

Keeping the Military on Side

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Top brass pledges to back Mugabe to the end, but lower ranks seem less committed to defending a regime that cannot feed them.

As the impasse around Zimbabwe's presidential election continues, analysts say much now depends on which way the powerful security forces will jump if they are asked to prop up President Robert Mugabe.

For the moment, it seems defence and police chiefs will maintain their loyalty to the president and will do what it takes to keep him in power. But rank-and-file soldiers and police have suffered from the country's precipitous economic decline, and appear less willing to go on blindly supporting Mugabe.

With United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon the latest high profile figure to express concern at the country's post-election chaos, and the Southern African Development Community scheduling an emergency weekend meeting on the crisis, analysts are warning a "silent coup" is under way.

Over his 28 years in power, Mugabe has relied on the security forces to maintain his grip on power, and now he may be planning to use them to effectively nullify the poll results. In the March parliamentary election, official results show that the two factions of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, have wrested control of the lower chamber from Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, while the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, has stalled on releasing the outcome of the presidential vote held the same day.

MDC Morgan Tsvangirai, who insists he has won the presidential election, reportedly asked for a meeting with security and army officials to discuss the transitional arrangements for Mugabe leaving office. Prior to the election, defence chief Constantine Chiwenga, police chief Augustine Chihuri and penal service head Paradzayi Zimondi declared they would "not salute" a future president Tsvangirai.

Mugabe himself has also had meetings with the security chiefs who sit on the Joint Operations Command, and with ZANU-PF's ruling politburo. Senior politburo officials including Didymus Mutasa - in charge of the country's intelligence services - are now said to have vowed to fight on in a run-off presidential election, despite the fact that no official poll results have been released.

As well as the regular forces, Mugabe enjoys wide support among militant veterans of the 1970s war of liberation, who form a de facto paramilitary reserve.

While security chiefs have declared their loyalty to the beleaguered Mugabe, rank-and-file servicemen appear to have their own ideas. Like civilians, they have lost out from years of economic chaos and mismanagement. Many soldiers now spend their time scrounging to feed their families.

Military officers who spoke to IWPR said they were not about to wield guns and batons against unarmed civilians. Such resistance to using force could hamper Mugabe's efforts to deploy the armed forces to perpetuate his hold on power.

This week, a young professional soldier told IWPR that he was beaten up at a Bulawayo army base after being accused of supporting the MDC. The man, who has fled to South Africa and cannot be named for safety reasons, said the assault took place after he resigned from the army in early April and returned to

barracks to hand in his uniform.

"I was locked up in a room, where I was thrashed all over my body and accused of attempting to abscond so that I could join Morgan Tsvangirai's army," he said, visibly shaken by what had happened. "After the beatings I was given a new uniform and told to return to work. That was when I decided I wasn't staying any minute longer."

Military experts say it is rare for a soldier to formally resign, but many simply desert and leave the country.

Although the army is supposed to have between 30,000 and 40,000 personnel, numbers have been falling as commissioned and non-commissioned officers abscond. The authorities have also scaled down recruitment, citing inadequate resources.

While the security forces might look monolithic from the outside, the armed forces contain more than one element - the Mugabe loyalists from the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, ZANLU, the armed wing of ZANU during the liberation war, and those originally from the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, ZIPRA, affiliated with the late Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU movement.

There is some suggestion the division lives on under the surface, making parts of the military more open to talking to the MDC than might be thought. According to a former lecturer at the National University of Science and Technology, it is significant that former ZIPRA officers have not joined colleagues in speaking out robustly in support of Mugabe.

"It has always been noted that there are divided loyalties within the Zimbabwean defence forces, if you look at the actual role being played by [ex-ZIPRA] men who fought alongside Joshua Nkomo. Their silence on issues of allegiance to the powers that be can mean a lot of things," said the lecturer.

He noted that while former ZAPU politicians now in government had aligned themselves publicly with the regime, "we don't get the same from the ZIPRA generals now serving under Mugabe. Why?"

The political crisis appears to have compounded the morale problems facing the security forces.

Members of Police Internal Service Intelligence, PISI, told IWPR that they had been monitoring political activity both in the police force and in other security agencies, and morale had been low ever since the elections.

"We all know about the situation," said one officer, who declined to be named. "We are equally suffering, and it is known by many within PISI that sentiment across the security forces reflects disgruntlement with the system."

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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