

## **Mistrust Hampers Zimbabwe Mediation Effort**

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The South African president will have to work hard to persuade Zimbabwe's government and opposition to talk to one another - and even to him.

Mutual mistrust and suspicion remain the two key obstacles to a negotiated political settlement in Zimbabwe, say analysts. A third challenge facing South African president Thabo Mbeki, who is leading the latest mediation attempt by Zimbabwe's neighbours, will be persuading the personalities who will be involved in any talks to put their egos to one side.

Police attacks on opposition leaders and their supporters on March 11 led to an international outcry against the deteriorating human rights situation in Zimbabwe. The United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand cranked up pressure on Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe to give his opponents breathing space to operate, and threatened more "targeted sanctions" against the regime's elite.

The traditionally lethargic Southern African Development Community, SADC, called an emergency summit in the Tanzanian capital of Dar es Salaam on March 28-29 at which they privately made Mugabe aware of their concerns about the TV images showing a badly beaten Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Although the president tried to downplay this ticking-off when he reported back to ZANU-PF supporters at home, and went on to secure endorsement from the party's Central Committee as its sole candidate in next year's presidential election, South Africa's Thabo Mbeki has said Mugabe was told that what was happening in Zimbabwe was "not acceptable".

Mugabe's talks with the SADC were followed by more arrests, beatings, abductions and torture of opposition activists accused of bombing state infrastructure and police stations.

SADC heads of state appointed Mbeki to mediate between the MDC and the ruling ZANU-PF. Mbeki has set up a five-member team to consider how such a negotiation process would work.

Last week, Mbeki met the secretary-generals of the MDC's two factions in Johannesburg. According to sources close to Mbeki, he refused to deal with them as separate factions and instead said he wanted to address them as a united party, and then take their common demands to the ZANU-PF leadership.

A political analyst in Harare said the biggest problem facing Mbeki was the abiding atmosphere of mistrust. ZANU-PF accuses the MDC of being a front for the West, while the opposition party returns the animosity, and also remains suspicious of the South African leader's credentials as an impartial broker.

"The MDC has always had problems with Thabo Mbeki since his earlier involvement in the Zimbabwean crisis," said the analyst, who asked not to be named. "They don't trust Mbeki, in the first place because they think he is too close to Mugabe. Secondly, they don't trust his so-called 'quiet diplomacy', whereby Mbeki has refused to openly criticise Mugabe's brutal rule."

By contrast, a ZANU-PF insider told IWPR that "Mbeki is welcome to discuss our challenges with us. We are neighbours. We help each other in times of need."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the party insider repeated the official line that the MDC exists only to advance western interests.

“It is up to them to prove they are Zimbabwean. Why do they always appeal to foreigners whenever there is a problem at home? They must renounce their western roots and denounce the sanctions which are hurting our people if they want to talk to us,” he said.

He was dismissive of the MDC’s demand for a new constitution, and refused to say whether ZANU-PF would consider the issue if it were put on the agenda of the proposed talks.

“They rejected a new constitution in 2000. Have they changed their mind now? What are they proposing?” he asked. “It is their problem. Comrade Mugabe has said the current constitution is sacrosanct and non-negotiable.”

A foreign diplomat based in Harare, who did not want to be named, said there was a need for compromise on both sides. He said it was wrong to declare any issue out of bounds in a negotiating process.

“For the sake of progress and for the good of the country, Tsvangirai will have to accept a face-to-face meeting with Mugabe. He can’t avoid him,” he said. “If it means recognising him as head of state, he will have to. After all Mugabe, has only a few months as president if he is defeated in next year’s election.”

He said there was a chance that the South African president would be able to persuade Mugabe to meet his nemesis Tsvangirai at some stage.

“If Mugabe has accepted that there is a crisis in his country and wants financial help from SADC, he cannot afford to humiliate those trying to help,” he said. “Zimbabwe is unlikely to get help from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund so long as there is no acceptable political settlement.”

To sum up, he said, “These are the pressures on both leaders. They will have to subordinate their egos to the national good. It would be unfortunate to squander this window of opportunity and allow the situation to get worse than it already is now, or the institutions of the state will start to collapse completely.”

The MDC says it might boycott next year’s joint parliamentary and presidential elections if no major constitutional reforms take place before then, and if draconian laws like the Public Order and Security Act and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act have not been repealed.

The party is also calling for fair elections under international supervision, and for the opposition to be given access to state-run media.

Overcoming the gulf between the MDC’s demands and the Mugabe administration’s refusal to budge presents a huge challenge to the South African leader.

“Mbeki’s mediation skills will be put to the test,” said the Harare-based analyst. “He cannot afford to fail again. Nobody in the region wants this crisis to continue.”

Takesure Dengu is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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