

MDC Riven by New Divisions

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As elections draw closer, the already divided opposition is stricken with internal strife. October has not been a good month for Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in the last couple of years.

In October 2005 the party split into warring entities, while this month two key groupings within the larger of the two factions have been dissolved under controversial circumstances.

The MDC has also spent the month dealing with the fallout of its controversial decision to back constitutional amendments that, among other things, allow President Robert Mugabe to effectively hand-pick his successor.

The MDC split in October 2005 badly weakened the party in its fight against the ruling ZANU-PF. The bigger faction, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, decided to boycott an election for the Senate, or upper house of parliament, fearing that the institution - newly reconstituted after a eight-year lapse - would simply be stuffed with supporters of President Robert Mugabe.

The other MDC, which took part in the Senate vote, is now led by Arthur Mutambara.

Both factions have since tried to damp down their differences as they confronted an increasingly violent Mugabe administration, but in September they jointly incurred the wrath of their opposition allies when they took a tactical decision to back the constitutional bill, which went through both houses of parliament unopposed.

They are still struggling to mend the rift with their main civic society partners within the Save Zimbabwe Campaign, which accuse them of selling out. At a recent meeting in Bulawayo, non-government groups voted to reject the amendments and continue pressing for an all-new constitution.

The MDC factions need to draw a line under this issue and start working towards crucial presidential and parliamentary elections in March next year.

But even as attempts are made to heal the rifts and form a united front, the Tsvangirai-led MDC has become embroiled in two internal conflicts of its own that could be leading to a messy implosion.

On October 10, the faction's influential women's assembly led by Lucia Matibenga was dissolved by the MDC's standing committee, on the grounds of poor performance.

"With the MDC's attack on its women's league, we are relegated once again to a second-class citizen position," said Grace Kwinjeh, one of the senior leaders of the dissolved women's assembly.

Matibenga disputed the legality of the move and took the matter to Zimbabwe's High Court, which ordered the party to hold a congress of its female members to decide whether the assembly should be dissolved.

MDC Secretary General Tendai Biti rejected claims of unfair treatment, saying the party had run an internal inquiry into "disharmony" in the body and had acted on the basis of most of the evidence it had gathered. The decision did not reflect "patriarchy, chauvinism or contempt of the feminist movement", he said, in remarks quoted by the London-based SW Radio Africa.

Meanwhile, the Tsvangirai-led MDC branch for Britain and Ireland, led by Ephraim Tapa, was dissolved on October 13 at a meeting presided over by MDC national chairman, Lovemore Moyo.

Both disputes have stirred up furious infighting, with accusations of wrongdoing on both sides, and claims that people are being pushed out to make way for friends and relatives of senior party leaders.

"What happened today among Zimbabweans here is an assault on both democracy and human rights. Once again, Zimbabweans have been deprived of a right to choose their leaders," said Tapa the day he was removed. "The MDC... can never take us to the freedom that we are craving as Zimbabweans. The freedom I am talking about is the right to make decisions on who should lead us."

However, a senior party official, who declined to be named, defended Tsvangirai. He said they had information that the party had been infiltrated by the Zimbabwean security services - "hence the need to move with speed".

"This is a very sensitive issue, and for the president [Tsvangirai] to follow all the constitutional processes at this critical time would have been remiss," he said. "He is fully aware of the constitutional requirements, hence he has already called for fresh elections this week. Those who have been suspended are free to contest," he said.

A political analyst in Harare said the internal strife and the accompanying allegations reflected badly on Tsvangirai's leadership skills.

"It doesn't augur well for a person who is fighting what is generally regarded as a dictator to be constantly accused of ignoring party rules and regulations. It gives you an ominous picture of the future when such a person wields real state power," said the analyst, who did not want to be identified.

He suggested the lack of unity and public conflict was bad news at a time when the MDC should really be focusing all its efforts on the elections.

"Tsvangirai keeps shooting himself in the foot," he said. "The party is already too weak to pose a serious threat to ZANU-PF in next year's election and he provokes a new storm in the party when civic society partners are already ambivalent about his ability to lead."

"The MDC is being forced to fight on too many fronts, when it should be mobilising the limited resources it has for the big fight against ZANU-PF. I don't know what will happen next year, but they appear keener to destroy themselves than face ZANU-PF head on as a united party."

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of a reporter in Harare.

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