

Outrage as Zanu PF takes poll campaign to schools

The Standard By Miriam Mangwaya

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School children struggle to learn in the current chaotic conditions (photo from Internet)

SCHOOLS have become the latest hunting ground for votes for Zanu PF after it emerged that ruling party fanatics are invading learning institutions to force learners and teachers to attend their campaign meetings.

Schools opened for the first term on Monday [9 January], but Zanu PF has reportedly hit the ground running; targeting them in an attempt to reach its target of having five million registered voters when Zimbabwe goes for elections later this year.

Addressing a press conference in Harare on Friday, Zanu PF political commissar Mike Bimha said the party was gearing up for a robust voter mobilisation programme ahead of this year's election.

"I would also like to urge our supporters that we are now gearing up for the various campaigns in all the provinces and I am happy that all our structures are ready to drive the campaign strategy," Bimha said.

Under the Virgin Voters for ED campaign targeting high school pupils, Zanu PF activists have allegedly 'deployed' some officers to monitor activities at schools, mostly those in rural areas, instilling fear among learners and teachers.

Last week, ruling party officials stormed some schools in Masvingo and forced their way into staff meetings and demanding minutes of meetings that would have been held in their absence.

This publication is in possession of videos and audios of teachers and pupils in Masvingo who were forced to attend a Zanu PF meeting, chanting slogans and singing party songs.

In one of the videos, a Zanu PF official tells pupils to be "guided" that the ruling party was a revolutionary party with public support including that of school children.

In the same video, a school head pleads with the Zanu PF officials to be excused from chanting a slogan as it was against the dictates of the constitution.

"May I be excused from chanting the slogan, chairperson?," the school head said.

"I am a civil servant. The law does not permit me to take a political side. I must not publicly declare my preferred political party."

However, the Zanu PF official declined to entertain his plea.

District schools inspectors have reportedly been directed to report teachers who refuse to comply with the party's directives, according to information gathered by The Standard.

Primary and Secondary Education ministry spokesperson Taungana Ndoro said there was no law that barred Zanu PF members from visiting schools hunting for votes.

"What you must understand is that Zanu PF is the ruling party, meaning it has the majority support," Ndoro said.

"It is not just an ordinary political party. It is not like those fly-by-night political parties.

"It is the party upon which the government of the day is built.

"It's their constitutional right to chant slogans wherever they feel like."

Ndoro claimed some opposition parties have also been targeting schools for votes as seen by some learners singing their slogans.

"If someone tries to stop a Zanu PF member from chanting his or her party slogan, it is infringement of their right," Ndoro said.

"There is nothing amiss about Zanu PF chanting party slogans in the presence of school pupils.

"We have seen several videos of children chanting slogans of these fly-by-night political parties, but was it an issue?"

A video in which high school pupils, who are members of the Virgin Voters for ED were mobilising supporters went viral on social media last week confirming fears that schools have been turned into hunting grounds for votes.

School heads have complained that learning was being disrupted by Zanu PF members as a result.

"We are under siege," reads one message from a WhatsApp group of school heads seen by The Standard.

"We have a new master. Schools have been turned into political grounds. Zanu PF is now acting like it is the Primary and Secondary Education ministry."

Zanu PF spokesperson Christopher Mutsvangwa was not picking calls on Friday and yesterday to comment about the matter.

In 2018, Masvingo High Court Judge, Justice Joseph Martin Mafusire barred Zanu PF from abusing learners, teachers and school property in pursuit of private political interests.

This followed an application by legislative watchdog Veritas and the Association of Rural Teachers Unions of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) challenging Zanu PF for forcing school authorities to provide transport and other services for its supporters to rallies as well as forcing schoolchildren to attend political rallies.

In some cases, children were asked by the party leadership to provide labour in the form of carrying benches and chairs from classes to places where rallies would be held.

In their application, they sought an order prohibiting the use of school property for political purposes and the forced attendance of schoolchildren at political rallies.

In his ruling, Mafusire barred Zanu PF from forcing school children and teachers to attend rallies and wear party regalia, causing the closure of schools for any of its rallies or activities and holding rallies on school premises.

The United Nations welcomed the ruling saying it was in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states 'that the best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration in every situation, and at all times.'

"The UN emphasises schools must be havens of safety and children must continue to have uninterrupted access to basic social services," the UN said then.

Teacher unions pleaded with political parties to desist from targeting education institutions in their electioneering campaigns, saying education will emerge as the biggest loser.

Zimbabwe Teachers Association (Zimta) secretary general Goodwill Taderera said some areas have become political minefields for teachers and learners.

"We call upon all state actors to protect the learners and teachers rather than making them victims of their innuendos," Taderera said.

"Government should come clean on protecting teachers and learners and also to ensure that there is no interference with the education system."

He added: "Learners have already been affected by Covid-19 and other natural disasters, hence learning should not be disrupted any further through political machinations."

Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (Ptuz) secretary general Raymond Majongwe said disrupting lessons for political expediency was unacceptable.

“We have always known of individuals who have nothing to do with the education systems involving themselves with the day-to-day running of schools,” Majongwe said.

“We want to say to Zanu PF that this is uncalled for.

“We have a report from Midlands, Mashonaland East and other provinces of victimisation of teachers.

“In some instances, Zanu PF officials are demanding lunch from school coffers and using other school resources which is uncalled for.”

Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (Artuz) secretary general Robson Chere said their members were being victimised in areas such as Gutu. He called on the Public Service Commission (PSC) to intervene.

“We received news that the district schools inspector of Gutu has requested a list of all Artuz members,” Chere said.

“We instituted an investigation to establish why he needs the names.

“We have since gathered that (one) Mr Muganhu is being forced to submit such a list to the Zanu PF leadership in Gutu.

“We urge all school heads to refuse to comply with the illegal directive.

“We are writing to PSC asking them to urgently intervene to protect the lives of teachers.”

<https://www.newsday.co.zw/thestandard/news/article/200006177/outrage-as-zanu-pf-takes-poll-campaign-to-schools>

Or:

<https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-local-byo-226946.html>

FURTHER READING (HISTORICAL):

[Demolishing Zimbabwe’s education system teacher by teacher – LA Times, 8 April 2008](#)