



CONTROVERSIAL ELECTION BILL PASSED UNOPPOSED

Campaigners are outraged at MDC's decision to back a bill that clears the way for next year's elections.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

Civil society groups called it the "great betrayal", while politicians on both sides of Zimbabwe's political divide described it as an historic moment.

Rarely has a single political event in Zimbabwe so confounded expert opinion as the passage of the controversial Constitutional Amendment No. 18 Bill.

What was initially billed as the ultimate showdown between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, would have been seen as an anticlimax were it not for the sighs of relief that finally something positive had come out of South African president Thabo Mbeki's mediation efforts between the two sides.



Credit: Lazele

Information Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu (middle), who is a ZANU-PF member of parliament, enters the legislature for the third reading of the constitutional amendment bill. Picture taken September 20.

Constitutional Amendment No. 18 sets out a framework for holding the combined presidential, parliamentary and local elections planned for next year, by cutting short the present legislature's life by two years and reducing the

president's term in office from the current six years to five.

Once President Robert Mugabe gives his assent and the bill becomes law, it will expand the House of Assembly from 150 to 210 seats, and the upper

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ The opposition Movement for Democratic Change has backed ZANU-PF's constitutional amendment after the two parties came to an agreement on a new constitution and changes to repressive legislation. The bill was passed by unanimous votes in the lower house of parliament on September 20 and the Senate five days later. Meanwhile, President Robert Mugabe told South African president Thabo Mbeki he was fully behind talks between his party and the opposition.

■ President Mugabe has shown intensified hostility towards the ZANU-PF faction led by the influential retired army commander General Solomon Mujuru ahead of a potentially explosive

party congress in December, which is set to determine his future.

■ The Swedish Co-operative Centre has urged the European Union and the United Nations World Food Programme to establish an observer force to monitor food aid distribution in Zimbabwe and prevent it being manipulated for political ends.

■ The central bank announced measures on October 1 to help finance the restocking empty store shelves by the end of the month. Among the planned programmes are cheap loans to manufacturers to restore productivity and hard-currency payments to farmers to keep them in business.

■ State schools ground to a halt on October 1 after the majority of teachers heeded calls by their trade unions not to report for work until their demands for better pay and working conditions were addressed. University lecturers and support staff countrywide have also gone on strike.

■ On September 29, plainclothes police stormed the Theatre in the Park in Harare after the opening of a new production called "The Final Push". Two actors and a journalist were arrested, but they were released two days later after being made to perform the play over and over again at a police station.

house or Senate from 66 to 93, by redrawing constituency boundaries.

It seemed unthinkable that the larger of the MDC's two factions, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, would agree to the proposal for an expanded Senate. After all, the reason the MDC split in October 2005 was a schism over Tsvangirai's decision to boycott a Senate election.

The body had been abolished in 1987, but the government proposed to set it up again. Tsvangirai opposed the reinstatement of the Senate because he felt its members would not be elected in a free and fair ballot, as the same electoral rules were to apply as in previous polls which heavily favoured the ruling party and were open to rigging.

In the event, the new Senate included traditional chiefs, most of them ZANU-PF supporters, and several members directly appointed by President Robert Mugabe.

All 111 of the members present in the House of Assembly parliament voted in favour of the bill on September 20, agreeing that it was "in the national interest". On September 25, the bill went through the Senate unopposed, backed by all 56 members present.

Outside, however, members of pressure groups aligned with the opposition expressed outrage that — in their view — the MDC had sold out on its demand for an all-new constitution before next year's elections go ahead, rather than another piecemeal amendment to the document agreed at Lancaster House in London when Zimbabwe won independence in 1980.

Critics of the revision to constituency boundaries say it will allow Mugabe to do some gerrymandering — enhancing constituencies in his rural strongholds while reducing them in urban areas where the MDC has dominated since it was launched in 1999.

Another contentious provision states that if the incumbent president resigns or is for any reason unable to carry out his official duties, the two houses of parliament will sit as an electoral college and pick a candidate to

complete the remaining portion of the incumbent's term. Once again, critics say this will allow Mugabe to handpick a successor whose position will be fairly secure by the time of the next presidential ballot.

Lovemore Madhuku, the chairman of the National Constitutional Assembly, said he was "disgusted" by the decision of the two MDC factions to make a deal with ZANU-PF.

"We are severing ties with the MDC over their going to bed with ZANU-PF," said Madhuku, whose group advocates a new democratic constitution. He himself has been arrested several times over the past eight years for leading demonstrations in support of a new constitution.

"We think the MDC has sold out" — Arnold Tsunga of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition.

Arnold Tsunga of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition could not conceal his anger at the latest political developments. "We think the MDC has sold out," he said. "It will be difficult to work with them in future."

Tsunga said it was wrong to believe that Zimbabwe's eight-year political and economic crisis "could be resolved through constitutional amendments".

The National Constitutional Assembly and the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition are part of a broad alliance of 23 pressure groups, student associations and labour organisations called the Save Zimbabwe Campaign, which was formed in 2006 to fight for a new constitution. The Save Zimbabwe Campaign also includes both factions of the MDC, one led by Tsvangirai and the other by Arthur Mutambara.

Analysts in Harare said while the demands made by these groups and their anger at the MDC's decision to go along with the constitutional bill were understandable, they were

nevertheless unrealistic, as it would be impossible to launch a process of consultation and drafting for a new constitution only six months ahead of watershed elections.

"This is a make-or-break election for the MDC," said a political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, who asked not to be named. "They cannot afford to lose it again. They will become history."

The analyst said while a new constitution would have been an ideal way of levelling the playing field, the MDC was losing valuable preparation time as the mediation process dragged on.

"They don't have a lot of time to campaign and there are many odds stacked against them, but they did not want to be seen by both Mbeki and the whole SADC [Southern African Development Community] region to be negotiating in bad faith," he said.

"They have made a huge sacrifice on their demand for a new constitution, but they should also be commended for putting the suffering of people ahead of personal ambition."

The MDC said it had not abandoned the fight for a new constitution, but had supported Amendment No. 18 "because we do not want to see Zimbabwe burning".

Welshman Ncube, the secretary-general of the MDC faction led by Mutambara, said, "Zimbabweans are faced with a national crisis. We may differ, but we agree there is a crisis."

Tsvangirai told an independent newspaper that the decision he and his colleagues had taken was "a necessary political risk" and that history would vindicate them.

"I fully understand the history and duplicity of ZANU-PF," he told the Standard. "This is not just a South African initiative but a SADC initiative. Both MDC and ZANU-PF recognise that."

Zimbabwe is in the grip of a prolonged economic crisis which has seen year-on-year inflation reaching an all-time

high of 7,600 per cent, unemployment of over 80 per cent and widespread shortages of most basic commodities. In the eight years since the precipitous decline began, life expectancy in Zimbabwe has plunged to 37 years for men and 34 for women.

Critics blame the country's catastrophic decline on Mugabe's decision in 2000 to seize white-owned commercial farms, ostensibly for distribution to the landless. In practice, some of the best farms went to his cronies. Mugabe, in turn, blames the crisis on the targeted western sanctions imposed on some 200 associates and members of his administration following his disputed re-election in 2002.

Escalating political tensions in 2007 culminated in the savage beating of opposition activists, including Tsvangirai, while in police custody in March this year. Weeks of violence against MDC members and other opposition activists forced SADC leaders to take action by asking President Mbeki to mediate a settlement between ZANU-PF and the MDC. That initiative resulted in the historic agreement on the Constitutional Amendment Number 18 Bill.

A political analyst in the capital Harare said that however angry civil society groups were, the worst thing they could do now was to openly campaign against MDC candidates, or boycott the 2008 elections.

"Don't forget that civil society activism has become a huge industry in Zimbabwe," he said. "The political crisis has become a lucrative source of employment for many, and people don't want to lose donor support.

"However, if they are committed to democracy they will still vote for the MDC because the negotiations haven't ended. If they choose to stay out of the whole process and not vote, then that's what I would call treachery, because that would indeed assure ZANU-PF of the easiest victory so far."

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

MUGABE USES UN SPEECH TO ATTACK WEST



Credit: Lazele

President Robert Mugabe addresses the crowd at a state funeral in Harare. Picture taken July 18.

The president's address to UN General Assembly followed close on a successful constitutional deal backed by the opposition.

By Mike Nyoni in Harare

President Robert Mugabe is probably as reviled in the West as he is revered in parts of the Third World, but in both spheres he has proved himself a master politician.

United States president George Bush and former British prime minister Tony Blair have accused Mugabe's neighbours, especially South African president Thabo Mbeki, of failing to adopt a sufficiently strong stance against Zimbabwe's errant regime. In their view, this has exacerbated the current crisis.

In fact, Mugabe has been accused of bullying his peers in the Southern African Development Community and African Union, and some believe this is

why they have not openly attacked him for human rights violations and brutal treatment of political opponents.

Mbeki's much-maligned "quiet diplomacy" has been ascribed as much to fear of the 83-year old Zimbabwean leader as to active approval of his regime.

The patient "quiet diplomacy" that Mbeki has applied as the SADC's appointed mediator in the Zimbabwe crisis put a spring in Mugabe's step as he went to attend the 62nd session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York last week.

Thanks to Mbeki's efforts to broker peace between ZANU-PF and the MDC, Mugabe secured a deal between the two parties which some analysts believe could bring an end to political violence in the country.

The constitutional amendment bill passed unanimously by ZANU-PF and MDC members of the lower house of parliament on September 20 and by the Senate five days later, allows Mugabe to effectively anoint a

successor if and when he steps down. At the same time, Mugabe has pledged a new constitution before joint presidential and parliamentary elections in March next year.

The deal provoked accusations of treachery from the MDC's civil-society allies, who believe the opposition party has compromised the ideal of a total constitutional overhaul in exchange for some token changes.

The Zimbabwean leader used carefully-selected examples of US behaviour to depict himself as a Third World crusader.

"Mugabe literally stole the thunder from his critics at the United Nations when he managed to strike a deal with his opponents just before he left home," said a politics lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, who asked to remain anonymous.

"It was as if Thabo Mbeki had timed the announcement for this occasion, to give his quiet diplomacy a place in history. In the end, everyone believed Mugabe when he said Zimbabweans know how to deal with their problems without meddling from the West."

Reacting to a September 26 speech at the UN General Assembly in which President Bush accused him of tyranny, Mugabe poured scorn on the charge, instead accusing his adversary of violating the UN's founding charter by invading Iraq.

In a speech on September 27, Mugabe told the General Assembly that the SADC had managed to secure an agreement on the constitutional amendment bill without resorting to the kind of sanctions that Britain and its allies have applied to Zimbabwe.

"We are Zimbabweans and we know how to deal with our problems," he said. "We do not deserve sanctions. We want to be left alone. We will interact with those in our region and those in organs to which we belong."

Selectively citing examples of US behaviour abroad, Mugabe gave his audience a convincing portrayal of himself as a Third-World crusader, rather than the villain that Bush had accused him of being.

"He [President Bush] kills in Iraq. He kills in Afghanistan," said Mugabe. He cited the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba where he said US soldiers routinely violated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with impunity.

"The national laws of the people there don't apply," said Mugabe. "At the concentration camp, international law does not apply."

He accused the US of defying both the UN and international opinion when it invaded Iraq together with Britain, a charge which will resonate with many countries in the West as well as the Third World.

"It is now very difficult for the US to take decisive action against dictators like Mugabe" **— Harare-based analyst.**

"Mugabe's examples of US violations of human rights are carefully choreographed to cause maximum damage, without Bush being able to rebut them with equally graphic examples against Mugabe," commented a political analyst in Harare.

"While the world can produce pictures of [MDC leader Morgan] Tsvangirai's bleeding face as examples of human rights violations, Mugabe retorts by pointing to US prisons teeming with blacks for violating the law. Mugabe says he is enforcing the law against public demonstrations, a defence which Bush cannot raise in relation to Afghanistan and Iraq, which should be sovereign states."

Another analyst who requested anonymity agreed that after Iraq and Afghanistan, the US had lost its ability to intervene in cases like Zimbabwe.

"It is now very difficult for the US to take decisive action against dictators like Mugabe," he said. "US authority and its moral failures are breeding more demagogues around the globe from North Korea to Iran."

He said Mugabe had carefully highlighted "well-documented acts of democratic negation by the West which exposed their lip-service to human rights".

"I am termed a dictator because I have... frustrated [the] neo-colonialists" **— Mugabe.**

"There is no doubt that Mugabe is intolerant of dissent — if not an outright dictator — but Bush should be the last person to accuse him of human rights violations, given the US's military record in Europe and the Middle East where foreigners are tortured in secret army camps without anyone raising a voice."

He said such actions lent credence to claims by populist leaders such as Mugabe, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran that they are being victimised for trying to protect their countries' natural resources.

Mugabe summed up this perception at the UN when he said, "I am termed a dictator because I have rejected this supremacist view and frustrated [the] neo-colonialists."

The West and human rights groups accuse Mugabe of plunging the country into poverty after he seized white-owned commercial farms in 2000. Since then, Zimbabwe has moved from a food exporter to the region to a net importer.

Mugabe blames the crisis on western sanctions imposed after his disputed re-election in 2002.

Mike Nyoni is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

TRADE UNIONS' "STAY-AWAY" STRIKE FLOPS

No sign of riot police as people turn up to work as usual, despite calls for a massive strike.

By Nonthando Bhebhe in Harare

The trade union federation, once President Robert Mugabe's nemesis, has faded into oblivion as a political force, analysts say.

A "stay-away" strike called by Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, ZCTU, flopped as workers ignored the call for a nationwide strike on September 19 and 20 in protest against a government wage freeze.

ZCTU, the dominant trade union federation in Zimbabwe, was formed in 1981 through the merger of six unions, and currently has 30 members.

In the Nineties, the ZCTU grew increasingly opposed to the government of President Robert Mugabe and was the main force behind the formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, headed by a former ZCTU general secretary, Morgan Tsvangirai.

Demonstrations organised by the ZCTU threatened to bring Zimbabwe to its knees in the late Nineties, but subsequent protests have been less effective. In September last year, the ZCTU was forced to abandon plans for mass protests after its leaders were arrested at the start of the main demonstration.

The labour movement had hoped that this time round, with tensions in Zimbabwe running high because of shortages of basic commodities including bread, and the collapsing value of wages, the majority of workers would heed the call.



Credit: Lazele

A May Day event staged by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions at the Gwazura stadium. Picture taken May 1.

Despite this, shops, businesses and factories in the country's major cities stayed open. In the capital Harare, it was business as usual, and some people professed complete ignorance about the general strike.

The riot police are usually out in force whenever labour unions or opposition parties call for strikes, but this time there was no sign of them in Harare's central business district or in high-density suburbs around the city such as Highfield, Glen Norah, Budiro and Glen View, which police refer to as "hot spots". During past protests, residents in such areas have woken up to army and police vehicles rumbling through the streets to deter people from participating in the mass action.

A junior officer in the riot police told IWPR that although his men were put on high alert from four in the morning on the first day of the strike action, they remained on stand-by rather than deploying in the streets.

"Normally we would have been deployed to areas that we call hot spots and road-blocks would have been mounted along the city's major roads. But because the general feeling was that it would fail, we were just told to be on high alert and should be ready if there was trouble," he said.

Interviews around Harare's central business district revealed a mix of reasons why people did not heed the ZCTU's call to stay at home. Some said that they could not afford to jeopardise their job, in an environment of 80 per cent unemployment, others that they had not even heard there was a strike. Many felt that labour protests had proved futile.

"What strike? What job stay-away when most people are unemployed?" asked Juliana Marufu, who works in one of the few factories that are still operating. "I heard about it but thought it a huge joke."

Memory Ncube, who works at the checkout in a supermarket, said, "I

cannot risk losing my job. I am already struggling to make ends meet and I would rather keep my low-paying job — at least I am getting some money, even though it's little, but it's better than nothing."

**"What job stay-away when most people are unemployed?"
— factory worker in Harare.**

Like many others, this supermarket worker felt it would be pointless to join the strike action.

"What's the point of participating in a stay-away when they have never succeeded?" asked Ncube. "Why they keep on calling for these stay-aways, I just don't know. They need to come up with better strategies, and they are starting to lose their credibility. What happened in the Nineties can never be repeated, and that they have to accept."

One street-wise bakery worker told IWPR that he needed to come to work so that he could earn extra money on the side to supplement his meagre

wages. Like many workers in Zimbabwe these days, he and his friends pilfer from their employer, in their case by loading extra loaves of bread onto the outgoing delivery trucks.

"I make all my deals at the office. Staying at home would not bring food on my table, so why stay at home? Even if I did, would that make government review its decision? I don't think so," said the bakery worker, who did not want to be named. "I think the ZCTU has seen its better days as a political force."

**"They need to come up with better strategies, and they are starting to lose their credibility"
— supermarket employee.**

Some senior MDC members felt the timing of the strike was all wrong as it coincided with the debate on a constitutional bill paving the way for joint parliamentary and presidential elections next year.

The bill was passed unanimously in the lower and upper houses of

parliament on September 20 and 25, respectively. The MDC came under fire from other parts of the opposition, which felt it had made far too big a concession to ZANU-PF by allowing the amendments to go through unopposed.

**"The ZCTU has exposed itself badly and will never again be taken seriously by anybody. The ZANU-PF government now sees it as a dead donkey"
— worker in Harare.**

Joseph Gumbo, a worker in Harare, said the ZCTU should have known better than to call a strike. "The ZCTU has exposed itself badly and will never again be taken seriously by anybody," he said. "The ZANU-PF government now sees it as a dead donkey. I think politically they are no longer a force to be reckoned with."

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

The Zimbabwe Crisis Report is an initiative of IWPR-Africa's Zimbabwe Programme. This programme promotes democratization and good governance with Southern Africa and contributes to the development of a culture of human rights and the rule of law. Focusing on Zimbabwe the programme has three core components —

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