

President Undermined by ZANU-PF Divisions

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Mugabe may face greater threat from own party than weakened MDC.

Though President Robert Mugabe is reported by state-controlled media to have won endorsement from ZANU-PF's powerful Women's League, Youth League, traditional leaders and war veterans to lead the party in next year's elections, analysts say his fight for survival is just beginning.

In their view, the biggest threat to his supremacy emanates from other more powerful groupings within his party who are far less vocal in their support of him.

The decision by the ruling party last week to call for a special congress in December suggests deeper, behind-the-scenes divisions in the ZANU-PF leadership.

The agenda of the meeting has not been made public and the ruling party's political commissar, Elliot Manyika, said it would be determined by the central committee.

But speculation is rife that the purpose of the special congress is to choose a candidate to represent ZANU-PF in next year's joint presidential and parliamentary elections after a faction of the ruling party, led by retired army general Solomon Mujuru, refused to have Mugabe endorsed as the sole candidate at the party's central committee meeting in March.

Since then, Mugabe has cajoled more pliable wings of his party to demonstrate their show of support for him as the preferred candidate.

The decision to call for the special congress shows that Mugabe's position is now even more precarious because he has to fight his battle on two fronts: within his party and against the opposition, in the form of a determined, if splintered, Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Oppah Muchinguri, leader of the ZANU-PF Women's League and a close associate of Mugabe, has often been quoted endorsing Mugabe as the sole candidate but some say she is speaking for herself. She is openly campaigning to replace Joice Mujuru, wife of Solomon Mujuru, as vice-president. She can only achieve this feat if Mugabe holds on to the presidency.

All is not well either in the Youth League where vocal Mugabe supporters - youth leaders Saviour Kasukuwere and his close lieutenant, Patrick Zhuwayo (who is also Mugabe's nephew) - apparently made false claims that the league had unanimously endorsed Mugabe as the sole candidate. The two were subsequently removed from the leadership of the Youth League, ostensibly because they were "too old". However, analysts believe senior members of the party opposed to Mugabe were behind the move to clip their wings.

Two weeks ago, war veterans demonstrated on the streets of the capital Harare, vowing that they would "die with our president" who should be president for life.

“We don’t want to give the imperialists any room to remove him (Mugabe) from power and we think now is a good time to show the whole world that we are behind President Mugabe,” said war veteran leader Jabulani Sibanda, explaining the reason for their demonstration. “Anyone in the ruling party with ambitions to challenge President Mugabe is digging his own grave.”

Although he denied that there were factions in ZANU-PF, he referred instead to “internal reactionary forces within our own party”.

Mugabe has called war veterans “torchbearers” of his presidential campaign but as far as the special congress is concerned they have no independent vote. Also some analysts say it would be foolish to think that the war veterans are a homogenous grouping. A week after the demonstration a fight broke out between senior war veteran leaders in Masvingo city, 300 kilometres south of Harare.

War veteran leader Joseph Chinotimba was beaten up by provincial leaders who told him they did not support Mugabe’s candidature but backed the Mujuru faction instead.

In May this year, some war veterans said they would not campaign for Mugabe unless they were given huge cash payments well ahead of the elections.

“You have ignored us all this time only to resurface because there is an election tomorrow,” a war veteran was quoted saying at a meeting in Mutare. “We are tired of being used. We are not going to campaign for the president or the party (ZANU-PF) until you give us more money.”

Analysts say Mugabe would have to fork out huge sums to placate this important grouping, as he did in November 1997 when he gave each of the 50,000 or so former fighters a lump sum of 50,000 Zimbabwe dollars each, as well as other unbudgeted-for perks. The Zimbabwe dollar collapsed in the aftermath of that “black November” decision, setting the country’s economy into a tailspin which continues today.

The embattled Mugabe has bribed traditional leaders in rural areas by giving them new vehicles for their personal use. He has said they can buy fuel from the money they receive from penalties paid by offenders under their jurisdiction. Traditional leaders are empowered by the constitution to try minor crimes in their areas and charge fines.

Analysts note that traditional leaders can easily manipulate their subjects to vote according to their bidding. Food shortages have only made rural communities more dependent on government handouts which come through chiefs.

In past elections, traditional leaders have been ordered to herd their subjects to polling stations where they then “helped them mark their ballots” because they were illiterate. That way Mugabe’s victory in the populous rural areas has been guaranteed. With the latest gifts to the chiefs, their voting pattern is a foregone conclusion. But the urban-rural drift which followed Operation Murambatsvina - where hundreds of thousands of people had their dwellings destroyed, leaving them with no choice but to return to their rural homes - may change voting patterns in the rural areas.

A political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe said Mugabe was personally facing a greater threat from within his own party than from the weakened MDC. He said in recent months Mugabe had begun warming towards a faction led by Rural Amenities Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa who “because of the nature of his portfolio should be closer than anyone to influence the majority rural voters.

“There is no doubt that Mugabe is having more sleepless nights [because of threats] from within his own party than from the MDC,” said the commentator. “He would have loved to have been endorsed as the sole presidential candidate at the March meeting but that did not happen and he is angry. That has driven him closer to the rival faction led by Mnangagwa who sees this as a chance to improve his prospects against Mujuru.”

The political scientist said it was not a coincidence that Sibanda, the head of the war veterans, was also personally close to Mnangagwa. “When it really comes to the elections, we know what the war veterans can do,” he said. “Mugabe would like to use them as his foot soldiers just as he has done in the past. This will undermine Mujuru’s influence. But when it comes to the special congress, there will be so much noise about Mugabe [from the women and youth leagues] we may never hear what Mujuru stands for.”

Another analyst said that a wily Mugabe had cleverly linked his fate to that of his ministers and members of parliament by holding presidential and parliamentary elections at the same time. He said it would be difficult for his members of parliament to “delink” their campaign to the president’s. “It means every MP who is campaigning for ZANU-PF is also campaigning for Mugabe, because if ZANU-PF loses the MP also loses his seat,” he said. “Similarly, one cannot vote for a ZANU-PF MP and not vote for Mugabe.”

But will he survive the extraordinary congress? Analysts say the battle lines are drawn but which way the fight will go is not yet clear.

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