

ZIMBABWE

The MDC's electoral boycott

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Zimbabwe's largest opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), announced on 25 August 2004 that it would not contest the parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2005. The MDC said it believed that the political environment in which elections would be held would be inimical to a free and fair poll, and added that it would reconsider its decision only after a comprehensive reform of the political system.

The party cited legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA)—both of which circumscribe civil liberties and freedom of expression—as major obstacles to participation. It claimed that Zimbabwean law enforcement agencies, directed by the governing Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) routinely used these statutes and other regulations to silence or exert pressure on the political opposition and pro-democracy activists. The MDC alleged that these laws, coupled with the rules relating to the conduct of elections, were intended to undermine the opposition and tilt the political playing field to the ruling party's advantage.

The government has responded to the MDC's decision by claiming that the opposition was afraid to test its popularity at the polls, fearing inevitable defeat. Regardless of the actions of the MDC, it said, the parliamentary contest would proceed on schedule.

The MDC argues that participation under

the current electoral framework would be tantamount to endorsing an illegitimate process, open to manipulation and vote rigging by the ruling party. It maintains that the ruling party's proposed technical reforms of the electoral laws only partly address the minimum standards required to improve the transparency and fairness of polling. This August, the government responded to calls for comprehensive changes to the system by proposing a series of technical reforms to the electoral laws. This may also have been an attempt to anticipate the adoption of electoral guidelines by the 14-member Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The reforms proposed by the government of Zimbabwe included changes that would see voting limited to a single day, the tabulation of election results at polling stations rather than at central locations, and the establishment of an independent electoral commission. Although these reforms go some way towards improving conditions on the actual day of the poll, they fail to address the broader political context in which elections are held in Zimbabwe. In fact, the MDC had set out the minimum standards under which it would be prepared to participate in elections in a party policy document entitled 'Restore'. David Coltart, MDC MP and shadow justice minister, assesses the shortcomings of the government's proposal as follows: "What the ruling party's proposal clearly demonstrates is that they view an election as an event as

opposed to a process.”

At this year's SADC summit in Mauritius, the region's leaders unanimously agreed to a protocol establishing minimum standards for elections in the member states. The summit chairperson, Mauritian Prime Minister Paul Berenger, said that SADC sought to establish an environment in which all political parties could campaign freely, without fear of the threat of violence or hindrance in their campaigning and access to the media.

In every election since independence, Zimbabwe's ruling party has been accused of various kinds of illicit electoral manipulation. Following the last general election in 2000, the MDC lodged legal objections to the results in 37 constituencies, claiming serious irregularities in the conduct of the polling. Four years have passed, and the Zimbabwean judiciary has yet to pronounce on the opposition petitions.

The presidential polls of 2002 were also marred in controversy, as the MDC was supported by elements of the international community in condemning the conduct of these elections. The ruling party summarily dismissed these complaints, though this resulted in Zimbabwe's suspension and subsequent withdrawal from the Commonwealth in December 2003.

Although the Zimbabwean government has shown little interest in implementing reforms in line with the new SADC protocol, many political observers have questioned the wisdom of the MDC's boycott. Commenting

in South Africa's weekly newspaper, *Mail and Guardian*, Iden Wetherell expressed the opinion that although it was understandable that the MDC should wish to “draw a line in the sand” the timing of this decision not to participate in the election was flawed, and denied the opposition an opportunity to “test the government's sincerity against the SADC electoral principles step by step”. The point has also been made that other SADC members could take offence at the MDC's decision, which might harm the party's attempts to garner regional support.

Nevertheless, the MDC remains convinced that President Mugabe's strategy is to stall the implementation of any comprehensive reforms until the last few weeks before the elections, in the hope that enough damage would have been done to the opposition's campaign to render it virtually defeated before the polls. In the face of this, the options open to the MDC are few and far apart. The expectation that SADC will somehow exert pressure on the Zimbabwean government to implement reforms in line with the newly adopted protocol on elections may, in view of past practice, be overly optimistic and even unrealistic. Although South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki made it clear that member states who fail to comply with the provisions of the protocol could face suspension from the regional body, it remains to be seen whether SADC (or for that matter any of Zimbabwe's neighbours) will take a firm stance against the ZANU-PF regime.