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Priests under watch ahead of Zimbabwe elections

Marko Phiri | Jul. 21, 2011

BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE -- The political temperature is heating up in Zimbabwe ahead of elections that President Robert Mugabe insists must be held this year, and members of the Catholic clergy find themselves at the center of a brewing storm.

Zimbabwe?s last election two years ago was marred by widespread violence and political intimidation. That was quelled somewhat when Mugabe and his longtime political rival Morgan Tsvangirai formed a ruling coalition with Mugabe as president and Tsvangirai as prime minister. For two years, the coalition has been uneasy and government business has been in a virtual stalemate.

Mugabe?s call for early elections would bring the coalition to a close. An alliance of independent human rights organizations, including the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, has reported a marked increase in political violence since Mugabe?s election call.

On July 3, the Catholic commission issued a statement condemning political violence, which it said is being aimed at opponents of Mugabe?s Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front.

Since issuing that statement, several priests have told NCR that they are being followed by security agents. The priests, who asked that their names not be used, say they are being targeted because they advocate for social justice, human rights and electoral rights.

?We know we are being watched, and for us the question has been what do we do about it, as we cannot report security agents to the police because they work together,? a priest based in rural Matabeleland said.

Matabeleland has been a hotbed of anti-Mugabe sentiment since the 1980s when thousands of people were massacred by a much-feared security forced called the Fifth Brigade. Catholic priests in Matabeleland have been pushing for the establishment of a truth commission that will name perpetrators of what some researchers say is southern Africa?s only known genocide.

Priests have told *NCR* that security agents are present during their Masses, but the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops? Conference has made no official complaint.

?The bishops know better than to engage Mugabe through public statements,? a Jesuit priest told *NCR*. ?They cannot be seen using the same language as Mugabe, but they are certainly concerned about their priests.?

Mugabe, 87, has ruled Zimbabwe since 1980.

Mugabe accuses Catholic clergy of opposing his long rule and has in the past few months used public platforms to bash the bishops? conference. In April, local media quoted Mugabe, who is Catholic, as saying, ?I am confused by my own Catholic bishops ... they are mere puppets of Western countries. ... All Catholic bishops are liars, they demonize my party every day.?

Also in April, Fr. Marko Mkandla was arrested as he opened a memorial service for the Matabeleland massacre victims. He spent more than a week in jail on charges that he had addressed an unauthorized public meeting and was provoking public disorder.

[Marko Phiri is a freelance journalist based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe?s second-largest city.]

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