

Opposition Under Attack

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Paranoia reigns in Harare where the government is jumping at shadows.

A nervous Zimbabwean government has put its opponents under siege in what analysts believe will be a futile effort to thwart swelling public fury over Operation Murambatsvina (Drive Out the Rubbish) and the current economic crisis.

Armed police forcibly broke up a public meeting in central Harare organised by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, on June 16.

Police insisted the meeting, being held to commemorate the Day of the African Child, posed a threat to public order. Several MDC activists including some of the party's parliamentarians, as well as journalists covering the meeting, were beaten during the raid.

Analysts say further proof of the government's mounting sense of insecurity was the reaction when University of Zimbabwe students in Harare decided to celebrate Liverpool Football Club's victory in the European Cup. Armed riot police, assuming the students were protesting against the government, descended on the campus.

Similarly, police also broke up a meeting of university students who had gathered to elect a new leadership. Then, a few days later, they dispersed a crowd watching a local soccer match in Harare's Mabvuku township, suspecting that the event was an MDC meeting to mobilise for mass action.

"Every little thing is a cause for strong reaction from the authorities. It just shows how insecure the government feels," said Professor Brian Raftopoulos, director of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Zimbabwe.

The MDC has threatened mass protests to force President Robert Mugabe to halt the demolition of millions of shack homes around the country.

In a show of force unprecedented since Mugabe and his ruling Zanu PF party wrested power from Ian Smith's white government 25 years ago, armed police have in the past few weeks swooped on opposition strongholds, destroying homes and arresting more than 30,000 people, mainly opposition supporters.

University of Zimbabwe political scientist Eldred Masunungure said by publicly wielding the iron fist, Mugabe is sending a clear message to ordinary Zimbabweans about the price they will pay if they join any protest against his government.

As he scatters some two million people to the rural areas, the president is intent on banishing the biggest threat to his 25 years of autocratic rule as poverty, unemployment and mass hunger reach record levels.

"The strategy is to thoroughly terrorise the population into submission as a way of neutralising any impending mass action," Masunungure told IWPR.

Raftopoulos believes the government's high-handed approach is also an admission it does not have any solution to the deepening political, economic and food crisis. "They see suppression of all voices of dissent as a way of consolidating their hold on power. What we are seeing are the typical signs of dictatorship."

Nearly half of Zimbabwe's remaining 11.5 million people (an estimated 3.5 million have fled into exile) face starvation, partly because of poor rains last season but mainly because ZANU PF supporters destroyed agricultural production when they seized land from large-scale white commercial farmers.

International isolation of Zimbabwe's government, which intensified following ZANU PF's controversial parliamentary election victory in March, has accelerated the meltdown of an already rapidly declining economy sapped by lack of foreign aid, international investment and hard cash, runaway inflation, 80 per cent unemployment and mass poverty.

Masunungure insisted that strong-arm tactics amid worsening social and economic conditions would not be enough to silence opposition. "It can only achieve the opposite," he said. "We have seen this in other countries where governments have attempted to quell discontent by using force against the people.

"In the long run, these governments have failed and there is no valid reason to believe the government of Zimbabwe will succeed where others have failed."

Josphat Gidi is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe.

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