

Beware the Ides of March

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- *From:* ayaz <iamtheidiotwhocrossposts@xxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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Beware the Ides of March
FinGaz
Daniel Molokele
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BETWEEN the years 2000 and 2002 I used to run a column in the Gweru-based Roman Catholic Church-funded monthly magazine called Moto, (literally translated 'fire' from the local Shona language). The column was called 'No Holds Barred'.

It may also be recalled that the Moto issue of March 2002, I wrote an analysis entitled, 'Beware of the Ides of March'.

The article sought to warn the incumbent leader of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, not to take things for granted in the run-up to the March 2002 elections. At that time, I felt it was appropriate to use the analogy of the assassination of Julius Caesar as the basis of my warning to (President) Mugabe as he prepared to battle the then leader of a much more united and determined opposition MDC, Morgan Tsvangirai.

It was my contention in the main, that just like Caesar, an over confident (President) Mugabe ran the risk of experiencing a humiliating defeat at the hands of the upstart, the ascendant Tsvangirai.

But as history would have it, (President) Mugabe appeared to have heeded the warning and fought perhaps the battle of his entire political life. In the end, he managed to shrug off Tsvangirai as some would argue, by hook or crook, in an election with a very controversial result.

And so it happened that unlike the great Caesar, the President did not meet his fateful end that March. In fact he has soldiered on, defying all forms of opposition to his stranglehold on the Zimbabwean political leadership mace unto this day.

But that was then.

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As I write today, the political state of affairs in Zimbabwe has just taken a new dramatic shift that might in the long term, completely transform the political landscape forever.

February 5, an ordinary day in Zimbabwe suddenly breathed a new lease of life into the largely moribund political environment of the country. A major Press conference was held in Harare that eventually brought the entire capital to a halt.

A rather quiet and unassuming gentleman, Simba Makoni, who upset the apple cart by openly declaring his candidature for the presidency in the much-anticipated March 2008 harmonised elections, addressed the event. Personally, I was not all that surprised by this turn of events. It appears that Makoni had read the national political mood so well. There actually appears to be an air of hopelessness and despondency in the Zimbabwean political atmosphere. This was further compounded by a desperate desire and yearning for some real politics of change.

Just a few days earlier, at the end of January 2008 to be precise, in my chronological context, I spent almost a full week in Bulawayo, the ailing second city of Zimbabwe. And so it happened that during my latest visit to my motherland, I had a good opportunity to collect views and perspectives about the rumour that Simba Makoni was allegedly preparing to stake a surprise challenge to President Mugabe's leadership of Zimbabwe.

I managed to speak to a wide-ranging group of people from some key political activists, civic society leaders, church leaders, friends, relatives and some family members about the alleged ambitions of Makoni.

The result of my elementary and less than empirical public opinion survey was so astounding! I discovered that an overwhelming number of people I spoke to were strongly in favour of Makoni standing up to President Mugabe. It appeared the people I spoke to had lost faith in both President Mugabe and Tsvangirai altogether! There was so much disillusionment over the performance of both the key candidates of the last presidential elections in March 2002.

Both President Mugabe and Tsvangirai seemed to have lost their strong appeal over the electorate.

In the final analysis, it was clear to me that Makoni was not necessarily a popular choice but rather a desperate option from a people that had become disillusioned with the leadership of both President Mugabe and Tsvangirai. Makoni was thus an emerging beneficiary of that strong feeling of disenchantment with the status quo.

Makoni's rather muted entrance into the presidential race has indeed complicated matters on the Zimbabwean political landscape. First and perhaps foremost, Makoni has breathed a new lease of life into the nation's confidence in the rather sterile electoral systems of the country. Until his arrival, the 2008 elections were bound to be a huge non-event. Over the years, the euphoria that greeted the formation of the opposition MDC and its promise of political change has evaporated among the long-suffering masses of Zimbabwe.

The MDC has not been able to complete the change and has in the final analysis helped to develop a notion that it would never be able to unseat President Mugabe via the electoral process since it remained tilted heavily in favour of the incumbent.

There is bound to be a re-affirmation of faith in the electoral process of Zimbabwe by the majority of voters who up to now were most likely not to even bother to turn out and vote, let alone support a specific candidate. Secondly, Makoni's entrance has perhaps saved the country from the ever-growing possibility of a military take over of the country. A duplication of the recent electoral patterns in the country would have resulted in the retention of a hugely unpopular government that would have driven the millions of long suffering Zimbabweans into an abyss of political despair.

That on its own could have resulted in a complete loss of faith in all future elections leading to the need for a new paradigm in the ultimate politics of change. As such the notion of removing the incumbent by 'bullets' and not by 'ballots' would have gathered more momentum. Such a ghastly context could have led to civil unrest, a sure recipe for a coup or an all out civil war.

Makoni's decision has thus given the electoral politics of change a stay of execution.

Thirdly, the entrance of Makoni as an independent now means that it is certain that the presidential elections will not be a predictable two-horse race between Mugabe and Tsvangirai as it was in the last plebiscite of March 2002. Until now, it was beginning to be apparent that there were only two serious alternatives for the electorate, the same old protagonists in the form of President Mugabe and Tsvangirai.

Makoni, it is hoped, will prove to be a viable alternative on the presidential menu for the electorate to savour upon. This is good for the development of a vibrant culture of credible multi-party democracy in the country.

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Fourthly, Makoni is also important in as far as the fact that he appears to have a broad appeal across the nation. He will be able to draw the attention of most voters who over the years have grown disenchanted by the politics of both the MDC and ZANU–PF.

It is common cause that both political parties are presently suffering from a crisis of common purpose and disunity, as largely reflected by the factionalism that is clearly evident in both groupings.

The past weekend's failure of the two factions of the MDC to adopt a political pact for the polls is a clear case in point. On the other hand, ZANU–PF has also been struggling to come up with a legitimate list of candidates.

This is so mainly in Matabeleland where discord has been exacerbated by the controversial reinstatement of Jabulani Sibanda by President Mugabe, a move that has led to an increasingly open challenge to his leadership credentials by the disenchanted senior party members of PF–ZAPU origins.

Last but by no means least, Makoni appears to be more likely to defeat the incumbent than the MDC since he actually fits more appropriately into the political analogy of the Ides of March.

Just like Brutus, he is from President Mugabe's inner circle. The presence of the likes of Ibbo Mandaza and retired army boss Kudzai Mbudzi appears to suggest that he has the backing of President Mugabe's only credible source of political power, the nation's security forces.

Besides, Mandaza is known to be a close associate of the ruling party's alleged kingmaker who himself wields a lot of influence over the armed forces, the retired army commander Solomon Mujuru.

Makoni himself has already claimed in public that he has consulted broadly and has the support of many senior leaders of ZANU–PF.

And so just like Brutus, it is most likely that President Mugabe, like Caesar, might not be able to survive an attack from his own inner circle. As it is for now, he is no longer sure as to who to trust within his own party. The postponement of the party's Politburo meeting last Wednesday may actually be an indication of the prevailing turmoil and uncertainty within the party leadership.

President Mugabe is reeling and staggering right now. As it

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is, he may soon fall down fatally, at the hands of his own.

President Mugabe must be aware of the real Ides of March
this time around!

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