

## **Zimbabwe Government Targets Dissidents**

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Groundswell of opposition to the Mugabe regime triggers new police crackdowns.

The Zimbabwe government, sensing a rising groundswell of defiance to its rule, has launched an unprecedented assault on fundamental freedoms of all Zimbabweans, hoping to stave off its demise.

The onslaught against dissenting political voices has intensified since the governing ZANU-PF realised there is near open rebellion against 83-year-old President Robert Mugabe's contentious plan to cling to power for another three years.

Zimbabweans want the next presidential election to go ahead next year as scheduled by law. But anyone openly expressing a desire to get rid of a leader whom they hold accountable for destroying the economy, creating 1,600 per cent inflation and an unemployment rate of more than 80 per cent, is now being targeted by the authorities.

Residents of townships – where anger and opposition to the government is intense – live in fear of midnight raids by soldiers and police officers whose actions are reminiscent of the last days of Ian Smith's white minority government.

At Ardbennie, Kuwadzana, Highfields, Glennorah, Glenview and many other low-income ghettos surrounding Harare, residents have been beaten up in bars and beer halls - their only crime discussing Zimbabwe's deepening political crisis over a drink.

Not even members of parliament are being spared. In a Glenview raid in early March, police arrested and jailed opposition MP Paul Madzore and harassed his wife and housemaid.

Three members of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC - deputy secretary for international relations Grace Kwinjeh, Kambuzuma MP Willas Madzimore and deputy treasurer-general Elton Mangoma - were arrested in connection with legal public demonstrations held in Harare, also in early March. They were accused of inciting violence, they have been charged.

Assaults on MDC legislators are clearly part of an unfolding strategy by police, using the draconian Public Order and Security Act, a reincarnation of the colonial Law and Order (Maintenance) Act that Smith used so effectively against the majority black population. Despite allegations of crimes by ZANU-PF members of parliament, there is no evidence of police action or even investigations against them.

Critics say it is Mugabe himself who should be the first to stand trial for repeatedly inciting violence against political rivals, including the MDC which he made threats against at his 83rd birthday party in February.

Asked for his reaction to the army's torture of prominent journalists Mark Chavanduka and Ray Choto, who needed subsequent treatment in a London clinic, Mugabe said: "I will not condemn my army for having done that. They can do worse things than that."

When he launched the confiscation of white commercial farmland in 2000 which plunged the country into a spiral of economic decline, he warned farmers who resisted, "We have degrees in violence... I will be a black Hitler, ten-fold."

Last November, the MDC threatened to launch mass protests, and Mugabe responded, "Be warned. We have trained armed men who can pull the trigger."

With many Zimbabweans cowed by the iron fist, the government has recently begun concentrating again on the remaining bulwarks of democracy and freedom - the judiciary and the media. Journalists have been harassed and assaulted to prevent them doing their work, and independent newspapers have been burnt by organised mobs, under the gaze of law enforcement officers.

The disruption by police of a peaceful rally held by opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai in Bulawayo in early March is another sign that the government is no longer even pretending to rule democratically. Subsequently, all rallies throughout the country were banned - a move condemned by the MDC and civic groups who say it amounts to a declaration of a state of emergency by Mugabe.

This led the Brussels-based International Crisis Group to observe in a statement: "The desire to remove Mugabe within the year provides a rare rallying point that cuts across partisan affiliations and ethnic and regional identities."

Sydney Chirimuuta is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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