamentary elections in 2000, the protocol demands that all registered political parties be allowed to campaign freely; have unlimited access to the media; permitted freedom of association; and that all citizens be allowed to exercise their right to vote.

The principles and guidelines also talk of the need for an independent electoral commission to run the ballot and to deploy election observers two weeks before the polls. The heads of state further demanded that there should be an independent judiciary and programmes of voter education run by the government and opposition parties.

With fewer than eight weeks to go before Zimbabweans go to the polls, President Mugabe - who has been in power since his country's independence in 1980 - has done very little as yet to demonstrate that he intends to honour the Mauritius Protocol or that he wants to level the political playing field to allow the free and fair participation of opposition parties.

On February 2, he cocked a snook at his fellow heads of state by expelling a delegation of the Congress of South African Trades Unions, COSATU, who had arrived in Harare to hold routine talks with Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions.

While international attention is closely focused on the SADC rules, Brian Kagoro of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Committee - an umbrella body representing pro-democracy groups - said they would have little effect.

"It's a joke," said Kagoro, a constitutional lawyer and human rights activist. "The reforms cannot be introduced within two months."

He was supported by COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, part of the expelled delegation, who said, "Where have you seen a government so desperate, going to the length that they have to refuse entry to trade unionists, unless they have something to hide?"

Referring to the leaders of South Africa's apartheid government in the Eighties and Rhodesia before it gained its independence and became Zimbabwe in 1980, he went on, "[The ruling] ZANU PF was once a liberation movement, but it has become a brutal regime which has no respect for basic human rights. Its actions are no different from PW Botha and Ian Smith.

"It is simply a change of complexion of the oppressor. Anyone who disagrees [with Mugabe] is jailed and those who have a different point of view are tortured."

A SADC election observer mission will be deployed two weeks before the voting to pronounce whether the political environment is conducive to holding free, fair and peaceful elections.

But Welshman Ncube, secretary general of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, said that the government is flouting the SADC guidelines daily.

"The police continue to stop us from holding political rallies, while allowing ZANU PF to hold theirs," he said. "Our party activists remain at risk of being abducted, beaten and tortured by ruling party militias and members of the security forces."

The MDC, which decided only on February 3 to take part in an election it expects to be deeply flawed, has said the Mauritius principles can only begin to be honoured if an independent electoral commission is established and if the most draconian laws used by Mugabe against opponents are repealed.

These include the Public Order and Security Act, POSA, which was inherited from the previous white minority regime of Ian Smith. It forbids any gathering of five people or more, and is being used by the government to deny the opposition the ability to hold meetings and rallies.

The MDC also wants the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, AIPPA, repealed before the polls open.

AIPPA is a draconian piece of legislation that requires journalists to be licensed by the government and has led to the closure of several newspapers, including the independent Daily News, the expulsion of all foreign correspondents and the detention of many Zimbabwean journalists.

The MDC also seeks reform of the judiciary, arguing that it is no longer impartial because the bench is packed with ZANU PF loyalists.

One such judge is George Chiweshe, a 51-year-old former ZANU guerrilla and Mugabe lieutenant, who has been appointed chairman of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. Chiweshe has already erased three important MDC urban constituencies from the electoral map and is expected to use soldiers, policemen and prison officers to staff and supervise 6,000 polling stations instead of trained electoral officers.

The MDC is allowed no time on national radio and TV, while all independent radio stations have been closed down. One station, Voice of the People, was silenced after its building was destroyed in a mystery explosion.

Trevor Ncube, former managing editor of the Zimbabwe Independent and now publisher of South Africa's Mail and Guardian, is deeply sceptical about the possibility of a free and fair Zimbabwe election.

"An election is not a one day event," said Ncube, who is also chairman of the IWPR Africa board.

He said ZANU PF was using the SADC protocol in an attempt to reverse what is seen by most of the world

as its illegitimate status, having rigged the last parliamentary election in 2000. March's ballot is expected to be no different. According to Ncube, this year's election is "already rigged".

The government has refused to publish voter rolls and will not allow independent observers into the country to monitor the election process.

In addition, Zimbabwean traditional chiefs charged with overseeing voting and the distribution of government food aid to their rural subjects have recently had their salaries doubled and been given government cars to ensure they and their village communities stay loyal to ZANU PF.

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