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Assassins in Zimbabwe Aim at the Grass Roots

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JOHANNESBURG — Tonderai Ndira was a shrewd choice for assassination: young, courageous and admired. Kill him and fear would pulse through a thousand spines. He was an up-and-comer in [Zimbabwe](#)'s opposition party, a charismatic figure with a strong following in the Harare slums where he lived.

There were rumors his name was on a hit list. For weeks he prudently hid out, but his wife, Plaxedess, desperately pleaded with him to come home for a night. He slipped back to his family on May 12.

The five killers pushed through the door soon after dawn, as Mr. Ndira, 30, slept and his wife made porridge for their two children. He was wrenched from his bed, roughed up and stuffed into the back seat of a double-cab Toyota pickup. "They're going to kill me," he cried, Plaxedess said. As the children watched from the door, two men sat on his back, a gag was shoved in his mouth and his head was yanked upward, a technique of asphyxiation later presumed in a physician's post mortem to be the cause of death.

Zimbabwe will have a presidential runoff election on Friday, an epochal choice between [Robert Mugabe](#), the 84-year-old liberation hero who has run the nation for nearly three decades, and the opposition leader [Morgan Tsvangirai](#). But in the morbid and sinister weeks recently passed, the balloting has been preceded by a calculated campaign of bloodletting meant to intimidate the opposition and strip it of some of its most valuable foot soldiers.

Even as hundreds of election observers from neighboring countries were deployed across Zimbabwe in the past few days, the gruesome killings and beatings of opposition figures have continued.

The body of the wife of Harare's newly chosen mayor was found Wednesday, her face so badly bashed in that even her own brother only recognized her by her brown corduroy skirt and plaited hair. On Thursday, the bodies of four more

opposition activists turned up after they had been abducted by men shouting ruling party slogans.

The strategic killing of activists and their families has deprived the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, not only of its dead stalwarts but also of hundreds of other essential workers who have fled while reasonably supposing they will be next.

At least 85 activists and supporters of the party have been killed, according to civic group tallies, including several operatives who, while little known outside Zimbabwe, were mainstays within it. They were thorns in the side of the government, frequently in and out of jail, bold enough to campaign in the no-go areas where Mr. Mugabe's party previously faced little competition.

"They're targeting people who are unknown because cynically they know they can get away with it," said David Coltart, an opposition senator.

One such target was Better Chokururama, a 31-year-old activist with an appetite for bravado and fisticuffs, nicknamed "Texas" for both the cowboy hats he favored and the moniker of a torture camp from which he once escaped. He was abducted on April 19, and his legs crushed by his captors with boulders.

He said in an interview afterward, as he lay with both legs in casts, that he had told his captors "that beating people would not change anything because the opposition had beaten the governing party, ZANU-PF, in the elections."

"They laughed loudly," he said, "then threw me out of the moving vehicle." Weeks later, he was snatched again, with two other opposition activists; the three bodies were discovered separately and identified by family members.

But the violence has been aimed not only at campaigners but at voters as well. So-called pungwe sessions, the Shona word for all-night vigils, have become common in areas where people once loyal to President Mugabe dared vote against him in the first round of voting on March 29. Villagers are roused from their homes and herded together. Suspected opposition supporters are then called forward to be thrashed.

In Chaona, a village in Mashonaland Central Province, a man named Fredrick said he was among 10 suspected opposition supporters tortured for five hours under a tree. One man was caught while trying to escape. "They tied his genitals with an elastic band and beat him until he passed out and died," said Fredrick, who asked that his last name not be used in order to protect himself. He said a second man was killed after his tormentors dripped bubbles of burning plastic on his naked body.

Prosper Mutema, 34, from Mtoko in Mashonaland East, said he was among dozens captured on June 4, taken to a torture camp and beaten all night with sticks and clubs called knobkerries. In the morning, he was ordered to hand over a cow as a "repentance fee." Lacking so costly an animal, he pleaded for a more modest penitence, eventually winning his freedom with a bucket of maize meal and a chicken.

There have been dozens of killings, thousands of beatings and tens of thousands of people displaced, civic groups, doctors and relief agencies say. Though roadblocks seal off rural areas where most of the abuse is taking place, there are so many surviving victims and witnesses that human rights workers and journalists have been able to catalog much of the brutality. Pain is often inflicted through hours-long pummeling of the soles of the feet and the flesh of the buttocks.

"When Mugabe declares himself the winner, the world must know what he has done," said the opposition's director of elections, Ian Makone, who has gone underground and travels only at night. Two of his chief aides have been killed; several others have scattered into exile.

Mr. Mugabe, on the other hand, is campaigning boldly. A vigorous octogenarian, his life span is already more than double the national average in this destitute country, where inflation has gone so berserk that a loaf of bread now costs \$30 billion Zimbabwean dollars.

Mr. Mugabe openly portrays the election in the terminology of warfare, a battle to preserve sovereignty against puppets put up by the British, the nation's onetime colonial masters who in his view want to reclaim the land for white domination. Either he will win, he insists, or he will keep power by force.

“We are not going to give up our country for a mere X on a ballot,” he said in a speech last week. “How can a ballpoint pen fight with a gun?”

The opposition claims that Mr. Tsvangirai won a majority in the earlier round of voting, and that the government manipulated the count to force a runoff and ready its violent response.

Whatever the actual count, hard-liners in the governing party agreed on a “war-like/military style strategy” to recapture votes that had drifted astray and win a second ballot, according to the minutes of one of their meetings obtained from a ZANU-PF official.

“This is not going to be an election,” said one senior ZANU-PF official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the plans are secret. “The election happened in March. This is going to be a war. We are going all out to win this, using all state resources at our disposal.”

Army officers were sent to every province to direct the strategy, which eventually employed soldiers, intelligence agents, policemen and paramilitary groups known as war veterans and youth brigades called the green bombers, the senior official said. Ward by ward voting results dictated the campaign’s geography. In the Zaka district of Masvingo, once a reliable ZANU-PF stronghold, Mr. Tsvangirai won in March, and the opposition party also took three of four seats in Parliament and the Senate seat. Reprisals began within weeks.

Names of the opposition’s poll workers had been published in the newspaper as required by law, and these workers seem to have been systematically identified for nighttime beatings. Hundreds of them have since fled, leaving their polling stations vulnerable to ballot stuffing on Friday, said the constituency’s senator-elect, Misheck Marava. He said his wife and children were savagely beaten with chains and whips.

Then, on June 4 at 4:15 a.m., 13 men led by soldiers attacked the local opposition office at Jerera Growth Point, where some of those displaced by violence had sought a haven. At least two men were killed. The office was set afire with gasoline.

As one of survivor of the blaze, Isaac Mbanje, lay with maddening pain in a Harare hospital, skin peeling from his raw wounds and fluids seeping through the bandages on his charred hands, he described his ordeal.

One of the assailants ordered him: "Lie down! Keep quiet!" Then shots were fired from an AK-47. "One of the guys who was shot fell on my body," Mr. Mbanje said. Then the attackers set both the dead and living alight.

Tichanzi Gandanga, the opposition's director of elections in Harare, said he was abducted April 23 by men who blindfolded and gagged him and then thrust him into a truck. As the vehicle raced into the countryside, he was badly beaten and stripped before being dumped onto the road, where he was beaten and kicked and then, as he hovered near unconsciousness, run over.

The men attacking him were armed and could have shot him, Mr. Gandanga said. He is not sure why they left him alive, or even if they meant to.

"We had an election machinery with some important foot soldiers," Mr. Gandanga said. "These soldiers were identified and eliminated."

Opposition leaders assumed the carnage would stop once election observers arrived to monitor the vote. But that has hardly proved true.

Emmanuel Chiroto, 41, was elected to represent his ward in Harare. Fearful of attacks on his family, he sent his wife, Abigail, 27, and son, Ashley, 4, to stay with her mother outside the city. But on Sunday, fellow city councilors chose him as Harare's mayor, and his proud wife came home the next day to celebrate, he said.

Soon after she arrived, he was called away because a ward chairman had been beaten up. While Mr. Chiroto was away, two truckloads of men firebombed his home and abducted his wife and child. Opposition party officials hurriedly contacted Tanki Mothae, a Lesotho native who is a key manager of the election monitors from the Southern African Development Community.

"The house was completely destroyed inside," Mr. Mothae said in an interview. "The furniture, everything, was burned to ashes."

On Tuesday, Mr. Chiroto's little boy was dropped off at a police station. Wednesday, his wife's battered body was found in a Harare morgue.

Mr. Chiroto still has not had the heart to tell Ashley that his mother is dead, he said. The boy told his father he had sat on his blindfolded mother's lap as she was held captive and then he was left behind as soldiers took her away.

"We need to go get Mommy," the 4-year-old has told his father over and over. "We have to go! She's in the bush. Let's go to Mommy!"

Four journalists contributed reporting from Harare, Zimbabwe.