

## **Sex Allegations Against Bishop a Diversionary Tactic**

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The Zimbabwean state media are in full voice as they seek to discredit one of President Mugabe's most steadfast critics.

The controversy around Archbishop Pius Ncube continued this week as a prominent pro-government cleric added his voice to the campaign against the vocal regime critic.

Analysts have told IWPR that the unproven allegations that the archbishop had an affair with a married woman are being hyped up to divert public attention from the growing economic crisis.

In addition, they say, President Robert Mugabe has his own reasons for seeking to discredit a religious leader who has been one of his most articulate and outspoken opponents.

In the latest broadside against Ncube, Bishop Trevor Manhanga of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Zimbabwe, and also chairman of the Heads of Christian Denominations, attacking him for meddling in politics.

"It is no secret that the relationship between Archbishop Ncube and the head of state President R.G. Mugabe has not been cordial. This is very unfortunate, and it was wrong for the Archbishop to have issued communication of a personal nature against the Head of State," Manhanga wrote in an article for the government mouthpiece, *The Herald*, on July 24.

When it came to the accusations themselves, the Catholic bishop was, however, careful to refer only to Ncube's "alleged moral failure".

Manhanga's comments came just over a week after a lawsuit was filed at the High Court in Bulawayo seeking damages in an adultery claim. The archbishop has flatly denied the allegations, saying, "I will prove my innocence. There is no truth at all."

The state media has gone to town on the lawsuit, carrying television footage and newspaper pictures purportedly showing Ncube in compromising positions with the woman in question, Rosemary Sibanda, who has already claimed she did have an affair with him.

The triumphalist tone of President Mugabe's comments on the allegations betrayed the political impetus behind the scandal.

Addressing to mourners gathered at the National Heroes Acre for the burial of Brigadier-General Fakazi Mleya on July 18, Mugabe was crushing in his condemnation of what he said was Ncube's failure to uphold his clerical vow of celibacy.

There is no love lost between the two men, and Ncube has consistently been scathing about the way the president has run Zimbabwe. It was he who first told the world that people were dying of hunger in parts of Matabeleland because of punitive policies imposed for repeatedly voting against Mugabe. Only a few

weeks ago, he implored the British, Zimbabwe's former colonial masters, to use force to depose the president.

"Mugabe's attack on Ncube had nothing to do with morality. It was all politics," said a Catholic man living in the middle-income suburb of Hatfield, who did not want to be named.

"For Mugabe, Ncube's fall is important in another respect. In recent months, there has been this war between Mugabe and the whole Catholic establishment after the issuance in April of the pastoral letter 'God hears the cry of the oppressed', which puts the blame for Zimbabwe's problems squarely on Mugabe's shoulders."

According to the Hatfield resident, Mugabe could now say to the people of Zimbabwe and the world at large that Catholic bishops had no moral authority to criticise him. "Ncube's fall takes the glitter from that pastoral letter," he said.

There is a strong sense among analysts and Mugabe critics that this high-profile case is being used not only to damage a hostile public figure, but also to use lurid headlines to deflect attention from the real problems that Zimbabweans are facing.

The Media Institute of Southern Africa-Zimbabwe has strongly condemned the way the case has been handled.

"The showing of graphic pictures... smacks of an agenda far beyond normal journalistic reporting. The pictures... are not only disrespectful of the legal processes under way, but show a hidden agenda to tarnish the respected reputation and image of the archbishop once and for all," said the group.

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, meanwhile, called for a day of prayer for the archbishop.

"The allegations against Ncube are not even an issue in these troubled times when there is no mealie-meal in the shops, there is no meat, and there are shortages of just about everything," the commission's J.D. Katazo said this week.

A Zimbabwean political analyst who asked not to be named said,. "For now, we have been made to forget that thousands of our compatriots are, as we speak, crossing into neighbouring countries daily to seek refuge from the dire situation that Mugabe has created."

He was referring to reports from South Africa that the number of Zimbabweans crossing the crocodile-infested Limpopo River had risen dramatically in recent weeks following a government directive to slash prices, which was intended to curb inflation but in fact led to immediate shortages in the shops.

The situation was now so serious, the analyst asserted, that in the next few weeks "we should not be surprised to hear reports of starvation in the country. There are no basic foodstuffs in the shops, and even those who stocked up are likely to run out soon because producers have stopped producing."

Before prices were cut, Zimbabwe was already in the grip of food shortages and the United Nations estimates that four million people already need food aid. The shortages have been blamed on Mugabe's disastrous land reform programme, which destroyed the country's mainstay, the commercial farming sector.

More than 80 per cent of the population live on less than one US dollar per day while unemployment is fast approaching the 90 per cent mark.

Urban dwellers are the worst affected by Mugabe's policies. Now they have to contend not only with the lack of basic commodities but also with serious transport problems. The cities have run out of fuel and commuter buses are at a standstill, leaving workers to walk to work.

Many analysts fear that the situation is reaching the point of no return, and say this explains the government's readiness to use the Ncube affair to divert people's attention and prolong its rule.

"I think we have reached the tipping point," said an independent journalist working in Harare. "As the old song says, a hungry man is an angry man."

Benedict Unendoro is the pseudonym of an independent journalist in Harare.

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