

Mugabe's 'clean-up' drive brings poll defeat

JANE FIELDS IN HARARE

PRESIDENT Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party lost a key election yesterday as Zimbabweans showed their disgust at his devastating campaign of shack demolitions.

Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube, of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), polled five times the number of votes won by Mr Mugabe's candidate in mayoral elections in the second city of Bulawayo.

State radio announced yesterday that Mr Ndabeni-Ncube, the sitting mayor, had received 29,575 votes against 5,509 for Dickson Abu-Basuthu, a virtually unknown candidate from ZANU-PF.

Mr Ndabeni-Ncube said his victory pointed to the government's growing unpopularity.

The clean-up exercise "was just the last nail in the coffin" for the ruling party, he told The Scotsman. "This government is not for the people. It (the clean-up exercise) makes them more hateful of ZANU-PF."

More than 700,000 people have lost their homes across Zimbabwe's towns and cities since the launch in mid-May of "Operation Drive Out Trash", Mr Mugabe's infamous "clean-up" campaign.

Bulawayo, with its wide avenues and old townships, was particularly hard-hit. Thousands of people took refuge in 17 churches across the city, according to a recent report by UN envoy Anna Tibaijuka. They were later evicted by armed police.

Political analyst John Makumbe said the MDC's victory was "a continuation of the urban people's resistance" to Mr Mugabe. "We can see that after the (clean-up) operation people are even more opposed to the Mugabe regime," he said.

The 81-year-old Zimbabwean president maintains he wants to "restore dignity" to Zimbabweans, but the MDC says the operation was an attempt to chase its supporters into the countryside.

Yesterday Mr Ndabeni-Ncube said the displacement of voters contributed to Saturday's low turnout of just 10.7 per cent. But the main reason for the poor showing was "the misery of the people" who felt their vote had become useless, he said.

The government has done all it can to neutralise the power of opposition mayors. Elias Mudzuri, the MDC mayor of Harare, was sacked in 2003 for alleged mismanagement while the mayor of Mutare, Misheck Kagurabadza, was suspended in July on similar charges.

Mr Ndabeni-Ncube was threatened with disciplinary action last month after he held a closed meeting with the UN envoy during her two-week tour.

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