

Recount Elaborate Plan to Steal Election

Author: [Hativagone Mushonga](#)

Official sources say it will ensure ZANU-PF regains parliamentary majority and leave Mugabe leading the presidential contest.

Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party has embarked on an elaborate plan to try to regain its parliamentary majority and ensure that President Robert Mugabe comes out as winner in the presidential poll held on March 29.

Enquiries by IWPR have revealed that the recount of ballots in 23 constituencies is supposed to ensure that ZANU-PF regains its majority in parliament, while closing the gap between Mugabe and MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in such a way that at the end, the president will be leading.

However, it is not yet clear whether the victory will be by a declaration that Mugabe has achieved the constitutionally required 50 per cent plus, or the outcome will be a run-off, with Mugabe leading with around 48 per cent and Tsvangirai trailing with 45 per cent or less.

The constitution states that if a winner fails to garner over 50 per cent of the total vote, a second round will be called within 21 days between the winner and candidate with the second highest figure.

A recount has been ordered by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZEC, of ballots in 23 disputed constituencies in last month's vote. After some delay, this is expected to start on Saturday, April 26.

ZEC chairman George Chiweshe said results in 22 districts had been disputed by ZANU-PF, while the MDC contested the count in one constituency. The recount will be of all presidential, parliamentary, senate and local council votes cast in those constituencies

Results from the March 29 presidential poll have not been released, but the opposition has claimed victory. Currently, figures with ZEC indicate that Tsvangirai is leading by at least seven percentage points, but missing outright victory by just a few votes. However, the MDC has claimed victory, saying it won with 50.3 per cent and that Mugabe trailed with 43.8 per cent.

ZANU-PF is already preparing for a run-off and has reportedly deployed former freedom fighters and its militia to the countryside to unleash violence and intimidate people believed to have voted against ZANU-PF and Mugabe in the elections.

Commentators say ZANU-PF militants and veterans of the independence war are supposed to ensure victory for Mugabe through violence in the three-week hiatus between March 29 and a possible run-off. Political violence and intimidation of the electorate have always been thought to be ZANU-PF's winning card.

ZEC is going ahead with the recount, even though sources in ZANU-PF believe any outcome favouring the president will lack credibility.

Sources in ZANU-PF told IWPR that it would be easier to justify a Mugabe victory in a run-off if the president had been leading in the March 29 elections.

And a politburo member said declaring Mugabe the outright winner after the recount might be difficult to sell to Zimbabweans and even to friends in the region.

However, one way or another, he said, "we are trying to ensure that the president wins the election, and we believe that we can cover that gap in the 23 constituencies and thereby reduce Tsvangirai's figures.

"We also believe that we can gain quite a number of seats from the 23 constituencies that will be recounted and retain our majority in parliament.

"An MDC majority in parliament will be history after the recounts on Saturday".

ZANU-PF did well in the popular vote in both the parliamentary and senatorial elections, although the party lost its parliamentary majority.

The Tsvangirai faction of the MDC won with 99 seats and the MDC faction led by Arthur Mutambara acquired 10 seats, with one seat going to independent candidate Jonathan Moyo, a former minister of information in Mugabe's government. ZANU-PF's haul was 97.

In the senatorial election, ZANU-PF won with 30 seats, MDC-Tsvangirai got 24 seats and MDC-Mutambara six.

The Zimbabwean authorities have been dragging their feet in announcing the presidential results, despite local, regional and international pressure.

Initially, Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who chairs the ZANU-PF sub-committee on information and publicity, had said there would be recounts in only five constituencies which had requested them within the 48 hours of the election, as set out by electoral law.

But to the amazement of Zimbabweans, ZEC suddenly announced last weekend that it was carrying out recounts in 23 constituencies.

The MDC desperately wants to avoid a recount, fearing such a move would wipe out its newly won parliamentary majority and deprive its presidential candidate of what Tsvangirai said is a clear victory over Mugabe.

The MDC has made it clear that it will not accept results based on

recounts. Spokesman Nelson Chamisa said, "For us, that is accepting rigged results. They had custody of the ballot boxes for two weeks and they must have stuffed them with their votes."

The national executive council of the MDC has rejected the recount, holding that ZEC would be invalidating the will of the people. The council pointed out that a recount in any case would be meaningless, given that the election results had already been declared. Results were posted outside polling stations when counting was completed.

MDC vice-president Thokozani Khupe said, "We have been receiving information that the ballot boxes are being kept by ZANU-PF and that they have been stuffing more ballot papers. The initial custody of these ballot boxes cannot be traced."

United States State Department spokesman Sean McCormack has criticised the recount, saying, "There has not been a good chain-of-custody regime in place", for the ballots and ballot boxes since the March 29 vote.

"Anything could have happened between election day and when a recount takes place, and that's a cause of deep concern not only for the United States but other countries around the globe," he said.

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, ZLHR, said it was "concerned that the inordinate delay in releasing the results of the presidential election, coupled with the lack of information as to the whereabouts and security of the ballot boxes during this time, has created a perception in the minds of the ordinary interested voter and members of the public that tampering may have occurred, which would compromise the integrity of the election material in any recount".

The ZLHR has written urgently to the ZEC chairperson, asking him to provide information on the whereabouts of ballot boxes –

but ZEC has not yet responded.

For a recount to take place, the party requesting it must set out the number of votes believed to have been miscounted, how the miscount occurred, if known, and how the results have been affected by the alleged miscount.

The recount will be allowed where ZEC considers that there are reasonable grounds for believing that the alleged miscount occurred and that, if it did occur, it would have affected the result of the election. Representatives of the contesting political parties and accredited observers are entitled to be advised of the date, place and time of the recount and to observe the process.

Hativagone Mushonga is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained journalist in Zimbabwe.

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