

# Zimbabwe church groups warn over new elections

News

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Harare, November 10 (ENInews)--Church and rights groups in Zimbabwe have warned against new elections saying the situation in the country is "highly volatile, uncertain and tense" after a bloody presidential run-off election two years ago.

"The polarised environment does not favour the holding of elections as violence would most likely erupt," the groups, which include the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, the Christian Alliance and the Student Christian Movement of Zimbabwe, said at the end of October.

The warning came after President Robert Mugabe told his supporters to prepare for elections in 2011. At the same time, there have been increasing reports of intimidation by security forces.

"The political environment remains highly volatile, uncertain, and tense," the groups said in a statement sent to ENInews.

Rallies to collect people's views for a new constitution have often turned into violent clashes between supporters of Mugabe's Zanu-PF party and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change.

Separately, the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said that in Zimbabwe, Anglican bishops had been threatened with assassination. The Anglican church in Zimbabwe says it faces constant intimidation from an excommunicated former bishop closely allied to Mugabe.

Nolbert Kunonga, the former bishop of Harare, was a staunch defender of Mugabe and was given a farm confiscated from a white farmer as a reward. He was excommunicated in 2008 after trying to withdraw the Harare diocese from the Anglican church. He claims he defected from the mother church because it supports the ordination of gay priests.

Kunonga, with the backing of police and security forces, has seized control of church halls and other property in Harare and has regularly blocked Harare's Bishop Chad Gandiya and other Anglicans from using the churches to worship.

In their statement, the church and rights groups say free and fair elections will not be possible unless laws and institutions that have been manipulated to favour Mugabe's party are changed.

"Institutions and infrastructure that support violence such as the [Zanu-PF] youth militia, war veterans and a partisan security force remain unreformed and therefore a threat to democratic elections," the groups said.

Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections in 2008, which Mugabe's party lost, were marred by violence. Prime Minister Tsvangirai has said more than 100 of his supporters were killed and thousands displaced. Mugabe in turn accused followers of Tsvangirai of destroying properties belonging to Zanu-PF supporters.

Tsvangirai withdrew from the 2008 presidential run-off election citing violence against his supporters. That gave Mugabe victory in the second round after he had lost in the first.

Following pressure from other southern African countries, the bitter rivals formed a power-sharing government aimed at easing tensions and mending an economy wrecked by hyperinflation which rendered the local currency unusable.

But the MDC says the work of the compromise government has been hampered by Mugabe's group refusing to hand over key portfolios and, in October, Tsvangirai wrote a letter to the United Nations protesting at unilateral appointments by Mugabe.

The Zimbabwe Independent newspaper reported on 28 October that Mugabe's party is trying to mobilise voters by appealing to younger people and trying to penetrate churches, especially apostolic groups who often combine traditional beliefs with Christianity, in a bid to win the elections he wants to take place in June.