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Zimbabwe: Harassment and intimidation as election looms

As Zimbabweans prepare to vote in national elections on 29 March, Amnesty International today warned that the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly are being unnecessarily restricted in advance of the poll date.

“Although opposition parties appear to be enjoying a greater degree of access to previously ‘no go areas’ in rural areas compared with previous elections, we continue to receive reports of intimidation, harassment and violence against perceived supporters of opposition candidates – with many in rural regions fearful that there will be retribution after the elections,” said Simeon Mawanza, Amnesty International’s Zimbabwe researcher who recently returned from Zimbabwe.

On 7 March, three members of the Morgan Tsvangirai-led faction of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) were putting up election posters in Bulawayo when they were ordered by members of the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) to pull them down. The CIO operatives forced a male member of the group to chew the posters and swallow them. A female member of the group was then forced to chew and swallow three-quarters of a poster. The three were allowed to go when the CIO operatives had to go to a political rally.

“Police in some parts of the country are clearly putting unnecessary restrictions on the activities of the opposition party members, while allowing supporters of the ruling party total enjoyment of their rights,” said Mawanza.

On or around 10 March, in Plumtree, five people operating a public address system at a rally addressed by Dr. Simba Makoni, an independent presidential candidate, were briefly detained at Plumtree police station. They were released without charge after the intervention of the candidate.

Amnesty International said that food is still being used as a political tool by ruling party functionaries in many rural areas. Perceived supporters of opposition candidates and political parties continue to be discriminated against, mostly in accessing the cheaper maize sold by the state-controlled Grain Marketing Board (GMB), which manages the country’s strategic grain reserves.

Last month, an MDC (Tsvangirai faction) councillor in Lupane district was allegedly prevented by a senior ruling party official and war veterans from collecting 235 bags of maize that had been bought by his community from the GMB. The senior ruling party official reportedly told GMB officials that “GMB maize is not supposed to be distributed to MDC supporters.”

Although the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) were amended in January 2008, ostensibly to protect the rights to freedom of assembly,

association and expression, restrictions still exist. Police also appear to be applying provisions of the old POSA.

“Application of the POSA is motivated by a desire to frustrate the activities of perceived political opponents,” said Mawanza. “Civil society organisations are operating under constant surveillance by state security organisations -- including the police. Surveillance tactics include intelligence operatives sitting in meetings and visiting offices to question staff and guests of the organisations. This type of harassment and intimidation has made the work of human rights organisations extremely difficult at the moment.”

On 21 March eight members of the activist organisation Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) were briefly held by police in Bulawayo’s suburb of Pumula while putting up posters encouraging people to go and vote. The eight women were taken to Pumula police station, where they were questioned for about 30 minutes and then released without charge.

Civil society organisations and opposition parties and candidates also face difficulties in accessing state-controlled radio and television stations. There are currently no privately-owned daily newspapers in Zimbabwe, and no private radio station has been granted a license.

Amnesty International urged Zimbabwean police to respect the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly of all candidates and civil society organisations going about their legitimate work during and after the election period.

“The police should ensure that all Zimbabweans are allowed to engage in peaceful protest before and during the elections, and must desist from using excessive force, torture or other inhuman and degrading treatment,” said Mawanza.

“The police should also investigate all reports of violence and intimidation and bring the perpetrators to justice.”

Amnesty International also called on the heads of security organisations to desist from making comments that can fuel election violence.

Recent statements by some security chiefs including the commissioner-general of police, the head of the prison services and army commander that they would not recognise an opposition candidate winning the election has increased the population’s anxiety.

“Security chiefs should all operate in a non-partisan manner and protect the rights of all citizens,” said Mawanza. “The conduct of the state security organisations -- irrespective of the outcome of the election -- will be crucial in safeguarding the rights of all Zimbabweans in the post-election period.”