

## **Veterans Hostile to Power-Sharing Deal**

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Tension mounts in rural areas where Mugabe loyalists seem determined to keep him in power. Reports are emerging that veterans of Zimbabwe's war of liberation will challenge any deal that sees President Robert Mugabe giving up power.

People from villages across Zimbabwe say war veterans are threatening they will not let opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai take power, following recent reports that he and the ruling ZANU-PF are making progress in power-sharing negotiations that began again this week.

Particular tension is reported in rural areas, where the war veterans have conducted a long-running campaign of state-sponsored violence against those presumed to be supporters of Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, supporters.

The Southern African Development Community, SADC, appointed mediator, South African president Thabo Mbeki, made another rapid visit to the capital city, Harare, this week in a renewed effort to revive negotiations to reach a political deal.

The talks, which began in July, had previously stalled when Tsvangirai refused to sign an agreement that does not give him executive powers.

Tsvangirai told party supporters at the weekend that he is pushing for a settlement that will leave Mugabe with nothing but a ceremonial post as head of state. This would effectively remove the president from power for the first time since the country gained independence from Britain in 1980 after a protracted war of liberation.

However, the country's war veterans are threatening to oppose such an agreement.

Villagers who spoke to IWPR report growing unease in their areas, with veterans warning them not to celebrate an MDC victory prematurely.

There are also fears that some communities might turn the tables on the veterans, exacting vengeance on those who harassed them before and during the March 29 election and the June 27 presidential run-off.

Nhlonipho Khumalo, from the Matopo area about 60 kilometres northeast of Bulawayo, said that ZANU-PF militias had been openly criticising the latest round of talks and threatening to prevent Tsvangirai assuming power.

"[The war veterans] are telling people at beer parties that they still rule the country, that they will not give the country to Tsvangirai," said Khumalo on a trip to Bulawayo, which he visits regularly to sell grain.

Veterans, who have long been closely associated with Mugabe, have been accused by rights groups, including Amnesty International, of conducting a campaign of violence during the harmonised elections in March, and a presidential runoff in June.

“The people are afraid, knowing the brutality of these men during the past elections,” Khumalo told IWPR.

“What these men want [from the negotiations] is for things to remain as they are, for the country not move forward.”

The war veterans have reportedly been interfering with the distribution of aid by humanitarian agencies across the country, even though the government announced a fortnight ago that it was lifting a June ban on the distribution of aid by NGOs.

Japhet Makwambeni, who this week returned from Gutu in the Masvingo province in the south of the country, told IWPR that villagers have been living in fear since talks looked set to go in favour of the MDC.

“What is happening is just ridiculous,” said Makwambeni, a qualified fitter and turner who now buys and sells a motley assortment of goods in Bulawayo’s central business district.

“The veterans are telling our parents that the MDC will not rule the country, and accuses us young people from the cities of bringing to the homesteads news about what they view as Tsvangirai’s imminent rule.”

Analysts warn that if the war veterans resist the outcome of the SADC-brokered negotiations, this will be taken to show Mugabe is a dishonest negotiator and could also lead to further economic decline.

The power-sharing deal is being touted as the only means of resuscitating an economy, reeling from the world’s highest level of inflation.

An economics lecturer at the National University of Science and Technology told IWPR that any conflict emerging from veterans’ resistance to Tsvangirai could prove to be the fatal blow that will see Zimbabwe “certified as a failed state”.

“They did enough damage invading farms, and the country certainly does not need any retrogressive forces right now,” said the lecturer, who preferred not to be named.

An activist with a rights group, which says it is fighting for the autonomy of Matebeleland after years of being marginalised by central government, told IWPR that the group would not accept resistance to a power-sharing deal.

“We know a lot of people have benefited from the economic ruin of this country and they will not be willing to give up all those privileges, but we will not tolerate anything or anyone that stands in the way,” said the activist.

“War veterans have always claimed ownership of the country, but it is time we also reclaimed our birthright. We know who we voted for in March.”

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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