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Zimbabwe Demonstrations Ruled Out Opposition Leader Says He Wants to Build Party

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HARARE, Zimbabwe, April 3 -- Zimbabwe's opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, ruled out organizing demonstrations against what he called the "fraudulent" results of last week's parliamentary elections, saying his party could not mount a protest large enough to force President Robert Mugabe from power.

In an interview at his home Sunday, Tsvangirai said widespread discrepancies in the official results from Thursday's elections indicated that Mugabe's party had rigged the voting in the rural areas where it claimed most of its seats. Tsvangirai has alleged that the ruling party intimidated voters, doctored voter rolls with phony names and used food aid in drought-stricken areas to garner support.

Yet Tsvangirai rejected calls from some of his supporters for demonstrations, saying that police would close roads to prevent protesters from reaching the country's main cities. Those who made it, he said, would face police violence and arrest, hurting the opposition party's long-term growth prospects. He said the party would instead focus on seeking new supporters in Mugabe's rural strongholds.

"I'm not afraid to go to jail myself," said Tsvangirai, looking relaxed in an open-collared shirt at his home in a suburb of Harare, the capital. "But it's one thing to be courageous and another thing to make reckless decisions in a way that won't be sustainable. We have to be realistic."

Tsvangirai's reluctance to call for protests, which require prior written approval from a police force that Mugabe controls, has prompted some opposition supporters to call for new, more aggressive leadership in their party, the Movement for Democratic Change. One frustrated party official said Tsvangirai had missed his "Gandhi moment" in the first days after the elections as the extent of the ruling party landslide became clear and people were ready to be led into demonstrations.

Mugabe, who has dismissed allegations that the elections were tainted, said Saturday that any effort by the opposition to demonstrate would cause "conflict, serious conflict."

Tsvangirai acknowledged in the interview that the government probably would overwhelm any protests with force. He added that Zimbabwe, with its repressive laws on public assembly and a history of political violence, is "not Ukraine," a reference to the relatively peaceful uprising that reversed a rigged presidential election in the former Soviet republic last year.

"We have to be realistic," Tsvangirai said.

In 2003, Tsvangirai called for a "final push" of protests, urging people to stay home from work, but the effort fizzled after a few days.

Tsvangirai maintained that his party would have won more than 90 of the 120 contested seats if the elections had been fair. The official results showed Tsvangirai's party winning 41 seats, compared with 78 for Mugabe's party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, a net loss for the opposition of 16 seats from its showing in the last parliamentary balloting in 2000. One independent also won a seat Thursday. Mugabe will appoint the 30 remaining members of the 150-seat national legislature.

Tsvangirai also said his party had more than twice as many active members as Mugabe's ZANU-PF, which has ruled with Mugabe since the nation became independent in 1980.

Journalists and other observers reported that opposition rallies drew large, enthusiastic crowds in many parts of the country in the final weeks before the elections. Even in rural areas previously regarded as prohibitive to the opposition because of the prospect of violence, the party organized supporters and held rallies.

Tsvangirai said he could not envision his party taking power unless Mugabe chose to negotiate, an unlikely prospect considering that the president has repeatedly called opposition supporters "traitors" and tools of colonialist Western powers.

"What has become very evident is you can't expect democracy from a dictator," said Tsvangirai, whose party threatened for months to boycott the elections before deciding to field candidates. "He goes through this democratic process but with a full eye on controlling the outcome."

Tsvangirai's comments came as observer missions from neighboring countries in southern Africa -- handpicked by Mugabe -- said the parliamentary vote reflected the will of Zimbabweans. The Southern African Development Community called the vote "peaceful, transparent, credible and well managed." The organization also endorsed elections in 2000 and 2002 that were widely condemned by observers from around the world.

"Only the gullible can believe what came out of this election," Tsvangirai said Sunday about the recent voting. "Everyone understands the extent of the fraud."

He added: "The struggles continue. . . . I'm very certain that the people are not going to give up. We are not going to give up."