

Presidential Election Run-off Unlikely

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If election shows signs of heading for second round, Mugabe is expected to take steps to ensure it doesn't.

The belated entry of Zimbabwe's former finance minister Simba Makoni into the presidential race has prompted speculation that a second round of voting will be needed after the March 29 polls.

But some argue that the ruling party will determine the outcome through control and abuse of the electoral process, removing the need for a run-off.

Makoni is one of four candidates who will contest the presidential poll, set to take place on the same day as senate, house of assembly and local government elections.

Before Makoni came into the picture, it was essentially a two-horse race for the presidency between the country's leader since independence 84-year old Robert Mugabe, and Morgan Tsvangirai, head of the main faction of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

However, there has been speculation that Makoni's candidacy will split the vote, triggering a second round.

According to a constitutional amendment of 2002, 51 per cent of the vote is now required to win the presidency instead of a simple majority as was previously the case.

Some observers believe Makoni may snatch votes from the MDC in urban areas, and undermine the ruling ZANU-PF in the countryside where it holds sway. The candidate, who has no party of his own, is seen as representing moderates from both sides.

Zimbabwe's former information minister, political scientist Jonathan Moyo, suggested that all three leading candidates could struggle to clear 51 per cent of the vote.

"If you look around where Tsvangirai is popular and likely to get support, where Makoni is popular and likely to get support, where Mugabe is popular and likely to pick more votes, none of them is guaranteed 51 per cent," said Moyo on an online news site.

However, a political science lecturer interviewed by IWPR under conditions of anonymity said Mugabe would never "allow himself to be humiliated" by a second ballot.

"A run-off is only possible when the whole electoral system is transparent and all the parties have access to the entire process - from the casting of the vote, through to counting, to the announcement of the final result," he said.

He argued that the authorities would use their control of administrative bodies to manipulate the results.

“The election results are decided by the command centre which is under the full control of the ruling ZANU-PF party and to which Makoni and Tsvangirai and their agents have no access,” he said.

The political scientist said the opposition party missed a chance in the recent negotiations with ZANU-PF, mediated by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, when it failed to demand access to the command centre where the final results of all national elections are processed.

The SADC negotiations, which began in March last year, are intended to achieve an agreement between ZANU-PF and the MDC to put an end to the country’s eight-year political and economic crisis.

He said that if a close challenger to Mugabe emerged during the poll, it would be easy for the command centre to use postal votes from abroad to widen Mugabe’s lead. He suggested it was easy to exploit the postal voting system to influence results.

The political scientist added that the opposition had shot itself in the foot by failing to resolve the internal differences which led it to split in 2005. He also argued that because the MDC delayed its decision to take part in elections, many of its supporters may have missed the chance to register to vote.

“They took too long to decide whether or not they wanted to take part in the elections,” he said. “As a result, it is possible that a number of people who wanted to vote for them didn’t in fact register as required by law.”

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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