

Zimbabwe attack reveals potential for violence
By Andrew Harding, BBC
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We were in Mbare, a tough, poor neighbourhood close to the centre of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare.

We were following a group of about eight activists for the MDC who were putting up posters calling on Zimbabweans to vote "Yes" to the new draft constitution in Saturday's referendum.

Sten Zvorwadza, who hopes to take over as the next MDC MP in Mbare, was wearing a smart grey suit and waving a copy of the constitution while his colleagues used a bucket of home-made glue to put up their posters.

When the first poster was ripped down, Mr Zvorwadza condemned "Zanu thugs" who have routinely broken up MDC rallies and meetings in the area.

But he and the team continued to put up more posters on the walls of some old blocks of flats, watched by a few dozen people.

Suddenly a woman came charging towards us from a nearby market stall and ripped down two posters.

"Who are you? Why are you putting those posters up? Put them where you live. I'm not going to allow you to do that here," she screamed.

Within seconds, she was punching one of the women campaigners. Another woman joined in.

Eventually they were separated, but then two or three men began to punch and kick Mr Zvorwadza, and throw water at him.

"Watch out... watch out!" they said menacingly, brandishing glass bottles at him and ordering him to leave.

As he slowly tried to move away, an increasingly large and agitated crowd turned on me and cameraman Stuart Phillips.

They tried to grab our camera, then threw buckets of dirty water at us. Finally two or three men began to punch us on the arms and back.

The urge to run was almost overwhelming. But we feared that would provoke even more violence.

Badly beaten

Sticking close to Mr Zvorwadza, we walked back towards our car, with the crowd following close behind.

Mr Zvorwadza said they were shouting: "Next time we will kill you."

We became separated from some of the other MDC campaigners.

Mr Zvorwadza said he feared they might have been abducted or killed, but a few minutes later we met them in their van back in the centre of Harare.

One of the men had a gash on his hand, a cut lip and cheek and bruises on his head. It was clear he had been badly beaten.

"Unfortunately supporters of Zanu-PF are very violent, and don't support the cause that the country is fighting to bring peace after so much violence," said Mr Zvorwadza.

He said he was planning to report the incident at a local police station but fully expected that he would be arrested, rather than his attackers.

"The entire people really long for peace and democracy and free and fair elections, but Zanu-PF supporters - headed by President Robert Mugabe - continue to abuse Zimbabweans as you have just witnessed," he said, urging Mr Mugabe "to uphold the rule of law and make sure impunity is not promoted".

The whole incident lasted only a few minutes, but it was a chilling reminder of the violence that lurks very close to the surface here in Zimbabwe.

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