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## Zimbabwe opposition supporters clash over Senate

**MUTARE** – Police here had to intervene to break up violent clashes on Tuesday between rival factions of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party as sharp differences over contesting next month’s Senate election threaten to tear apart the opposition party.

The six-year opposition party has failed to agree on whether to contest the November 26 election with leader Morgan Tsvangirai insisting the MDC should boycott the election while the party’s national council, many of whose members hope to win seats in the new Senate, says they should contest the poll.

Violence broke out in Mutare, Zimbabwe’s fourth largest city, when a group of MDC supporters that backs Tsvangirai’s position stormed the party provincial offices to voice their displeasure at the provincial leadership who are in favour of contesting the poll.

But the provincial executive was quick to act, mobilising its own backers to counter protests by the pro-boycott faction with violence ensuing almost immediately as the two factions met each other.

Police spokesman Joshua Tigere told ZimOnline: “We managed to restore order after MDC supporters clashed over internal party issues.”

Tigere could not say whether there were any injuries or whether the police had arrested any of the opposition supporters.

MDC chairman in Manicaland province under which Mutare lies, Prosper Mutseyami declined to talk to the Press about the clashes saying he would only do so after the “dust settles”.

He said: “Our party is faced with major difficulties. I would rather not talk to the Press over that issue until the dust settles.”

The sharp differences over whether to contest the Senate poll have brought to the fore divisions in the MDC over what strategy to use to unseat President Robert Mugabe and his ruling ZANU PF party.

Analysts have warned that the divisions that have been simmering for long could see the break up of the six-year old party that has since its formation in 1999 posed the greatest threat yet to Mugabe and ZANU PF's 25-year hold on power.

Already, deputy secretary general Gift Chimankire has written to the party's 12 provinces instructing them to begin nominating candidates for the election saying this was the position taken by the national council.

The council is said to have voted 33:31 in favour of participating in the election. But Tsvangirai insists the vote was deadlocked at 50:50 and that he had to use his casting vote in favour of a boycott.

Tsvangirai has also written to party provincial councils ordering them to ignore Chimankire's instructions to select candidates.

The opposition leader last Friday wrote to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission that runs elections telling it the MDC was not standing and that any of its members submitting their names as candidates were doing so in their individual capacities.

But commission head High Court Judge George Chiweshe has indicated that the commission would ignore Tsvangirai's letter.

Tsvangirai - a fiery trade unionist during his stint at the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions – has vehemently opposed the Senate election saying it will be rigged by ZANU PF and that in any event the proposed Senate would be of no value in a country that should be better directing meagre resources to fighting starvation threatening a quarter of its 12 million people.

He is backed in his position by the party's key youth and women's wings. But several other top leaders of the MDC say the party should not surrender political space to Mugabe and ZANU PF by boycotting the Senate poll.

The other faction of the MDC pushing for the opposition party to contest the election is said to be led by secretary general Welshman Ncube and includes executives of at least six of the party's 12 provinces. Both Tsvangirai and Ncube however deny their party is riven by factionalism. - ZimOnline