

Makoni Supporters Fear Mugabe Backlash

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Many ruling party members are seemingly too scared to declare support for presidential challenger. The ZANU-PF heavyweights expected to back Simba Makoni's presidential bid in next month's election in Zimbabwe have failed to come out in support of him because they fear President Robert Mugabe will turn on them.

Former finance minister Makoni was expelled from ZANU-PF earlier this month when he announced his intention to stand against Mugabe in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in March.

Makoni, who predicts that he and his fellow independent candidates will win the elections in a landslide, has said his immediate priorities on being elected would be to resolve shortages of food, power, fuel and water, and abolish the various exchange rates that fuel black-market currency trading.

He has also announced plans to establish a non-partisan organisation to haul the country out of its current economic crisis, which has left the country with an inflation rate of 66,000 per cent, high unemployment and food shortages, and a collapsing infrastructure.

Although 73 candidates have so far joined Makoni's camp and nominated themselves as independent candidates in next month's elections, most of them are political lightweights.

Analysts say that fear of reprisals by the ruling party machinery has deterred those ZANU-PF stalwarts who were reported to be contemplating standing with their expelled colleague as independents.

The party is known for punishing defectors, and those who are thrown out have found it hard to recover their former glory, even after being readmitted. According to the ZANU-PF constitution, a party member loses membership if he or she stands as an independent.

Mugabe has wasted no time in delivering a body blow to the Makoni project.

Makoni's biggest backer, retired army commander General Solomon Mujuru, is now under investigation for various cases of corruption concerning his vast business empire.

The charges were leveled at the general, who according to reports may now be under house arrest, immediately after it emerged that he was fronting Makoni's election bid.

According to media reports, Mujuru has already been called in for questioning on corruption charges which were presented by the Central Intelligence Organisation to the police for investigation.

Some of Mujuru allies, such as Zimbabwe's attorney general Sobusa Gula-Ndebele, have already felt Mugabe's wrath.

Gula-Ndebele has since been removed from office and is facing charges of misconduct related to a case involving former banker and close Mujuru ally James Mushore, who is accused of breaching the country's foreign exchange laws.

Although Gula-Ndebele is alleged to have abused his office to help Mushore, commentators believe the case against him is politically motivated. Mugabe suspended the attorney general last month and appointed a tribunal to investigate allegations of his alleged misbehaviour.

Guruve North MP David Butau, who was in charge of finances for Mujuru, has now fled to the UK amid allegations of exchange control violations.

The charges waged against these men have been interpreted as attempts by Mugabe to deal with those he believes are trying to oust him.

Only a few brave people - mostly those who have already been marginalised in ZANU-PF - presented their nomination papers on February 15, when the courts sat to receive candidates for the crucial elections.

However, no big names put themselves forward. A number of senior figures in Mugabe's party are believed to support Makoni's challenge but are thought to be waiting to assess his prospects closer to polling day before openly backing him.

Makoni has not revealed any major supporters in ZANU-PF since he announced his decision to contest the election. Sources in his camp said although the heavyweights will not come out in the open, they will continue to campaign for him behind the scenes.

The candidate urged his supporters not be intimidated.

"I invite the many Zimbabweans who share the vision I have ... to join me and stand as independents in the forthcoming election under our banner. Please enter the race," he said.

The Makoni camp was busy at the weekend checking which of the registered independent candidates had submitted their names in support of the ex-finance minister. As of late February 18, a total of 62 independent parliamentary candidates and 11 aspiring senators had joined his project.

However, so far only a couple of prominent ZANU-PF members have taken up Makoni's challenge.

Fired former legislator and publisher Kindness Paradza, whose newspaper The Tribune was shut down by the government, and former education minister Fay Chung, are among those who have joined Makoni to fight the election.

Margaret Dongo, a former legislator and the first woman to rebel against Mugabe and form the Zimbabwe

Democratic Party, is also backing Makoni and contesting the election as an independent candidate in Chikomo.

Other politicians standing as independents include the apparent brains behind the Makoni project Ibbo Mandaza, who is going for the Mazowe West parliamentary seat. ZANU-PF founding member Edgar Tekere is vying for Mutare, while Major General Kudzai Mbudzi is standing for the Masvingo West seat.

The independent candidates will fight it out in the parliamentary elections with candidates from ZANU-PF, as well as from the main faction of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, headed by Morgan Tsvangirai.

Makoni has also forged an alliance with Professor Arthur Mutambara's smaller MDC faction. The opposition leader will back Makoni, and in return, he is expected to urge his supporters to vote for contestants in that faction.

Makoni's camp is contesting most constituencies, with the least support expected from Mugabe's home province of Mashonaland West and the Midlands provinces, from where Mugabe's preferred successor Emmerson Mnangagwa hails.

A source in Makoni's camp told IWPR the day before nominations that not as many independent candidates as hoped had been fielded in the above home provinces of Mugabe and his closest ally Mnangagwa.

"There is a lot of fear felt by our supporters in those provinces, although there is interest. It seems the people in Mashonaland West feel they might be punished more and have more to lose since they have gained the most from Mugabe's patronage. They also understand how ruthless the man can be," said the source.

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