

Talks on power handover continue after Zimbabwe elections

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2 April 2008

The US State Department confirmed Tuesday that talks had begun between the Zimbabwe government and opposition over the possible departure of President Robert Mugabe, following elections held on Saturday. A State Department official who refused to be named would only say that the talks were ongoing, but refused to give details, stating, "I know that there are supposedly at various levels...discussions between representatives of the opposition and representatives of the government."

Three days after the elections, the official results of the presidential poll have still not been made known. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) has released the results of the parliamentary elections in a trickle. The delay is unprecedented and has provoked fears that the result is being rigged or a military crackdown is being planned.

After news of the talks broke, Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), appeared in public for the first time since he cast his vote on Saturday. He pointedly did not declare victory, as the MDC has been doing since Sunday. His reticence suggests that he has agreed not to claim victory until a deal has been struck.

An unnamed diplomat told the *New York Times* that those close to Mugabe were trying to persuade him to resign. The opposition was negotiating with the heads of the military, the Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Organisation and prison chiefs, the diplomat said.

The talks began after Tsvangirai approached General Solomon Mujuru on Sunday. Mujuru is retired but remains a power broker in Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF party. He is married to the vice president of the Zanu-PF, Joyce Mujuru. Her name had been linked to the opposition in the course of the election campaign.

John Makumbe, a political analyst close to the MDC, told the newspaper, "The chiefs of staff are talking to Morgan and are trying to put into place transitional structures."

Makumbe added, "The chiefs of staff are not split. They are loyally at Mugabe's side.... They are negotiating for themselves. They are negotiating about reprisals and recriminations.... They are doing it for their own security."

Marwick Khumalo, who led the Pan-African Parliament observer mission during the election, told the Associated Press that the leaders of Zanu-PF were now discussing defeat.

"I was talking to some of the big wigs in the ruling party," he told the South African media, "and they also are concerned about the possibility of a change of guard."

Martin Rupiya, a military analyst at South Africa's Institute for Strategic Studies and a former lieutenant colonel in the Zimbabwe army, confirmed that talks were under way.

The election result, he said, "has compelled the military, the hawkish wing and the moderate, to begin to reconsider accommodating the opposition."

The scale of the MDC victory seems to have left the military in a state of shock. Their initial response was to tell the ZEC to delay the release of

the results. Prior to the election, the heads of the army, the police and the prison service all said that they were loyal to Mugabe and would not serve under a "puppet."

Expert commentators were predicting before the election that former Zanu-PF Finance Minister Simba Makoni would poll well. Sections of the military may have expected to be able to replace Mugabe with Makoni and see business continue as usual. Makoni did unexpectedly badly, and their plan seems to have foundered on the scale of the popular opposition to Mugabe and Zanu-PF.

Tsvangirai's MDC claimed victory in the presidential poll on Sunday based on the figures posted at individual polling stations after the initial count. An MDC spokesman claimed that Tsvangirai had won with 67 percent of the vote. "We are not in any doubt. We are heading for a landslide victory," MDC Secretary General Tendai Biti told reporters.

Harare, the capital, and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, both seem to have fallen to the MDC. But it is not only in the urban areas that the MDC seems to have done well. It has also made significant inroads into Mugabe's position in rural Zimbabwe. The MDC claimed to have won in the southern province of Masvingo and in Mashonaland Central Province, where the party last won a parliamentary seat in 2000.

Journalists who toured the polling stations report that a number of Mugabe's closest lieutenants lost their parliamentary seats, indicating a major swing against Zanu-PF. Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa is among the ministers who appear to have lost their seats. He represented the rural constituency of Makoni Central.

Another cabinet minister, Chen Chimutengwende, lost his seat in rural Mazowe Central. In total, six of Mugabe's closest supporters have been ousted.

The *Financial Times* reports that, faced with this disaster, Mugabe held a crisis meeting with his security chiefs on Sunday night. "In the JOC [Joint Operations Command] meeting there were two options on the table for Mugabe: Declare victory on Sunday night or declare martial law, an unnamed Western diplomat said. 'They didn't consider conceding. We understand Mugabe nearly decided to declare victory. Cooler heads have prevailed.'"

As the delay continued, it seemed there was an attempt to fix the vote. Before polling began, there were signs that the vote would be rigged.

An estimated 3 million extra ballot papers are thought to have been printed. The names of long-dead people, such as Ian Smith, former prime minister of the racist white Rhodesia, were reportedly identified on the electoral roll. Pan-African parliament observers claimed to have identified 8,000 non-existent voters in one Harare constituency.

Mugabe changed the law prior to the election to allow the police to enter polling stations and even to go into polling booths with voters to help them cast their ballot. Although there was less government violence than in previous elections, opposition activists reported being detained until polling was finished.

But the scale of popular opposition made election-rigging an uncertain

tactic. With memory of the post-election violence in Kenya fresh in everyone's minds, the aftermath of the Zimbabwean election has followed a hesitant course.

Even so, Lovemore Sekeremayi, head of the ZEC, warned the MDC that it should not claim victory before the official result was released. "We note with regret," he declared, "that some stakeholders have started announcing the results of the elections when counting is still in progress."

"We wish to advise the nation that it is the responsibility of the ZEC alone to issue results and that will be done as soon as the counting and verification of ballots is done."

Responding to the MDC's victory claim, government spokesman George Charamba said, "It is called a coup d'etat and we all know how coups are handled."

Zanu-PF's newspaper, the *Herald*, accused the MDC of "preparing its supporters to engage in violence by pre-empting results."

Riot police were used to stop a victory demonstration by MDC supporters in Manicaland, and riot police have been seen in the capital, Harare. But there was no major clampdown on the opposition of the kind that took place last year and has accompanied previous elections.

By Monday, police were appealing to MDC supporters to celebrate sensitively. "Police are very much still on high alert and appeal to those wanting to celebrate to do so with respect for other people."

"It's human to celebrate," police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena said, "but they should not provoke, intimidate or insult others."

On Tuesday, the ZEC raised the prospect of a run-off between Mugabe and Tsvangirai by claiming that neither man has won the 51 percent majority that is required for an outright victory. But that position appears to have been dropped as untenable.

Mugabe has taken care to ensure that the army is paid, but rising prices have made life difficult for the rank and file. Ordinary soldiers are struggling to survive like the rest of the Zimbabwean population, with inflation running at 100,000 percent. The price of a loaf of bread was Z\$6.6 million at official prices, and as much as Z\$15 million on the black market.

The generals have benefited from Zimbabwe's involvement in the Congo war, where they established interests in minerals and logging and gained from the expropriation of white-owned land. They could also expect to reap rewards from the confiscation of foreign businesses that Mugabe had promised would occur after the election. They therefore remained loyal to Mugabe, but may now have begun to doubt how far they can rely on their men.

The prospect of maintaining Mugabe's regime against opposition in rural as well as urban areas, among soldiers as well as civilians, seems an unsustainable project. The BBC suggests that Mugabe will stand down from office and Tsvangirai will be declared the victor in the presidential election. An unnamed businessman told the BBC that Mugabe had been warned that if he did not accept defeat, he could face an uprising.

Western governments have seized on Mugabe's electoral difficulties in an attempt to strengthen their grip on the country, which contains valuable mineral reserves and rich farm land. The *Wall Street Journal* advised that "Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown should consider creating a foreign aid package that would be contingent on Mr. Mugabe's colleagues engineering his departure."

The newspaper continued: "President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who this weekend called Mr. Mugabe's regime a 'disgrace,' could also offer support for restoring some sanity to a post-Mugabe Zimbabwe."

Right on cue, Brown demanded that the "results should be published immediately." Foreign Secretary David Miliband joined in to say that millions had turned out to vote and "their voice must now be heard." The Brown government let it be known that it did indeed have an aid package in waiting for a post-Mugabe government.

European Union foreign ministers issued a statement demanding that the results be published and declaring, "The future of the Zimbabwean people depends on the credibility and transparency of the electoral process."

US State Department spokesman Tom Casey called on Zimbabwe to issue the results quickly and warned that the US government was "concerned" by the delay.

The MDC has long-standing links with Western governments and agencies such as Germany's Ebert Foundation, from which it has received funding.

Britain's Channel 4 News reported that President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa was overseeing the Zimbabwe talks, and that Brown was in discussion with both Mbeki and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Zimbabwe is a source of concern to the West, both because of its own resources and because unrest there threatens the stability of the entire region of southern Africa. Share prices fell in South Africa as the political stalemate continued in Zimbabwe. South Africa has put in place contingency plans for millions more refugees to flood across the Zimbabwean border if the economic meltdown continues.

After years of a Western siege and worsening economic dislocation, the majority of Zimbabweans were ready to remove Mugabe. According to World Food Programme figures, 83 percent of the population live on the equivalent of less than US\$2 a day. Almost half the population is malnourished. A quarter of the population has fled abroad. Those who remain often rely on money sent back by relatives.

Average life expectancy has dropped from 67 years to 37.3 years in the last decade. Zimbabwe has the fourth-highest rate of HIV/AIDS in the world, and more than 3,000 people a week are thought to be dying from AIDS-related diseases. More than 10 percent of children die before they reach their fifth birthday.

This social disaster provided the impetus for the MDC vote, whose slogan is "change." But the MDC has made it clear that it intends to impose International Monetary Fund (IMF) terms on Zimbabwe if it comes to power.

Zimbabwe has already had a taste of what IMF measures mean. An IMF Structural Adjustment Programme was introduced with Mugabe's support in the 1990s. Social gains that had been made after independence were wiped out, and unemployment rose to 50 percent.

By 1999, two thirds of the population was living on less than US\$2 a day. Mugabe only rejected IMF measures when they threatened to undermine the system of patronage on which he relied to maintain his power. Since then, Mugabe's economic policies have created an even more serious situation. His land redistribution programme has transformed a food-exporting country into a country that relies on foreign aid.



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