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Fresh insights into the Zimbabwean situation

MUGABE OUTMANOEUVRES RULING PARTY OPPONENTS

President's rivals caught flatfooted over ZANU-PF candidature for presidential poll.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

Credit: Lazele

Robert Mugabe gives a speech at National Heroes Acre, Harare. Picture taken July 18.

President Robert Mugabe appears to have outwitted ZANU-PF rivals seeking to oust him from power, but remains at a loss as to how to turn around the country's collapsing economy.

The ZANU-PF politburo has all but endorsed Mugabe as its sole party candidate for a presidential election to be held jointly with a parliamentary poll early next year, beating back any challengers for the post.

Last December, he failed to get endorsement for a plan to extend his term of office by two years to 2010 at the Goromonzi People's Conference, where he faced opposition from a ZANU-PF faction led by retired army general Solomon Mujuru. The proposal was also fiercely attacked by civil society organisations and the Movemnt for Democratic Change, MDC, which accused Mugabe of trying to extend his term of office because he was afraid of defeat at the polls.

A ZANU-PF central committee meeting on March 30 again failed to endorse Mugabe's bid to extend his term in office. Instead, it resolved to reduce the term of the current parliament by two years, to run concurrently with the presidential term, starting next year. A special ZANU-PF congress in December is scheduled to decide who should be the ruling party's candidate,

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ After failing to stop President Robert Mugabe from attending the European Union's Africa Summit in Portugal next month, Britain is reportedly lobbying Nordic countries to put human rights abuses and state-sponsored violence in Zimbabwe on the summit agenda.

■ Negotiators from Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, and the governing ZANU-PF have agreed on provisions protecting media freedom in a draft constitution that is now in the hands of the country's political leaders.

■ The pressure group Women of Zimbabwe Arise, WOZA, has blamed police for the death of founding member and activist Maria Moyo, 57, who died on November 6 from pneumonia. WOZA says her condition worsened after she was tortured in police custody.

■ The MDC faction led by Morgan Tsvangirai maintains that Lucia Matibenga has been removed from her former position as head of the Women's Assembly. However Matibenga refuses to recognise her removal or the selection of a replacement.

■ The British parliament and the MDC are calling for an investigation into possible breaches of EU financial sanctions against Zimbabwe's ruling elite by Barclays Bank.

■ An alarming 25,000 Zimbabwean schoolteachers — unhappy at poor pay and working conditions — have left the country since January. According to the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, 10,000 have left in the last three months alone despite the government raising their salaries along with those of other public servants in October.

but Mugabe has managed to head off any challenge to his candidature.

For some time now, Mugabe has deftly turned the tables against the enemy within. He recently mobilised alleged veterans of Zimbabwe's independence war, led by the abrasive Jabulani Sibanda, who have been criss-crossing the country in support of Mugabe's candidacy at the party's special congress in December. Despite the resentment Sibanda has provoked among senior members of the party, especially in the two Matabeleland provinces, he appears to enjoy Mugabe's tacit backing.

Mugabe has deftly turned the tables against possible rivals within ZANU-PF.

Formerly the provincial chairman for Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city and an MDC stronghold, Sibanda was suspended from the party in 2004 and expelled two years later for "indiscipline", specifically for attending a meeting opposing the accession to the vice-presidency of Joice Mujuru, wife of the general.

The war veterans are aligned with Rural Housing Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa, a bitter rival of Mujuru, and seen by many as a favourite of the president.

The women's and youth branches of ZANU PF have already expressed their backing for Mugabe. The two groups are led respectively by Gender and Women's Affairs Minister Oppah Muchinguri and Youth Minister Saviour Kasukuwere, both of them firmly in the pro-Mugabe camp.

With the key grassroots constituencies safely in his pocket, Mugabe turned on his senior opponents in the party. At the party's ordinary session of the central committee on October 26, Mnangagwa, who is also the party's secretary for legal affairs, said the special congress in December would only discuss agricultural mechanisation and the harmonisation of elections, and ratify a reduced term for the president from six to five year — which means there will be no debate of the presidential candidate.

Mugabe's opponents were caught literally flatfooted, as two weeks ago ZANU-PF spokesperson Nathan Shamuyarira had told the party mouthpiece, *The Voice*, that all positions in the presidium would be contested. But last week, Mugabe loyalists changed tack, saying there would be no competition since according to the ZANU-PF constitution, the first secretary of the party is automatically the presidential candidate.

"What this means is that anybody who raises the issue of a presidential candidate other than Mugabe would be declared out of order," said a senior ZANU-PF official in Harare. "Those three agenda items mean the fireworks that people were expecting from the likes of Mujuru challenging Mugabe are dead and buried. Only divine intervention can change that reality."

A University of Zimbabwe lecturer in politics said he was surprised by the ease with which Mugabe outwitted opponents within his party. "He won without breaking a sweat against dire predictions that the Mujuru camp would want to build on the victories they scored in Goromonzi against [extending Mugabe's term to] 2010 and against Mugabe's automatic endorsement in March," he said. "It's an unbelievable anticlimax."

However, he said the party might have alienated significant constituencies in Matabeleland and Manicaland, where senior party leaders are against the readmission of Sibanda into the party. Most senior party leaders in the two provinces have boycotted Sibanda's solidarity marches, while Mnangagwa claims Sibanda has appealed against his suspension, and in any case was doing work for a welfare organisation as leader of the war veterans.

Another analyst noted a bigger irony in the whole drama. He said while Mugabe had made "mincemeat" of his opponents in the party and the opposition was too weak to mount any serious challenge, there was no sign that the root cause of all the anger against Mugabe's leadership — a collapsing economy — was responding positively to his political victories.

"If Mugabe could confide in anyone," said the analyst, "I have no doubt he would confess that the economy was his greatest nemesis. He can see only spurts of sunlight in a bitterly cold winter night. While he has made mincemeat of his political opponents, in fact beating them before the game has started, the economy remains his most stubborn challenge against which he doesn't appear to have a trick to play."

Economic problems "should have been a godsend for any competent opposition party" — analyst.

The analyst said Mugabe had given Reserve Bank governor Gideon Gono carte blanche to print money in the hope of improving the supply side of the economy. "They are hoping that increased production might shore up the economy," he said. "But that is a big 'if' because it all depends on the inputs available and the rains, over which they have no control.

"Mugabe scored a lot of points against George Bush at the recent UN General Assembly in New York. He is also winning his latest spat with British prime minister Gordon Brown over his presence at the forthcoming European Union-Africa Summit in Lisbon. He has all of Africa in his pocket. Back home, the MDC is all but beaten.

"Yet with inflation raging at 8,000 per cent and unemployment nearly 80 per cent, plus pervasive shortages of all basic commodities, the economy doesn't appear to respond positively to Mugabe's political fortunes. That should have been a godsend for any competent opposition party."

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

LIFE-SAVING DRUGS OUT OF REACH FOR MOST

Many seriously ill patients can no longer afford prescription charges.

By Nonthando Bhebhe in Harare

As the prices of drugs and healthcare continue to soar to astronomical levels, many Zimbabweans with life-threatening conditions are going without the treatment they need.

Spending an afternoon at one of Harare's busiest pharmacies is heartbreaking, as patient after patient walks in and out without collection their prescription because they just can't afford it.

Barely able to stand without leaning against the wall, Martin Sibanda, a self-employed welder, waits anxiously for the pharmacist to give him the prices of the five drugs that were prescribed to him at a clinic close to his home in Harare's poorest suburb, Mbare.

After a two-minute wait, the pharmacist hands him a piece of paper with the total cost of the drugs. He looks at the paper and as if in slow motion, he shifts his gaze to the pharmacist, who repeats the figure and asks if he should supply the drugs.

Sibanda whispers the figure and shakes his head in bewilderment, "My son, are you saying 28 million? [Zimbabwean dollars, ZWD — 28 US dollars at the black market rate] Did I hear you right? Please check again, you must be mistaken."

But it is not an error. It is the cost of three life-prolonging drugs for his two chronic illnesses, and two others for a new infection.

Credit: Lazele

A woman gets free healthcare during AIDS Expo 2007 in Harare. Picture taken July 13.

Sibanda suffers from high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, and diabetes. A month's supply of nifedipine to treat hypertension costs an average of five million ZWD; drugs for diabetes go for about six million ZWD and ulcer medication costs ten million ZWD.

Sibanda's pharmacy bill is equivalent to twice his monthly salary.

In addition, Sibanda has developed a chest infection and was prescribed an antibiotic and cough mixture. The antibiotic erythromycin costs about 2.5 million ZWD and the cough mixture 4.5 million ZWD.

With a teacher's monthly salary at 14 million ZWD a month as of October — a figure still below the official poverty line which was set at 16.7 million ZWD in August — Sibanda's pharmacy bill of 28 million ZWD is way beyond the reach of the majority of Zimbabweans.

Sibanda stares blankly at the pharmacist and then turns to his wife. He tells her that they will just have to go back home and pray for God's healing.

His predicament mirrors that of millions of other Zimbabweans suffering as a result of a collapsing public health system.

Zimbabwe's health service used to be the marvel of the southern African subcontinent, with the government's vision of "Health for All by 2000" almost within reach. By the turn of the millennium, each of the nine rural provinces had a well equipped referral hospital. District clinics were complemented superbly by mission hospitals scattered all over the country.

However, a declining economic situation attributed to government's ruinous policies has seen the situation deteriorate to pre-independence levels.

Zimbabwe is going through a severe economic crisis, with serious fuel and food shortages which are blamed on recurring droughts as well as the government's fast-track land redistribution programme, which has disrupted agricultural production and slashed export earnings.

This has taken its toll on the health service. Now drugs are scarce, those which are available are exorbitantly priced, medical equipment is dilapidated and there are persistent strikes over poor salaries on offer to health workers.

Those who can afford it have turned to private medical practitioners.

In recent years, those who can afford it have been forced to turn to private medical practitioners for services no longer offered by government clinics and hospitals. However, as private hospitals now demand an upfront cash deposit of 50 million ZWD before admission, this is out of the reach of most people.

Touched by Sibanda's plight, IWPR sought an interview with him. He seemed to have resigned himself to whatever fate awaited him.

When IWPR visited his home four days later, his condition seemed to have worsened and his breathing was strained. He tried to sit up on his small wooden bed, but this made breathing more difficult.

"I am in a lot of pain. If I had money, I would seek private medical care or buy those drugs I was prescribed. But I have nothing and I'm now waiting for my death. My condition is getting worse every day and I just don't know anywhere to turn to," he said.

Asked why he does not go to any of the government hospitals, Sibanda smiled and said, "Government hospitals are now deathbeds — people are referred there to die. There is no medication and they are filthy and you can almost smell death as you enter their buildings. So, no, thanks — I would rather be with my loved ones and die surrounded by love."

The high costs of medical care are affecting everyone, including those with medical insurance, who still have to meet more than half of the medical costs.

Commonly prescribed drugs are unaffordable to most. For example, Ranferon — which is recommended for pregnant women to increase circulation and avoid birth complications — now costs more than 13 million ZWD.

"I tell you many people are dying in silence without medication and proper health care" — pharmacist.

One pharmacist told IWPR that although he and his colleagues understood that most Zimbabweans can no longer afford medication, there was nothing they could do because they have to sell drugs at profit.

"I tell you many people are dying in silence without medication and proper health care. I have to develop a hard skin to deal with the situation in Zimbabwe. My heart bleeds every single time when a patient walks out without her medication," he said.

"You can almost feel or even touch the helplessness in people. I am sure if we were to do a proper survey, we will find that hundreds of people have died when they should not have. The government has to address this issue; otherwise, it is presiding over a dying and hungry nation."

Many of those worst affected by the rising prices of drugs are those with HIV.

HIV-infected people have to "choose between feeding and educating their kids or taking ARVs" — Lynde Francis of The Centre.

In a country with the world's fourth highest rate of HIV infection, many infected people simply cannot afford the antiretroviral, ARV, drugs they need, said Lynde Francis, who runs The Centre — an HIV/AIDS non-governmental organisation with 4,500 registered clients.

"People are giving up [taking their] drugs — they have to choose between feeding and educating their kids or taking ARVs," she said. "It's becoming more of a struggle to get the basic necessities. ARVs are way down on their list of priorities."

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

MDC HIT BY MORE RUMBLINGS OF DISCONTENT

Some disgruntled members are even calling for a new party to be formed.

By Meshack Ndodana in Harare

Credit: Lazele

Theresa Makone, the new chairperson of the MDC women assemly, speaks to the press at party headquarters. Picture taken November 10.

The largest faction in the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, could split following a row over Morgan Tsvangirai's sacking of a senior female party official, say analysts.

At a crisis meeting on November 3, the MDC's national executive refused to endorse the decision of its leader to replace the head of the powerful Women's Assembly, Lucia Matibenga, with Theresa Makone — the wife of Tsvangirai's friend and financier, Ian Makone.

"This is a fatal case of poor judgement on the part of Tsvangirai," said a University of Zimbabwe political scientist who has monitored developments in the party since its formation in 1999.

"The decision to [sack] Matibenga is very depressing and I think now people are beginning to realise that Tsvangirai cannot think strategically."

The dismissal of Matibenga — whom the MDC chief accused of being a "mole" for the ruling ZANU-PF — has been challenged by a number of normally firm supporters, including party spokesperson Nelson Chamisa, national organising secretary Elias Mudzuri, deputy secretary general Tapiwa Mashakada, Kwekwe member of parliament Blessing Chebundo and youth leader Thamsanqa Mahlangu.

These people form the backbone of his party and commentators say that this row could presage a damaging split in the faction just months before presidential and parliamentary elections early next year.

Strong objections to Matibenga' replacement prompted the national executive to defer the matter to November 11. In this meeting, party chairman Lovemore Moyo is expected to explain how Makone's election was handled.

"This is a fatal case of poor judgement on the part of Tsvangirai" — Harare political scientist.

Sources say Matibenga has been victimised for being too critical of Tsvangirai and the party's secretary-general Tendai Biti, both of whom she accuses of monopolising the party

The MDC split into two factions in 2005, when Tsvangirai chose to boycott elections for a newly created upper house of parliament, or Senate, which would include traditional chiefs — generally supporters of ruling party ZANU-PF — and presidential appointees.

Since then, Tsvangirai has headed the bigger faction, the other MDC, which took part in the Senate vote, led by Arthur Mutambara.

The university political scientist, who preferred not to be named, said that since 2005, Tsvangirai's has been losing support among his most loyal followers.

The row over Matibenga's dismissal could lead to a damaging split within Tsvangira's MDC faction months before crucial elections.

"There was a lot of sympathy with Tsvangirai when the MDC first split in October 2005, because a lot of people felt the Senate was an unnecessary waste of resources," said the analyst.

However, he said, Tsvangirai no longer seems to care what eventually happens to the MDC and is more concerned with pleasing his friends.

"In 2005, he adopted the same stance when the party split, declaring if the Senate issue meant the MDC should die, he was prepared to let it die. Now he wants to kill the party just to accommodate his cronies," he said.

"Now [Tsvangirai] wants to kill the party just to accommodate his cronies" — analyst.

Another analyst close to the goings-on in the MDC said that with his decision to oust Matibenga, Tsvangirai had gone too far.

"The least I can say is that this time he has bitten off more than he can chew and will need to rethink," said the analyst, who preferred to remain anonymous.

"The time is fast approaching when his close supporters will start challenging him for his position, not just criticising his ability to lead the party and win an election."

The analyst said the sane thing for Tsvangirai to have done when he realised his decision to sack Matibenga was unpopular would have been to reverse it following the MDC national executive meeting on November 3.

"We may not know the full story about what is going on in the party, but the truth is that a leader who makes such a big blunder just before a crucial election does not wish to be taken seriously," continued the analyst. "It is his commitment to the democratic cause that is coming under scrutiny. That is why there are even calls by some of his MPs for another party."

The analyst added that what is most worrying is the way in which the party is gradually coming to resemble ZANU-PF in its internal squabbling and overbearing leadership.

"A leader who makes such a big blunder just before a crucial election does not wish to be taken seriously" — analyst.

"The only major difference [between the two leaders] is that President Robert Mugabe is able to contain the divisions within his party," he said.

Meshack Ndodana is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

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