

Mugabe Henchmen on the Warpath

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ZANU PF youth militias and activists launch campaign of beatings and threats.

Violence and massive intimidation are wreaking havoc in Zimbabwe's rural areas as the ruling party's and opposition's campaigns gather momentum ahead of Zimbabwe's fifth parliamentary election on March 31.

ZANU PF youth militias, President Robert Mugabe's much feared stormtroopers, known among the population as the Green Bombers, are currently behaving with such menace in the Makoni West constituency that many villagers have fled their homes.

Makoni West is a marginal constituency on the outskirts of Rusape, 135 kilometres southeast of Harare. The sitting ZANU PF MP has been replaced by Zimbabwe's highly unpopular Minister of Agriculture Joseph Made, who is opposed by Remus Makuwaza, for the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, and Tendai Chekera of the small regional party ZANU-Ndonga.

Villagers also allege they have been threatened with eviction from their recently acquired farms - taken over in Mugabe's move against white commercial farmer - if they do not vote for ruling party.

Matthew Ngoroma, 38, told IWPR that he fled his home after "some people told me I would pay the price for supporting MDC". He said four men in Zanu PF campaign shirts visited him three weeks ago and threatened to burn down his house. "They said they would torch my house if I continued selling MDC cards," said Ngoroma, who has moved his family to a place near Rusape town. "I am not alone. There are others who have been beaten, threatened and intimidated. It's a terror campaign."

Other villagers perceived to be MDC supporters have been denied food aid, fertiliser and maize seed being distributed by government officials loyal to ZANU PF.

"You have to be a Zanu PF supporter to get fertiliser, seed and food," said another villager, Susan Rugoyi. "We have to show Zanu PF cards in order to get a pack of maize meal being distributed by Zanu PF officials as food aid."

The chiefs and village heads have also been roped into Zanu PF campaign teams. Villagers said the chiefs are forcing their subjects to attend Zanu PF rallies. Meanwhile, the chiefs are banning opposition rallies in their areas while threatening to evict opposition supporters.

"We do have several cases of political violence that we are investigating," said a senior police officer who declined to be named. "But it would be unfair to say categorically say that these violent incidents are being perpetrated by Zanu PF. What if they are just rogue elements abusing Zanu PF regalia?"

The violence is not just isolated incidents. It is on a national scale. Fifty soldiers assaulted three MDC candidates returning from the launch of the party's election campaign in Masvingo in the southeast on February 20. MDC spokesman Paul Themba Nyathi said, "The soldiers first assaulted Gabriel Chiwara, our candidate for Makoni West, and his election candidate, Josphat Munhumumwe, accusing them of selling the country to the British.

“They were kicked and punched and sustained injuries all over their bodies. They were taken to hospital for treatment and later released. The assault was reported to the police, but no arrests have been made.”

Nyathi said the MDC was particularly concerned about this assault because it repeated a pattern of army violence against the opposition in places many hundreds of kilometres apart. MDC candidate for Mutare West, Gabriel Chiwara, who is trying to topple Transport Minister Christopher Mushohwe in a constituency 250 km southeast of Harare, was assaulted by soldiers together with his campaign manager.

Reports are also coming in of violence by soldiers, Green Bombers and ZANU PF activists against MDC candidates in the south of the country in Gwanda and Beitbridge constituencies.

In Norton, 40 km west of Harare, a stronghold of ZANU PF MP Sabina Mugabe, the president’s sister, ruling party supporters waylaid and severely beat an eleven-strong MDC campaign team who were putting up party posters. The posters and party regalia the MDC activists were wearing were confiscated and burned.

Hilda Mafudze, the MDC candidate for Manyame constituency, neighbouring Norton, said, “This cannot be a free and fair election. How can the whole process be fair when one’s campaign team is beaten up and their regalia burnt by these thugs who belong to a party which claims it supports a free and fair election?”

Wellington Chibebe, secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, said, “We want to state very clearly that as much as the politicians are saying the elections will be violence-free, the reality on the ground is that ordinary men, women and children are going to be subject to untold violence.”

Reginald Matchaba-Hove, chairman of the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, ZESN, a group of 40 civic organisations supporting democratic elections, said, “For many opposition supporters, fear of violence means they would rather not go to vote than vote and face the recriminations.

“The penalty for voting for the opposition can be expulsion from the village, physical violence, withdrawal from the local food aid registers, or all of them combined. Past experience has taught them that such threats are eventually carried out, and they fear a repeat of 2000 and 2002 [legislative and presidential elections marred by widespread violence and intimidation].”

Rural areas in Zimbabwe’s majority ethnic Shona regions have traditionally voted ZANU PF, with the chiefs, who maintain government food registers, beneficiaries and loyal supporters of the ruling party. According to southern Africa’s Famine Early Warning System Network, five million Zimbabweans, nearly half the population, are in need of food aid.

President Mugabe, in an interview on ZANU PF-controlled state television, said he wanted this election campaign to be peaceful. His interior minister, Kembo Mohadi, said organisations alleging violence and human rights abuses were “subversives who are western-funded”.

Responding to the allegations that chiefs are forcing their people to attend ZANU PF rallies and vote for Mugabe’s party, Mohadi said, “Ours is a peaceful party. Our people hold their chiefs in high regard and, naturally, get worried when such accusations are made against them. We cannot deny our people the right to choose their own leaders when we fought so hard [in the 1970s liberation war] to bring them human rights, freedom and social justice.”

Inspector Wayne Bvudzijena, Zimbabwe’s national police spokesman, said the national force had not received any reports of violence or intimidation by political parties. “I am surprised to hear these reports,” he said. “But I can assure you that the campaign remains peaceful.”

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