



ZIMBABWE: Smaller parties hamstrung by lack of funds

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HARARE, 24 Feb 2005 (IRIN) - Small Zimbabwean parties and independents are complaining that 'unfair legislation' is freezing them out of the forthcoming elections by denying them access to government funding for political campaigns.

The polls, to be held on 31 March, will see the ruling the ZANU-PF face off against the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), two minor opposition parties - ZANU (Ndonga) and the Zimbabwe Youth in Alliance (ZIYA) - as well as 14 independents, among them the former minister of information, Jonathan Moyo.

Four more smaller parties failed to file nomination papers, despite their earlier intention to run: the Democratic Party (DP), ZAPU a former liberation movement; the National Alliance for Good Governance (NAGG); and the Multi-racial Christian Democrats.

Wilson Kumbula, the president of ZANU (Ndonga), which has a single seat in the outgoing parliament, told IRIN that his party's ambition to field candidates in all 120 constituencies had been dashed by a critical shortage of money to bankroll their campaign.

"We are now being forced to reduce the number of candidates to run in the March elections because of the prohibitive costs of doing so - the threshold is just too high," Kumbula said.

The party will field just nine candidates, and Kumbula blames the recently announced hike in candidate's fees, as well as the government's failure to cater for smaller parties when allocating money for election campaigns, as the main reasons for this.

"All along, we had been made to believe that the fees would be low and manageable, but we were surprised at the sudden sharp rise, with barely two months to go to elections," he added.

In a statutory instrument published in the first week of February, the registration fee for a candidate rose by 2,000 percent from Zim \$100,000 (about US \$17) to Zim \$2 million (\$330).

The steep rise meant ZANU (Ndonga) would have had to fork out Zim \$240 million (\$39,675) instead of Zim \$12 million (\$1,983).

In addition, parties now have to pay Zim \$5 million (\$826) for a copy of the voters' roll per constituency, up from the previous Zim \$200,000 (\$34), amounting to Zim \$600 million (\$99,200) to obtain the roll for every constituency.

"This is a gimmick to deter the opposition from contesting, because the government knows there is nowhere we can get that kind of money, especially given that there is hardly any time before the elections. Besides the fees for registration and the voters' roll, we need money to feed our campaign teams, provide transport and fuel, the printing and distribution of campaign material as well as advertising our manifesto," Kumbula complained.

Margaret Dongo, an independent standing in the Harare central constituency, said the Political Parties (Finance) Act, which spells out conditions under which political parties can access funding from the government, disadvantaged small parties.

The act states that each political party whose candidates received at least five percent of the total number of votes cast in the most recent general election is entitled to a proportional amount of money from a special fund.

In the last elections, only ZANU-PF and the MDC received more than five percent, meaning that they were the only parties eligible to claim from the fund. ZANU-PF received Zim \$3.5 billion (\$578,608) and the MDC got Zim \$3 billion (\$495,949) for their campaigns.

Under the Political Parties Act, it is illegal for a political party or any of its members to accept foreign donations, whether directly from the donor or indirectly through a third party.

"Clearly, the act places hurdles in the way of the opposition. It is virtually impossible for an independent like myself to obtain any funding from the state because I can never achieve the five percent spelt out by the law," Dongo told IRIN.

A liberation war veteran, Dongo was Zimbabwe's lone opposition legislator between 1995 and 2000 after splitting from ZANU-PF.

Dongo said she has been forced to dig deep into her own savings to finance her campaign, which covers 25 Harare suburbs. Businesspeople and companies she has approached have not been forthcoming - they complain that the economy is bad, but analysts say local donors are sceptical about candidates running as independents.

ZANU-PF information secretary, Nathan Shamuyarira, has defended the Political Parties (Finance) Act, saying those who were attacking it were doing so to gain "undeserved attention".

"There is no way in which those small parties can be given money, because they hardly command any following," Shamuyarira told IRIN. "These parties should grow big first, before they can start claiming any money."