

Public Fury Over Election Mounts

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Voters are running out of patience with Mugabe's refusal to announce results of presidential ballot. On March 29, Tariro Murahwa woke up full of hope that the day would bring an end to her suffering.

Like millions of Zimbabweans, the last seven years have not been easy for Tariro.

She endured a painful divorce, losing her beautiful house, car and comfortable lifestyle. She struggled along as a single mother of two. But just when she thought she had found her feet again, she was forced into near destitution.

The last seven years have aged the once vibrant and stylish Harare resident, who now looks much older than her 36 years.

After her divorce in 2001, Tariro rented a fully furnished two-bedroom flat in the high-income Avenues area. She could afford pre-school for her children, three healthy meals a day, and could clothe herself and her children with some of the latest fashions that hit the streets of Harare.

She could even afford to lunch or dine at any one of the restaurants around the city centre. She could go on holiday to one of the resort areas in the country and, sometimes, take a trip overseas.

But Tariro now calls herself a "have been". Going through her photo albums, one can understand the sorrow in her voice as she reminisces about those "good old days".

Rentals went up drastically three years ago, forcing her to move into servants' quarters. Her furniture could not fit into the two small rooms and she eventually had to sell some of it, leaving her with beds, a stove, fridge, a couch and a cupboard.

Just as she was about to adjust to her new lodgings, the landlord started demanding rent in hard currency. He now wanted 150 US dollars a month, which was equivalent, for Tariro, to three months' salary.

Tariro then had to move back to her parents' home in the working-class Mufakose suburb. She felt that all her dignity had been stripped away.

Tariro blames President Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party's reckless handling of the economy for her plight - and Saturday, March 29, was the day that she was going to vote them out.

She was up by 3 am and woke her two neighbours so that they could join the queue at the nearest polling station in her ward. By 5 am, she was already in the queue and when the polling station opened two hours later, she was one of the first people to vote.

The air was filled with excitement and everyone in the queue was talking about Mugabe's final days at State House. Normally in Zimbabwe, election results are announced within three to four days after polling closes.

Tariro was up by 5 am on Sunday, the day after the election, waiting for the first batch of results. She switched on her radio and set the volume high so she could hear it clearly from outside. She did not want to miss this "historic" moment. She wondered if it was the same excitement and anxiety which her parents and millions others felt during the 1980 general elections, which gave birth to Zimbabwe's independence.

The first election results were announced on Monday morning. The announcement of parliamentary results dragged on for three days and senatorial results were only announced five days after polling.

As the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission staged-managed the announcement of both parliamentary and senatorial results, Tariro's fears grew that ZANU-PF might actually win the election. Fear turned into disappointment and despair when the ruling party lost by only two seats, winning 97 seats to the 99 seats won by the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Fewer than half of the 5.9-million registered voters went to the polls, and the estimated three million Zimbabweans who have left the country for South Africa, Britain, Zambia and Botswana in the past seven years were not allowed absentee ballots.

"To tell you the truth, the biggest disappointment to me was the low voter turnout," said Tariro. "Bulawayo, Harare, and Matabeleland provinces were disappointing. Up to today, I cannot understand why people did not go and vote.

"This election was up to us, the country's destiny was in our hands and if we had turned out in our millions, we would not be in this predicament. It would have been difficult for Mugabe to rig the elections and we would not be talking about a run-off. Zimbabweans let me down as well as those rural folks who stood up to Mugabe and the MDC."

Mugabe faces deep discontent as Zimbabwe has the world's highest inflation (more than 160,000 per cent), acute shortages of basic foodstuffs and fuel, and frequent power and water cuts.

Like millions of Zimbabweans, Tariro has been eager for word on Mugabe's fate since he lost control of parliament more than a week ago. The country has been waiting since March 29 to hear whether Mugabe has also been defeated in the presidential vote, as the MDC has said. The MDC and many like Tariro believe the unprecedented delay in issuing results masks attempts by Mugabe's team to find a way out of the crisis.

Tariro's despair is slowly growing into anger.

She is angry at Mugabe for clinging to power and his total disregard of the people's will and also taking Zimbabweans for granted.

"Zimbabwe is not his to do whatever he likes. He does not own the people of Zimbabwe. We all have a right to this country. What pisses me off the most is the fact that Mugabe treats Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans like his piece of property. Wasn't 28 years enough? How can one man be so selfish and have total disregard of other people's feelings and their suffering?" she said.

Tariro fears that Mugabe is going to push Zimbabweans into violence if results are not announced soon.

"Please don't underestimate people's anger – they are boiling inside. The calmness you see is the calm before the storm. People are just going to blow up soon. If we are going to have a run-off, why not just announce that and we can prepare for it and I can guarantee you that people will go out and vote. People now know that it is possible to vote Mugabe out."

Tariro cannot imagine Mugabe being handed another term in office.

"Another five years of what – of this – no way. Another five years will mean more people dying from stress-related illnesses, five years of unprecedented suffering and five years of hell. Why can't he just step down, if he loves his people so much?" she said.

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