

Opposition Claim Poll a "Massive Fraud"

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MDC leader gives followers barely disguised signal to overthrow government.

Zimbabwe and the southern Africa region has been plunged into deep crisis after opponents of President Robert Mugabe conceded on April 1 that the ruling ZANU PF party was on its way to a crushing two-thirds majority parliamentary election victory.

However, Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition MDC, said the victory had been achieved as a result of massive and widespread electoral fraud by Mugabe and ZANU PF. Tsvangirai gave a barely disguised signal to his followers to begin extra-parliamentary action to topple a government that has presided over seven years of economic collapse, widespread violence, massive unemployment and inflation, hunger and spreading disease.

"These elections cannot be accepted by anyone in their right mind," an angry Tsvangirai told reporters in Harare. "This is disgusting massive fraud.

"I am asking people to defend their right to vote. We have been using the legal route and that route has failed. We are not going to use it this time."

Tsvangirai was referring to the last parliamentary election in 2000 when, despite massive government violence which resulted in many deaths and countless maimings among the opposition, the MDC won 57 of the 120 parliamentary seats. In subsequent actions in the supreme court, more than twenty ZANU PF victories were overturned as fraudulent, giving the MDC a parliamentary majority.

But the supreme court verdicts were held up for five years in the appeal court, staffed by judges loyal to Mugabe and who had been given properties confiscated from white commercial farmers in the post-2000 anarchic government-inspired upheavals. Those electoral appeals are still stuck in the supreme court and, following the March 31 general election, have become null and void.

What Tsvangirai plans in place of the legal route, which many of his top officials previously acceded to only reluctantly, is not yet clear. One near-certainty is that MDC MPs will not this time take their seats or salaries in a parliament seen as totally subverted and corrupted by Mugabe and ZANU PF.

Tsvangirai, widely criticised for his weak leadership, may have to consent to the calls of leaders of civil society for an attempted revolution similar to those of Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. Prime among these civic voices has been that of Pius Ncube, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, who predicted the poll would be heavily rigged.

Before Easter Sunday mass last weekend in Bulawayo Cathedral, the Archbishop said, "I hope that people get so disillusioned that they really organise and kick him [Mugabe] out by a non-violent, popular mass uprising ... People should pluck up just a bit of courage and stand up against him and chase him away."

Tsvangirai admitted the impending defeat at a moment on April 1 when the MDC had won 30 of the first 38 constituencies to declare. But they were all safe opposition seats in the three major urban centres of Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare. His MDC advisers decided they must pre-empt the final outcome when party supporters reported massive intimidation and ballot stuffing in the key rural areas of Mashonaland and Masvingo, the heartland of traditional Shona tribal support for ZANU PF. In an electorate of 5.7 million,

some one to two million “zombie votes” of dead people still on the ZANU PF-controlled electoral register are believed to have been cast.

Among many other electoral fraud weapons, human rights organisations, opposition supporters and media analysts said the application of sheer fear during this election campaign was the most powerful and subtle, especially in Shona rural areas.

Poverty-stricken peasants were warned by communal chiefs that their agricultural plots would be repossessed if a single MDC vote was found in the ballot boxes.

It may be a mystery to the outside world how ZANU PF can impose such a draconian hold on its rural people. It is doubtful that the majority of them support ZANU PF, but, more than their urban relatives, they have borne the brunt of Mugabe’s mismanagement of the country. It is in these rural areas that such necessities as bread, sugar and the staple maize are either available through ZANU PF officials or not obtainable at all.

Until last year, international non-government organisations such as Oxfam, Care International and World Vision donated basic food for survival, but they were expelled by Mugabe who said they were supporting the MDC, leaving the government as the sole guardian and distributor of food supplies.

During the last election campaign these rural areas were subjected to heavy intimidation and violence by ZANU PF men who had also coerced the same population during the 1970s war of liberation against Zimbabwe’s former white Rhodesian government.

That war and the events of 2000 are still implanted in the folk memories of the rural people of Shona tribal lands, where the majority of Zimbabweans live. Intimidation was as a rife as ever during the election campaign, but it went unnoticed by foreign observer teams and journalists who hung around the cities rather than penetrating the less comfortable and more dangerous countryside.

In Shona rural areas, ZANU PF commissars had long ago divided the people into cells of 500 each and placed one polling station in the territory of each cell. All the ZANU PF militants and the Green Bombers, Mugabe’s personal storm troopers from the National Youth Militia, then had to do was to tell each and every largely illiterate peasant, whose traditional loyalty is to the local chief, to go to the polling station in their cell or ward. The chilling message delivered, out of sight and earshot of election observers and the foreign press, was that the community as a whole would bear responsibility if a single MDC vote was found in the ballot box.

The implication was that extreme violence would follow on the whole community from the Green Bombers and ZANU PF organisers if an MDC vote appeared. Control was easy because vote counting was carried out at the polling station under pro-Mugabe police and army officers. Among other threats available to chiefs and headmen, who allocate communal lands for agriculture, was withdrawal of plots essential for bare survival of the peasantry.

Many details of the massive fraud employed by Mugabe will emerge in coming weeks, but the above was the main method, long planned, by which he secured his huge victory.

“Five-and-half years of savagery have left a legacy of fear,” said Andrew Moyse, head of Zimbabwe’s Media Monitoring Service, one of the country’s few surviving human rights organisations. “Violence this time only needed to be implied. If you beat a dog every day for five years there comes a time when all you need to do is show him the stick and he will do as he is told.”

By late April 1, ZANU PF was well on its way to a two-thirds majority which will allow Mugabe to change the constitution and strengthen his iron rule. Meanwhile, the South African parliamentary observer delegation, the most influential of the observer groups permitted to enter Zimbabwe, was preparing to issue a statement declaring the 2005 Zimbabwe parliamentary election free and fair, as instructed in advance by South African president Thabo Mbeki.

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