

NGOs Move to Sideline Tsvangirai

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Morgan Tsvangirai insists he must head any transitional administration, but opposition-aligned pressure groups say they want a more neutral figure.

The announcement by several influential non-government groups in Zimbabwe that they wanted a transitional administration headed by a neutral figure has dealt a severe blow to opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, who has been seeking support to take on the job himself.

In a surprise move, a group of civil society organisations said on July 15 they would reject a transitional government led by either Tsvangirai or President Robert Mugabe. They included the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions – which gave birth to Tsvangirai’s Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in 1999, the Zimbabwe National Students’ Union, Women of Zimbabwe Arise, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, and Christian groups.

As preliminary discussions take place in Pretoria to lay the groundwork for talks on a power-sharing arrangement, the MDC has made it a precondition that Tsvangirai should head any “government of national unity”.

South African president Thabo Mbeki, appointed by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, as negotiator in the Zimbabwe crisis, is thought to be putting the final touches to a negotiated settlement between ZANU-PF and the MDC. Those privy to the Pretoria talks say the deal would see the establishment of a presidency with scaled-down powers and an executive prime minister, and both factions of the MDC, of which Tsvangirai’s is the larger, would be awarded senior posts.

Following consultative meeting on July 15, Lovemore Madhuku said the non-government organisations, NGOs, had agreed that a transitional government would provide an appropriate vehicle for ushering in democratic reform, but that “such an arrangement must not be headed by a person from ZANU-PF or the MDC”.

“We want a neutral person,” said Madhuku, who heads the National Constitutional Assembly, an influential body that presses for constitutional reform.

The NGOs, he said, envisaged a transitional authority with a specific, limited mandate to oversee the drafting of a new democratic constitution and the installation of a legitimate government, leading to a fair presidential election.

“We wholeheartedly reject the suggestion of a power-sharing agreement that fails to immediately address the inadequacy of the current constitutional regime,” he added.

Tsvangirai beat Mugabe in the first round of the presidential election on March 29, although election officials said he failed to win the required absolute majority. He boycotted the June 27 run-off vote, citing violence against his supporters.

His demand to take charge of a caretaker government has been backed by the European Union, the United States, Britain and several members of the African Union and Southern African Development Community,

SADC.

Outraged MDC officials said the civil society groups' plan to ditch Tsvangirai, their ally of the past eight years, was tantamount to stabbing him in the back.

"The problem with civic society is that they are not being realistic," said MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa. "Tsvangirai won the presidential elections, based on the [March 29 poll] results. For all intents and purposes, he should lead any transitional arrangement or whatever government you choose to call it.

"Why would they need a neutral person, who was not voted for by the people, to be in charge, when facts are that the people of Zimbabwe made a choice on March 29 in a legitimate election?"

Useni Sibanda, coordinator of the Christian Alliance, a coalition of church groups, accepted that the NGOs' announcement might be interpreted as meaning Tsvangirai's allies had ditched him.

"Mugabe might use it for propaganda purposes to mean that Tsvangirai has been abandoned by his allies," he explained.

At the same time, he said, "Tsvangirai must understand it's time to put national interests first before personal interests".

Eldred Masunungure, a politics lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, said the opposition leader should come to terms with his allies' decision.

"Tsvangirai might see it as a political blow that his allies want him out of the transitional arrangement so that he concentrates on solving the political crisis.... I think he must not feel ditched. It will give him time to re-strategise," he said.

Masunungure noted that given the degree of political polarisation in Zimbabwe, it would be very difficult to identify a neutral figure.

According to Madhuku, Zimbabwean NGOs believe a transitional government should represent a wider segment of the population than just the political parties.

"Individuals from a broad sector of Zimbabwean society should be incorporated into the transitional government. This should include representatives from labour organisations, women's and children's rights groups, churches and various interests groups," he said.

He insisted that the NGOs' support for a power-sharing deal was conditional on an end to political violence, the restoration of law and order, and the resumption of humanitarian relief operations.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of a reporter in Harare.

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