

Zimbabwe's Commonwealth return bid: Opposition says NO!

NewZimbabwe By Pindai Dube & Sharon Mazingaizo for The Sunday Times

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Citizens Coalition for Change spokesperson, Fadzayi Mahere

It's crunch time for the government as a delegation from the Commonwealth landed in Zimbabwe this past weekend to assess the human rights situation, more than three years after President Emmerson Mnangagwa asked to be readmitted to the body.

The visit by the delegation, led by assistant secretary-general Prof Luis Franceschi, comes as election violence is on the rise ahead of next year's presidential polls.

It also comes as two main opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) MPs, Job Sikhala and Godfrey Sithole, have been in Chikurubi prison for five months alongside 14 party members on allegations of political violence after organising a wake for slain party member Moreblessing Ali. Sithole was released on Friday night ahead of the delegation's arrival yesterday.

In addition, 34 Apostolic Church members have been held in remand prison for four months. They were arrested for marching on Harare's CBD to pray for the country's economic revival.

Two weeks ago, political violence also hit Matebeleland during municipal by-elections. CCC MP Jasmine Toffa and a number of party supporters were injured and hospitalised after being attacked, allegedly by Zanu-PF supporters.

In a statement ahead of their arrival, the secretariat said it would be in until Thursday on a visit that is part of an "informal process of assessment".



Commonwealth Assistant secretary-general Prof Luis Franceschi

The delegation said it would meet the president, members of the government and senior officials, as well as members of opposition political parties, heads of diplomatic missions in Harare, and civil society organisations such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) and the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers' Association (ZWLA), alongside media and business associations.

“The process of readmission entails several rigorous steps that all countries wishing to join the Commonwealth must undertake and includes countries’ adherence to the values enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter,” it said. These include peace, freedom and democracy.

Zimbabwe was suspended from the 56-nation organisation in 2002 for breaching the Harare declaration and withdrew the following year after the body refused to lift the suspension.

Zanu PF information director Tafadzwa Mugwadi said: “We welcome the Commonwealth delegation which is coming to do its assessment.”

He said the assessment would focus on conditions that had been put in place so Zimbabwe can return to the Commonwealth.

“We welcome them and hope their stay in Zimbabwe will expose them to the reality of our democracy, the reality of our peaceful existence as a country and as a people.

“Most importantly, to the tailoring efforts that tell the story of the second republic under the leadership of President Emmerson Mnangagwa,” Mugwadi said.

CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere said her party believed Zimbabwe should not be readmitted because of continuing human rights violations.

“For Zimbabwe to rejoin the community of nations, it is very important for us to stop abusing citizens. You know that there are political prisoners who have been in pretrial detention for more than 140 days.

“Violations of the constitution, violations of property rights, corruption, the escalation of violence by Zanu-PF against citizens, journalists and members of political opposition and civic society, the shrinking democratic space and the continued promulgation of repressive unconstitutional legislation — that does not bode well for Zimbabwe to be received back into the community of nations,” she said.



CCC national spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere

While the Commonwealth delegation is in the country, a court battle looms between the Election Resource Centre (ERC) and the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) which has been accused of misconduct and manipulation as the country heads towards the presidential election.

This after the gazetting, in August, of hefty nomination fees for aspiring presidential and parliamentary candidates. Presidential candidates have to pay US\$20,000 to qualify to run for office next year, and would-be MPs are required to cough up US\$1,000.

The ZEC said a hard copy of the 187,000-page national voters’ roll will cost \$1 a page. An electronic copy costs a comparatively cheap \$200 but the elections authority won’t provide one, for “security” reasons.

Last week, the ZEC demanded that the ERC pay it US\$187,238 for a printed copy of the voters’ roll.

“We advise that for the time being the voters’ roll can only be furnished in printed form as the commission is working on enhancing the security of the electronic voters’ roll and same would be availed on a platform at a date to be advised,” the ZEC said in response.

On Wednesday, the ERC gave the ZEC an ultimatum to provide it with an electronic copy within 10 days or it will take it to court. The ERC has engaged Zimbabwe Human Rights Lawyers to fight the case on their behalf.

Late last month, the ZEC told opposition MP Rusty Markham it was only able to provide him with a hard copy of the roll “upon payment of the prescribed fee”, and that it would be sent to him within 30 working days from the date of payment.

Markham has also challenged the ZEC to withdraw the exorbitant nomination fees and told the Sunday Times the electoral body was using delaying tactics to avoid a voters’ roll audit.

“It is clear that ZEC are delaying for as long as possible to supply a clean voters’ roll that can be audited and assessed. Under no circumstances can anyone believe or trust ZEC with their voters’ roll if they are not prepared to have it audited. What ZEC is doing is exactly what they did in 2008 when there was a very strong possibility of the opposition winning the elections, so they are doing exactly the same thing of going back to their default setting of trying to cheat their way out of it. I have no confidence in ZEC at all,” Markham said.

The Herald quoted ZEC spokesperson Jasper Mangwana saying the high price of a hard copy of the voters’ roll was intended to guard against its manipulation and abuse.

“It is US\$1 per page as it will have security features to avoid tampering and duplication. Some people have been abusing the voters’ roll by taking critical personal information of voters, including their national identity numbers and addresses,” he said.

National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) party leader Prof Lovemore Madhuku told the Sunday Times the nomination fees were unfair.

“The exorbitant nomination fees are both undemocratic and unlawful. They will unlawfully interfere with our political party’s participation in the 2023 elections,” said Madhuku.

“I do not think the fees will be allowed ... It would mean the ZEC is now governing the country instead of merely conducting free, fair and credible elections. If we raise such monies for being nominated, how much more is required for political campaigns? I think that the ZEC, on its own, ought to revise the fees substantially downwards.”

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