

MDC Election Tactics Questioned

Author: [Meshack Ndodana](#)

Some say opposition has lost valuable campaigning time by vainly trying to get the election date changed.

In the wake of failed talks between the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, and the ruling ZANU-PF, the former has been criticised for expending so much energy on attempts to delay national elections until political reforms are in place.

At a February 21 press conference in Johannesburg, both factions of the MDC made it clear the mediation process, led by South African president Thabo Mbeki on behalf of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, had died a death because of the Zimbabwean government's preemptive move to call elections before measures to ensure they were free and fair could be put in place.

Although the timing of the election was the subject of the SADC-led negotiations, President Robert Mugabe on January 25 unilaterally proclaimed March 29 as the date for presidential, parliamentary and local ballot.

The negotiations were initiated by the SADC in March last year to ease political tensions between ZANU-PF and the MDC and to try to reverse Zimbabwe's eight-year economic decline.

The secretary-generals of the two MDC factions, Welshman Ncube and Tendai Biti, who led their respective delegations in the negotiations, said in a joint statement that the election date "lay at the heart of the deadlock" in the talks with ZANU-PF.

The MDC said ZANU-PF had "renege" on a number of transitional mechanisms that had been agreed at the talks, while Mugabe's announcement of a firm date was a sign the party had "repudiated the principles and the spirit of the dialogue".

"At the core of the deadlock were issues of the date of the election, the time-frame for the implementation of the agreed reforms, and the process and manner of the making and enactment of a new constitution," said the statement.

During the talks, the two sides had reached agreement on amendments to electoral, security and media laws, a draft constitution, and issues to do with violence, sanctions, land, and food aid. The MDC had called for the elections to be put off to a later date to allow these arrangements to take root and gain public acceptance.

This view stands in stark contrast to Mbeki's claim that the date was a peripheral procedural matter. In the opposition's view, the timing of the election and the reforms that should precede it were "not matters of procedure but of substance", as holding the vote too early would prevent other agreements being implemented, and consequently "the dialogue would therefore not have resulted in the resolution of the Zimbabwe crisis".

The request for a delay was brushed aside by Mugabe, who said the MDC had known as early as last year that the elections were scheduled for March. He said the opposition was preoccupied with internal rivalries, and was seeking to shift the blame for its lack of preparedness onto the government.

The MDC said Mbeki met Mugabe in Zimbabwe as late as January 15 to try to break the deadlock over the election date, including a proposal to push back the elections to as late as 2010. Mugabe is said to have rejected this, insisting the election date was “non-negotiable”. He also rejected the idea of a new constitution, which the MDC had said should be in place before the elections to level the playing field.

The statement made clear that the MDC would participate in the elections, but only under protest, and concluded by warning, “Tragically, the results of the... elections will be contested.”

The MDC’s scathing comments came as the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance, ZCA, a network of church and civic bodies, announced that it had lost hope in the talks.

The ZCA blamed the failure of the talks on what it called “a lack of clear objectives and accountability on the part of those involved. The SADC talks failed to produce tangible results in terms of creating a conducive atmosphere for free and fair elections”.

Political analysts who spoke to IWPR criticised the MDC for expending so much energy on matters that were already impossible to change, such as the election date.

One commentator based at the University of Zimbabwe said the opposition needed to get into gear and prepare for the elections.

“The best they can do for themselves is to mount a vigorous campaign for their supporters to vote,” said the analyst, who did not want to be named. He said it would be “suicidal” for the MDC to contemplate a boycott this late in the day, pointed out that “there are already other smaller parties and individuals ready to take the MDC’s place”.

Another political analyst said the MDC should be focusing on the electoral process and specifically the “command centre” in charge of running the ballot.

“This is where the results will be decided,” he said. “The MDC is wasting time focusing on dates and talks which have already failed. The voting will be done in Zimbabwe and that is where rigging will take place if the opposition loses its focus.”

The two MDC factions had, he said, “weakened their position and squandered public sympathy by failing to unite to fight a single common enemy”.

Meshack Ndodana is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Harare.

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