

Zimbabwe activists go into hiding as security crackdown intensifies

Thursday 9 August 2018, by [BURKE Jason](#) (Date first published: 8 August 2018).

Opposition MDC backers report being harassed, detained and beaten after recent election

Hundreds more activists have gone into hiding in [Zimbabwe](#) as security agencies intensify a crackdown launched shortly after the election 10 days ago.

Millions of people cast votes in the poll, the first since the ousting of Robert Mugabe last year. The victor was [Emmerson Mnangagwa](#), a former aide to Mugabe and a stalwart of the Zanu-PF party, which has ruled since independence from Britain in 1980.

Nelson Chamisa, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change leader, has said his party will challenge the “illegitimate and fraudulent” election in the courts.

The poll was seen as a [potential turning point](#) for Zimbabwe, which desperately needs foreign investment to avoid economic breakdown. But hopes for dramatic and immediate change have been [dashed by violence](#) and alleged human rights abuses since the election.

Tendai Biti, a senior MDC leader, was briefly held at the country’s border with Zambia on Wednesday, while further reports of detentions of and assaults on activists emerged.

Six people died last week when soldiers opened fire on MDC protesters in central Harare.

According to dozens of testimonies gathered by the Guardian, security forces have since harassed hundreds of MDC leaders and activists, arbitrarily detaining and beating scores of people.

At the weekend, soldiers moved through neighbourhoods of Harare and surrounding towns, targeting opposition supporters, smashing property and assaulting dozens of people.

Last week the homes of leaders were surrounded by unidentified masked and armed men during the night, and homes of activists were invaded by gangs shouting pro-government slogans.

In the past 48 hours, dozens of independent media activists have gone into hiding, along with several NGO workers fearful of detention.

Ashley Pfunye, 21, a student leader, said he had gone into hiding after a warning that “the military” were looking for him. At least one of his friends had already been detained, he said.

“The army has a list and I am on it,” Pfunye told the Guardian. “I rang my mum to tell her she would not hear from me for a while and went underground. It was a hard call to make.

“I don’t know when we’ll speak again. If I’m found, I will disappear and it might be for ever. I am frightened, but it is what politics here in Zimbabwe is all about.”

Some of the worst attacks took place in Kuwadzana, a poor neighbourhood to the west of Harare. Arnold Dzakatira, a driver, described how he had been beaten by soldiers while drinking with friends in a pub.

“They suddenly came in trucks,” Dzakatira said. “They told everyone who was MDC to go to one side. No one moved, they told the women to go and they started beating all the men. They were saying ‘You guys are MDC’. I lost a tooth and needed stitches in my mouth.”

Others sustained more serious injuries, including broken bones. Gifted Mwayadze, a hawker, has been warned he may lose sight in one eye after being hit on the head with a stick by a soldier.

“I am not political,” Mwayadze said. “I am not an activist or anything. I was coming home from work and they attacked me. They kicked me, used sticks. They didn’t say or ask anything.”

Few sought medical attention, humanitarian organisations say, for fear of further harassment in state-run hospitals.

More than 20 MDC activists detained last week at the party’s headquarters in central Harare were released on bail by a magistrate on Tuesday. They have been charged with involvement in political violence. In a court hearing, defence lawyers said they were only polling agents who had come to the capital to deliver copies of election voting forms and collect travel allowances.

In a series of communications before his arrest, Biti, one of the most well-known MDC leaders, said his family was being harassed while he was in hiding. He described authorities as “fascists and murderers”.

Nqobizitha Mlilo, Biti’s lawyer in Harare, said his client had tried to cross into Zambia at the Chirundu border post to seek asylum. “He did all this because he believes his life is in danger,” Mlilo said.

A [statement](#) by the heads of the mission of EU member states in Harare, along with the US, Canada and Switzerland, condemned the “violence, attacks and acts of intimidation targeted at opposition leaders and supporters”, saying they had no place in a democratic society.

Ruling party officials deny the allegations. Sibusiso Moyo, Zimbabwe’s foreign affairs minister and a retired army general, blamed “a [lot of misinformation](#) that is coming out from social media”.

He said: “Yes, they may be certain security or police operations, which are under way as a result of the death of six people, those normal police operations do not normally end up meaning or being interpreted as some kind of atrocities being perpetrated.”

Authorities in Zimbabwe need international legitimacy to obtain the multibillion-dollar bailouts required to avoid economic breakdown. The violence is a serious setback and some say the crackdown suggests splits within the ruling elite.

Jason Burke

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/08/zimbabwe-activists-go-into-hiding-security-crackdown-intensifies>