

## **Voters Reluctant to Return From South Africa**

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Vibrant campaign to encourage migrants to go back and vote falls flat as diaspora Zimbabweans talk of hardship and wasted ballots.

With only days before Zimbabweans elect a president, parliament and local councils, activists in Johannesburg are going all-out to encourage the estimated two million or more expatriates living and working here to return home and vote.

Loud music accompanies a “Rock the Vote” event taking place just outside Park Station, a busy transport hub in the centre of this South African city.

Many of the expatriates who work in Johannesburg pass through Park Station on a daily basis, while cross-border traders and people doing some grocery shopping in South Africa use the coach stations and taxi ranks.

Pitched in front of the station is a white tent decorated with Zimbabwean flags, where artists and poets take it in turns to sing, declaim and entertain passers-by.

Attracted by the music, diaspora members are handed leaflets by civic activists urging them to go home and participate in the March 29 elections, which many hope will bring an end to the rule of President Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party.

Under current rules, Zimbabweans abroad are not allowed to vote, apart from embassy staff and others such as policemen serving with the United Nations duty.

The “Rock the Vote” campaign includes billboards scattered around areas where large numbers of Zimbabweans live, especially inner-city suburbs like Berea, Hillbrow, Yeoville and Ellis Park. Similar billboards have been placed on the Zimbabwe-South Africa border.

“Power to the People - We demand: one citizen, one vote, independently-run elections and an end to political violence,” reads one large poster outside Park Station, posted up by the non-government group Zimbabwe Democracy Now.

Other organisations supporting the get-out-the-vote campaign include the National Constitutional Assembly, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, the Zimbabwe Exiles Forum and Crisis in Zimbabwe, CIZ.

CIZ hosted a “Rock The Vote” concert last weekend in Johannesburg, featuring artists from Zimbabwe who played to an audience of mostly young economic migrants.

Mathula Lusinga, who is in overall charge of the voter education campaign, said it would run until election day.

"We are saying that those who can go home should go and vote, and those that cannot go should pick up the phone and urge their relatives not to forget to go and vote," said Lusinga.

Nixon Nyikadzino, CIZ's media spokesperson, said he was optimistic that the concert and other efforts by civil society groups would prompt many Zimbabweans in South Africa to go home and vote. The idea is that as many registered voters as possible should turn up at the polls to subvert any attempt by the Mugabe administration to rig the poll by appropriating the votes of absentees.

"We think the message has been well served. We are also happy with the turnout we have been receiving. I hope all these numbers will translate into votes," said Nyikadzino.

At the concert, Nyikadzino urged the crowd to persuade friends and relatives to go back home. He called on the religious to pray for their country, and people who believed in ancestor spirits to should ask them for guidance.

On the streets of Johannesburg, however, many Zimbabweans who have made the difficult journey to get here said they would not be crossing back over the border. In any case, many said, the elections were unlikely to be free and fair.

Most of the people interviewed for this report said the risks of returning were too high, especially given the tough requirements and high price set for obtaining a South African visa.

Bree Street, Johannesburg's busiest thoroughfare, is a good place to meet Zimbabweans. There are hundreds of them, either visitors shopping for goods they cannot buy in the empty shops back home, or migrants on their way to work.

At several hairdressers' salons run by Zimbabweans on Bree Street, female staff and customers said they would not be going back because they believed their votes would count for nothing.

"What difference is it going to make if I go home and vote?" asked one hairdresser, Martha Jani. "I voted in 2002 and nothing changed. I was in the queue for a very long time, but look at me today. I have relatives that died for Zimbabwe's independence but what do I have to show for it? Besides, I went through a lot to reach this country and I'm not willing to go through that again."

Another hairdresser, who gave her first name as Nyasha, said life in South Africa might be far from rosy, but she had no choice but to stay. She said she hoped family back in Zimbabwe would vote on her behalf.

"Life here is tough. We play cat-and-mouse games with government authorities on a daily basis. Just yesterday, I was arrested for being here illegally," said Nyasha. "Luckily I was arrested with a girl whose boyfriend is an officer so we were set free, but we had to pay, of course."

"I have no money right now and have to start working again to earn and pray that I won't be picked up again. I need to feed the people back home."

Nyasha was dismissive of Mugabe's main challengers, Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change and Simba Makoni, the ex-finance minister and ZANU-PF stalwart who infuriated the president by announcing his election bid in February.

"Tsvangirai and Makoni will not feed my family if I risk going back to vote for them. They all make promises like Mugabe did at independence. Where is the milk and honey?" she said.

At Park Station, Jonasi Phiri was selling passport holders, marker pens and other small items. He reacted angrily to the suggestion that he should pack up and go home to vote.

"One thing I want to know from them - will they buy clothes for my children so I can carry a box full of goodies, food and all?" he said. "No, they won't, but they want me to leave the opportunity that I have to be here doing what I'm doing to feed my family. I do not even have money for transport and they tell me to go to Zimbabwe. I'm not going there."

When he learned that CIZ has promised to provide buses to ferry those who want to go and vote, Phiri softened his stance.

"I would love to vote in my country, but look at the situation here. We are suffering and the people back home are worse. I do not like being here, selling to people who do not even want to talk to me, but it is making my family survive so I would rather concentrate on that than on Tsvangirai, Mugabe and Makoni."

Another vendor, who gave her name as Susan, said she enjoyed the music from the "Rock the Vote" campaign but could not risk going back as she could not afford a visa and was in South Africa illegally.

"I crossed into South Africa illegally and may not be able to find the same guts that made it possible for me to come here in the first place," she said, turning to serve another customer.

Susan is one of the many Zimbabweans who have risked life and limb to cross the Limpopo River in search of a better life in South Africa. Many are rounded up and deported by South African police on a daily basis. The International Organisation for Migration says it assisted 126,000 Zimbabweans at its reception centre in the Zimbabwean border town of Beitbridge in 2007, and the figure continues to rise.

At Park Station, migrant worker Spiwe Chiutsi was touched by the coalition's message. She was one of a few who said they would go home.

"I have been saying all along that I will not go to vote, but I have just changed my mind," she said. "I'm tired of being abused in this country, working in a restaurant, serving the rich and famous in Sandton but getting peanuts out of it. I live in squalor here because of the poverty in my country."

"If they [CIZ] help me to go and vote, then I will go. What happens next, I do not know. I will try to come back again after that, but I hope my vote will help bring change to Zimbabwe."

Sandra Nyaira is a Zimbabwean journalist based in Britain.

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