

How MDC lost plot:

Zim elections from a labour perspective

Despite claims of widespread rigging by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF)'s electoral machinery, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) could have won if it had built on its support from workers and social movements. Such support would have made the fraud irrelevant, write **Taurai Mereki** and **Nunurayi Mutyanda**.

As the nation headed for the 31 July 2013 harmonised elections, there were high hopes by the working class and many other Zimbabweans at home and abroad that the party of their choice was finally going to hammer the nail on the head by resoundingly winning the elections. The MDC was tipped as the winner both locally and internationally. The prospects of a non-campaign that President Robert Mugabe proclaimed and subsequently implemented increased confidence among bookmakers. Apparently the working class did not foresee a landslide victory for the nationalist Zanu PF.

Even President Robert Mugabe was shocked, says one of his major supporters Reverend Obadiah Musindo of the Destiny for Africa church. While the victory has been attributed to massive rigging and voter intimidation by many civic organisations both locally and internationally we argue in this article that regardless of the alleged trickeries, the MDC was strategically responsible for its own downfall, as it lost the election well before the masses cast their ballots.

The MDC destroyed its campaign machinery and opted to rely on faith while hoping that the masses, especially the working class, would vote for it as a reward for its role in stabilising the economy during its tenure of office in the Government of National Unity (GNU). Due to this ill-conceived 'faith' the party even ignored the Southern African Development Community (SADC) call to have the elections postponed so as to allow for electoral reforms and possibly the dismantling of the state rigging apparatus as per the Global Political Agreement (GPA).

MDC AND WORKING CLASS

Launched in September 1999 after the National Working People's Convention endorsed the idea of forming a political party, labour played an overt role in the new party since the majority of its top brass comprised high ranking officials from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). Notable among them were Morgan Tsvangirai (former general secretary and president of the new party), the late Gibson Sibanda (former president and MDC vice president), and Gift Chimaniro

(general council member from the Communication and Allied Services Workers Union of Zimbabwe (Caswuz)). Lucia Matibenga and the late Isaac Matongo, the party's former national chairman, were some of the leaders to come from the federation.

The formation of the new party came against the backdrop of a number of crippling strikes in 1997 to 1998 which were motivated by poor wages, deteriorating human rights records and poor governance. From 1991, the once leftist Zanu PF party had shifted its ideology by adopting the neo-liberal economic structural adjustment programme, which led to among other things: privatisation of state enterprises, removal of subsidies on basic commodities, and downsizing, and liberalising the financial market. These austerity measures had a negative bearing on the country's working class and the poor.

The formation of the MDC brought hope to the working class of a return to conditions similar to the first decade of independence, which characterised a typical Keynesian welfare state. Their hope was pinned on the belief

that the labour party belonged to the Left and was therefore likely to carry out its socialist ideology.

While Mugabe had given the working class a choice to form a political party, if they so wished, its formation did not augur well with Zanu PF. The birth of the new party was followed with what Albert Althusser and Antonio Gramsci called the 'ideological' and 'state repressive apparatus' respectively. Spearheaded by then Media, Information and Publicity Minister, Jonathan Moyo, various laws were crafted to curb growing opposition from labour, civil society and the MDC.

These laws included the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Criminal Law and Codification Act, among others. This cocktail of legislation criminalised the holding of union meetings as well as civic and political party gatherings without prior approval from the police. In addition, the labour laws for a long time prohibited and criminalised strike action in the public service as well as sectors labeled essential service providers by the country's labour minister. All strikes and demonstrations were met with massive beatings and the use of live ammunition, leading the ZCTU to informally call off mass demonstrations since 2006.

The air waves were awash with Zanu PF praise jingles on its role in the liberation struggle while painting the MDC and ZCTU as puppets of the West. The state also stepped up its efforts to destabilise all legitimate labour meetings with Mugabe labelling the ZCTU an extension of the MDC and the state sponsoring a splinter union - the Aggrieved Affiliates Workers Union (AAWU). According to a 2004 ICFTU report the state supported the nominations of two AAWU members to the June 2005 International Labour Conference

instead of the nominations of the union's democratically elected president Lovemore Matombo and general secretary Wellington Chibebe.

GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY

The GNU came into effect in September 2008 after the MDC won 99 seats against Zanu PF's 97, with Tsvangirai getting 48% of the vote and Mugabe 43% in elections in March. Thus there was no clear winner with 50% plus one vote to be declared president as required by the constitution. This led to a bloody run-off which saw more than 200 opposition supporters killed and thousands more displaced as political violence escalated. Tsvangirai then withdrew from the run-off dubbed a one man race as Mugabe went on to win convincingly against himself. The bloody violence that characterised the run-off led to international condemnation of the 'sham election.' Despite Mugabe being sworn in as the winner of the run-off a SADC-brokered GNU became imperative.

With the GNU in place, the working class expected a 'Lula moment' of its kind. Since their party of choice was now in government, the working class expected first the prosecution of perpetrators of violence since 2000. Worse still, these 'killers and murderers' were on the government payroll just like teachers - a situation that has not changed. This, according to Nunurayi Mutiyanda, is part of the 75,000 ghost workers unearthed by the Public Service Commission inquiry which the GNU partners did nothing about. The perpetrators continued to campaign for the ruling party and were election officials at most polling stations during the elections, reminding the electorate that if they voted for the MDC they risked being maimed or killed.

Unfortunately, the finance minister, a trusted MDC lieutenant, Tendai Biti, failed the working class who form the majority of the MDC supporters as he repeatedly rejected a salary hike for civil servants. Biti, whose austerity knife pierced deepest into the hearts of the workers and the rural poor, is notorious for his rhetoric: 'you eat what you kill' meaning the state had no money to spend on salaries. In essence, this Bretton Woods institution-inspired neo-liberal offensive was meant to kick-start the collapsed economy through the slashing of all quasi-fiscal subsidies to the poor, wage freezes for civil servants and rigid adherence to the US dollar without safeguards for the poor. Worse still the civil servants' appeal to the MDC-led parliament for action and to the prime minister was to no avail. Ironically, when they appealed to Mugabe their salaries were increased.

Although Zanu PF was an equal partner in the GNU it was a *de facto* ruling party as it successfully operated a parallel government. Revenue from the diamond fields in Marange were kept in an account known only to senior Zanu PF officials with the MDC failing to challenge Mugabe to reveal the slush fund. The then mines minister Obert Mpofu had the tenacity to tell Biti to 'shut up on diamond money'. This left a serious credibility challenge for the MDC as most intellectuals and neutrals lost confidence in the party's capacity to seriously challenge Zanu PF.

Since the MDC formation, POSA and AIPPA were called in to hound the working class and all the groups believed to have links with the party and who wanted the draconian laws that still remain, removed during the GNU tenure. However, Zanu PF launched the 'remove sanctions first' campaign thus it did not move even an inch on legislative reforms.

CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

While many theories have been brought to the fore on how the vote was peacefully swayed in favour of Zanu PF, a comparison of the two main political parties strategies reveal deficiencies on the part of the MDC campaign. Firstly, Zanu PF went into election mode after losing to the MDC in 2008. Contrary to popular belief that it disbanded the youth militia together with district coordinating committees and the security apparatus, these structures were active from 2008 and worked up to the 12th hour of the 2013 election.

The militia and the security apparatus worked with village heads in rural areas to continuously 'reorient' the electorate that voting for the MDC meant continued sanctions. With such memories in mind, rural voters were bound to vote for Zanu PF. They also made their homework in terms of voter population and ensured that there were more than enough new voters in all the constituencies that they had lost in 2008.

Secondly, Zanu PF went on a membership drive in urban areas that targeted the young and first-time voters whom they promised jobs once they got into power. The party ensured that the youth were sufficiently 'indoctrinated' and registered in their respective wards. The party successfully increased its number of voters in the urban areas that are traditionally MDC strongholds. With all this in place all that Zanu PF needed was for the voters to turn up in their numbers and the game was over.

On the contrary, the MDC shot itself in the arm by failing to solve a potential problem that was going to devour it. To start with, the party failed to deal with the 2011 ZCTU split that pitted the Wellington Chibebe (former ZCTU secretary general) faction against the Matombo faction that elected George Nkiwane as the new general secretary. By siding with

the Chibebe faction, the MDC lost important campaign machinery especially among the working class structures and Matombo's speaking skills. One of the main reasons why the MDC had prospered was because it had used labour's well established structures throughout the country to campaign for its agenda.

As much as Zanu PF boasted of the police, military and the youth militia, the MDC failed to recognise that it had destroyed its non-violent machinery of the working class. To lose the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), which has influential and eloquent teachers across the country, and also CASWUZ headed by the former ZCTU president Matombo was one of the MDC's greatest mistakes in this election. This is supported by Samuel Valenzuela in his article titled 'Labour movements in transitions to democracy; a framework for analysis' where he argues that 'labour movements had greater capacity for extensive and effective mobilisation at critical moments than other social groups.'

The MDC president also failed to have CASWUZ members, who were dismissed in 2004 for purportedly striking to push an MDC agenda, reinstated when in fact it was a real labour strike. This failure to help the dismissed workers also became a lesson to the workers that they are instruments of politicians and once they (politicians) achieve their dreams, they forget about them. Had the MDC resolved some labour issues and desisted from certain unpopular statements against labour, they would have won resoundingly, even with the alleged rigging apparatus in place.

Besides labour, the MDC also lost key allies like student organisations, the National Constitutional Assembly and the International Socialist Organisation. These social movements together with a section of the rebel ZCTU unions were against the 'yes' vote for the new

constitution hence they severed relations. As early as August 2009, Chibebe hinted: 'We are saying as long as they (MDC) are part of the government and we feel they are not interpreting policies and responding to workers' challenges, we reserve the right to withdraw our support... We never accept the privatisation of the political landscape and we make no apologies for giving support to organisations inclined towards meeting our goal.'

The growing opposition from allies spelt doom for the MDC as it failed to read from the labour slogan 'united we stand,' but instead sought to use a different template.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LABOUR

According to PTUZ secretary general Raymond Majongwe the greatest loser of this election is labour not the MDC, which has now become a collection of intellectuals, lawyers, businessmen and a handful of trade unionists out of touch with the working class.

The MDC was the vehicle to be used for the attainment of the workers' goals but it never happened. What it means is that if Zanu PF does not change and it continues with its anti-organised labour way of governance, labour has to re-strategise so as to confront the state on issues of income inequality, the rule of law, harmonisation of labour acts, repeal of the draconian POSA, decent work and respect of human and workers' rights. Indigenous employers have also been known for abusing workers who go for months without pay. If this is not addressed by the incoming government then labour unions have a mammoth task in the coming five years. It also applies to Chinese companies who have hit the headlines for physically abusing workers and telling them to 'appreciate; because we came here to help you.'