

Grassroots return for Zimbabwe election



By [George Wood](#), Deputy Muse Editor (2012/13)
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With less than two weeks before the proposed constitution referendum, the international community needs to be on high alert as Zimbabwe swiftly approaches its July elections, following UN human rights concerns over violations reported last Wednesday.

Seemingly deadlocked in an uneasy coalition between President Robert Mugabe with his Zanu-PF party, and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai with his Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the potential for bloody conflict is high as corruption and human rights violations are still rife across the state and amongst the Zanu-PF party. Mugabe shows little signs of conceding power despite the referendum being created in order to pave the way for free and fair elections.

Concern was expressed by independent experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council in response to increased searches and intimidation by police on human rights activists, including arrests following on from the government's announcement of the tentative dates set for the upcoming referendum and elections.

Such incidents took place in Harare and Bulawayo where 195 members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), a human rights activist group, were arrested at their annual Valentine's Day peaceful demonstrations. Ironically, in Bulawayo, members that were demanding the police to respond to "formal complaints about police beatings and brutality" were met with riot officers and indiscriminate beatings. In Harare, where eight women were arrested after giving out roses and teddy bears, protests were disbanded as "police fired tear gas at the peaceful demonstration and beat protestors with baton sticks". Noel Kututwa, southern Africa director of Amnesty International, described the incident as an "alarm bell" for international human rights.

These acts of intimidation, violence and harassment committed by the police is shocking, but not surprising. However, the fact the such arbitrary arrests and raids are on the increase is worrying. Heightened ruthlessness provides further evidence that Mugabe will not be leaving the political arena any time soon, regardless of potential constitutional changes.

Neither Mugabe nor Tsvangirai want an all-out conflict to follow July's elections, but the coalition that came from the bloody presidential run-off of 2008 was only grudgingly formed. It still seems inconceivable that Tsvangirai and the MDC could completely replace Mugabe's reign on the country.

Grassroots organisations like WOZA present a path forward for democratic change. According to experts, Zimbabwean human rights activists are vital in spreading the word of the proposed referendum. "Human rights defenders who promote participation have a critical role to play," said Margaret Sekaggya, a Special Rapporteur monitoring the freedom of expression, assembly and treatment of human rights campaigners. It is through the grassroots that mobilisation of political action can take place in preparation for the elections.

The date of the referendum, 16 March, means there is little time left to study the 160-page draft constitution. Hasty voting and continual attacks on protestors could lead to a creaky

referendum,threatening the credibility of these elections. Corruption and police brutality will not end soon.

But with continued perseverance and vigilance up until July's elections, the possibility for a breakthrough in Zimbabwe's political deadlock still prevails.



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