

New Bill to strengthen Mugabe's hand

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Ruling-party legislators in Zimbabwe are pushing a new slate of constitutional amendments critics say are designed to strengthen ageing and autocratic President Robert Mugabe.

A 22-clause Bill before Parliament, which reconvened on Tuesday after a two-week break, will establish a 40-seat Senate, strip landowners of all rights of appeal if their property is seized and allow the government to deny its critics passports, lawyers say.

Government officials were not immediately available for comment on Tuesday on the proposals. No date has been announced for Parliament to debate them, but the House received 30 days' notice of its introduction a month ago.

In a petition to legislators and judges, 100 of the country's top lawyers described the proposed amendments as "a direct affront to basic human rights norms" and "the greatest challenge yet" to the legal profession, the judiciary and the estimated 15-million Zimbabweans at home and abroad.

Jonathan Moyo, who was Mugabe's propaganda chief for five years and is now the lone independent among Parliament's 150 members, said the proposed changes are part of the 81-year-old Mugabe's efforts to control who will succeed him and when.

The main opposition Movement for Democratic Change is vowing to fight the Bill. But with just 41 lawmakers, opposition chief whip Innocent Gonese conceded the party won't be able to prevent the changes from coming into effect.

Mugabe's Zanu-PF claimed 78 of Parliament's 120 elected seats in a bitterly disputed March 31 election, and the president nominates an additional 30 representatives.

Lawyers headed by law Professor Geoffrey Feltoe said in their petition that Zimbabwe inherited a "fundamentally deficient Constitution" at independence from Britain in 1980 that is in urgent need of reform to strengthen its human rights protections.

The proposed Bill does the opposite, they argued.

It "seeks to remove fundamental rights to property, secure protection of the law and freedom of movement", the petition said.

Moyo said the move to establish a second House of Parliament and increase the government's powers of expropriation "buys Mugabe the patronage he needs" after divisions within the ruling party burst into the open over the appointment of Joyce Mujuru as Second Vice-President in December.

Moyo defected from the ruling party after losing his job as information minister in a power struggle with Mugabe over Mujuru's appointment to a position that places her in line to succeed the president.

He said he has no qualms about aligning with his former rivals in the MDC to oppose the amendments.

Few details have been released about the proposed new chamber, except that it will represent traditional chiefs, retired politicians and other eminent Zimbabweans.

The Bill will also give the government power to refuse passports on grounds of national interest, which lawyers argue could be used to restrict the movements of its critics.

It also closes the last legal recourse open to white farmers whose land has been designated for redistribution to black Zimbabweans. The effect will be to reduce land owners -- even in urban areas -- to "mere tenants at the will of the state", said Zimbabwe's Human Rights Forum.

"The mere fact that a land owner has fallen from political favour will be sufficient reason to expropriate his land," the forum said in a statement that predicted "disastrous economic results".

Mugabe defends the often violent seizure of about 5 000 white-owned commercial farms as a bid to right colonial-era imbalances in land ownership. But critics blame the so-called fast-track reform for the collapse of Zimbabwe's agriculture-based economy.

About four million Zimbabweans now need food relief in a country that was once a regional breadbasket, according to United Nations figures. The country is also facing the possibility of expulsion from the International Monetary Fund for failing to make payments on its \$300-million arrears.

South African President Thabo Mbeki has reportedly been pressing Mugabe to negotiate with the opposition to resolve the political and economic crisis gripping Zimbabwe as a condition for a \$1-billion bail-out. But Mugabe has ruled out any such talks.

Despite mounting pressure for reform, Gonese and Moyobelieve Mugabe's party won't hesitate to push through its constitutional amendments.

"Zanu-PF is one of the most arrogant political parties. I do not believe they will wait at all, and we do not foresee any of their members breaking ranks," Gonese said. -- Sapa-AP