

Mugabe Looks Set to Tighten Grip

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He seems unlikely to make any concessions to the opposition if he wins bitterly contested presidential poll. If Robert Mugabe retains the presidency in a predicted run-off election, analysts say he will be more determined than ever to cling on to power.

The 84-year-old leader of ZANU-PF won't be in any mood to offer any concessions to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, despite its majority in parliament, they say.

Indeed, if Mugabe secures the presidency, many expect the MDC to be rendered virtually powerless - as the head of state controls the Senate, the upper house of parliament, which has the power to block the lower house and overrule legislation passed.

Some suggest Mugabe could even use his powers to dissolve the lower chamber in order to secure his own party's control of the assembly.

Results from the original March 29 presidential poll have not yet been published by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC. However, observers think it unlikely that either of the top two candidates will be awarded over 50 per cent of the vote, introducing the need for a second round.

MDC secretary general Tendai Biti announced on April 10 that his party was not prepared to take part in a second round, arguing that its leader Morgan Tsvangirai won the poll outright. Should they stick to this position, Mugabe could run uncontested.

The results of the parliamentary poll issued by the ZEC show the MDC secured a narrow majority in the lower house. They won 99 seats, with ZANU-PF taking 97.

An opposition-dominated lower house could make life difficult for Mugabe, but analysts believe he would use considerable means at his disposal to enforce his will.

Brian Raftopoulos, analyst and director of research at the South Africa-based NGO Solidarity Peace Trust, said that an MDC majority in the lower house will not significantly change the balance of power if the incumbent president stays in power.

"If Mugabe were to win a run-off, he would still have a great deal more control than parliament. He [could even] dissolve parliament," he said. "Mugabe will do everything possible to retain power.

"Mugabe will try to whittle down the MDC majority and diminish the opposition's influence. He's already contesting 16 parliamentary seats, which would give Mugabe's ZANU-PF the majority."

Southern Africa correspondent for The Independent Basildon Peta agreed that an opposition-dominated

lower house won't have much influence on the president.

"Any MDC majority would be totally meaningless if Robert Mugabe wins a presidential run-off and remains in power," he said.

"I don't see how a narrow MDC majority in parliament can make life in any way difficult for [him]. The MDC's majority won't be of significance until Tsvangirai also becomes president.

"I don't think Mugabe will make any concessions if he rigs the run-off. If he cannot persuade parliament to vote in favour of any new legislation via a simple majority, as required by the law, he will be more than happy to ignore parliament and rule under the current legislation that heavily favours him.

"Mugabe will be assured of a majority in the Senate, which can override any decision in parliament."

The president revived the Senate with an election in November 2005, having abolished it by a constitutional amendment in 1989. The decision to re-establish it was controversial. Tsvangirai called for a boycott of the election, arguing that the upper chamber is a meaningless body and the ballot would be rigged anyway.

Peta points out that the Senate provides Mugabe with a powerful counter to the MDC-dominated lower house.

"Even though the elected Senate seats [contested in the latest elections] were split at 30/30 between the combined MDC and ZANU-PF, any incumbent president is allowed to make extra appointments to the Senate. The 18 chiefs and governors who automatically sit in the Senate will assure Mugabe of a majority in that chamber, as these are all people who have traditionally supported him," he said.

Mugabe also enjoys sweeping emergency presidential powers which enable him to bypass parliament and effectively legislate in so-called emergency cases. Peta points out that Mugabe "recently used these powers to amend the electoral act to allow police officers in polling stations - to help the 'physically incapacitated'".

Patrick Smith, editor of the respected London-based newsletter Africa Confidential, agrees that the MDC's dominant presence in the lower house is unlikely to curb Mugabe's power.

"It seems Mugabe is determined to prevail and the Zimbabwe crisis will rumble on," he said.

Marian Tupy, policy analyst at The Cato Institute, believes the situation may even worsen, "In the next four of five years, we will see the economic crisis deepen even further."

Smith, however, is more optimistic. "I do think a corner has been turned. There will have to be some sort of arrangement, some kind of power sharing between ZANU-PF and the MDC - some point of cooperation. Decisions are overwhelmingly weighted in favour of the executive, but the two sides will have to mould a compromise," he said.

David Coltard of the MDC who gained a Senate seat in these elections said his fractious party would have to unite if it was to pose any challenge to Mugabe.

“It was, in fact, the two factions of the MDC that won the majority of seats in parliament. It’s important that they form a coalition agreement to ensure an effective, functional majority,” he said.

The party split into two factions in 2005, when Tsvangirai chose to boycott the Senate elections. Tsvangirai heads the bigger faction, with the other led by Arthur Mutambara.

Some analysts believe the MDC must work hard to bury its differences and show the electorate that it is capable of standing up to Mugabe, otherwise it risks alienating its supporters.

“The MDC must be very careful. If they are seen by the people of Zimbabwe as occupying a position of power, but are also seen as not being able to change anything because of the blocking actions by Mugabe, then the people will associate the MDC with failure,” said Tupy.

Smith remains hopeful that the opposition has some power to effect change.

“The MDC has a great deal of influence – they have the support of the people. That counts for something, even if they don’t control the levers of power.”

Raftopoulos agrees. “The MDC are the popular choice. Tsvangirai should be given the opportunity to show what he can do. The voice of the Zimbabweans should be heard – and should be respected.”

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