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Zimbabwe's Rulers Unleash Police on Anglicans

By [CELIA W. DUGGER](#)

JOHANNESBURG — The parishioners were lined up for Holy Communion on Sunday when the riot police stormed the stately St. Francis Anglican Church in Harare, [Zimbabwe](#)'s capital. Helmeted, black-booted officers banged on the pews with their batons as terrified members of the congregation stampeded for the doors, witnesses said.

A policeman swung his stick in vicious arcs, striking matrons, a girl and a grandmother who had bent over to pick up a Bible dropped in the melee. A lone housewife began singing from a hymn in Shona, "We will keep worshiping no matter the trials!" Hundreds of women, many dressed in the Anglican Mothers' Union uniform of black skirt, white shirt and blue headdress, lifted their voices to join hers.

Beneath their defiance, though, lay raw fear as the country's ruling party stepped up its campaign of intimidation ahead of a presidential runoff. In a conflict that has penetrated ever deeper into Zimbabwe's social fabric, the party has focused on a growing roster of groups that elude its direct control — a list that includes the Anglican diocese of Harare, as well as charitable and civic organizations, trade unions, teachers, independent election monitors and the political opposition.

Anglican leaders and parishioners said in interviews that the church was not concerned with politics and that it counted people from both the ruling party and the opposition in its congregations. Yet the ruling party appears to have decided that only Anglicans who follow Nolbert Kunonga — a renegade bishop in Harare who is a staunch ally of President [Robert Mugabe](#) — are allowed to hold services.

Over the past three Sundays, the police have interrogated Anglican priests and lay leaders, arrested and beaten parishioners and locked thousands of worshipers out of dozens of churches.

“As a theologian who has read a lot about the persecution of the early Christians, I’m really feeling connected to that history,” said Bishop Sebastian Bakare, 66, who came out of retirement to replace Mr. Kunonga. “We are being persecuted.”

Church leaders say the struggle in the Anglican diocese of Harare is not only over its extensive, valuable properties, but also over who controls the church itself in a society riven by political divisions, especially since the disputed elections of March 29.

Mr. Kunonga, who broke with the church hierarchy late last year and recently called Mr. Mugabe “a prophet of God,” is known in Zimbabwe as an avid supporter of the ruling party and a proponent of its seizures of white-owned commercial farms, often accomplished violently. In fact, he appears to have benefited richly from the policy himself.

While such strong allegiances have clearly played a role in the attacks on parishioners, Anglicans beyond Zimbabwe have also taken steps likely to have enraged Mr. Mugabe and the ruling party, known as ZANU-PF.

The worldwide Anglican Communion issued a statement in January expressing “deep concern” about Mr. Kunonga’s close ties to Mr. Mugabe. Then on April 21, amid the postelection intimidation of opposition supporters, the communion called on all Christians to pray for Zimbabwe’s rescue “from violence, the concealing and juggling of election results, deceit, oppression and corruption.”

And three weeks ago, an Anglican bishop in South Africa persuaded a judge there to halt the delivery of Chinese-made ammunition to Zimbabwe’s military — bullets the bishop warned could be used to repress Zimbabweans.

This is not the first time that a church has felt the ruling party’s fury. Last year, state-controlled television showed photos of one of Mr. Mugabe’s most ferocious critics, Archbishop Pius Ncube, a Roman Catholic, in bed with a married woman, effectively neutralizing him as the leader of the clerical opposition to Mr.

Mugabe's rule. This month, the state-run newspaper, The Herald, reported that the woman had died "lonely and miserable after being abandoned by Ncube."

Now Bishop Bakare's followers, who include most of the city's Anglicans, say that Mr. Kunonga has falsely told the government that they are politically aligned with the opposition — an accusation the ruling party seems to be taking seriously.

Despite a High Court order requiring that Anglican churches be shared among the worshipers, church officials say that only people who attend services led by priests allied with Mr. Kunonga have been allowed to pray in peace.

This week, the Supreme Court dismissed Mr. Kunonga's appeal of the sharing order, but church leaders say they are far from sure that the law will be enforced.

A widowed mother of five who sings with the choir at St. Francis Church in Waterfalls — and who was too frightened to be quoted by name — asked despairingly this week where she could seek solace now that her church was no longer sacrosanct.

"I go to church to talk to the Lord and feel better," the woman said. "Now, I don't know where to go."

Neither Mr. Kunonga nor his spokesman, the Rev. Morris Brown Gwedegwe, has returned repeated calls seeking comment.

When Chief Superintendent Oliver Mandipaka, a police spokesman, was asked about police assaults on Anglican parishioners, he said he was unaware of such episodes and asked for the names of those complaining. "Give me names, because without those I will not comment," he said. "Thank you and bye." Then he hung up.

At the heart of the conflict with Mr. Kunonga is more than property and power, but also some of the church's core values. Mr. Kunonga told Anglican officials last year that he was withdrawing from the mother church because of its sympathy toward homosexuals, they said. By October, the Anglican Province of Central Africa said Mr. Kunonga had "severed" his relationship with the church and was no longer a bishop of the province.

Bishop Bakare said Mr. Kunonga had preached hatred of gays and lesbians, contrary to the Harare diocese's stand. "We believe in a church that is inclusive, a church that accepts all people," Bishop Bakare said.

But even a spokesman for an alliance of conservative bishops who oppose "the ordination of practicing homosexuals as priests," distanced them from Mr. Kunonga. Arne H. Fjeldstad, head of communications for the alliance, the Global Anglican Future Conference, said in an e-mail message that Mr. Kunonga was not part of the conference, but "rather that he's one of Mugabe's henchmen."

Mr. Kunonga appears to have gained much from that loyalty. In 2003, the government gave Mr. Kunonga a 1,630-acre farm outside Harare and a seven-bedroom house that sits on it, according to Marcus Hale, who said the farm, bought by his family in 1990 for \$2 million, was confiscated without payment.

Mr. Kunonga's influence has been felt in church after church in recent weeks as well. Anglican parishioners said they found themselves shut out or driven out by police officers who claimed to be acting on orders from their superiors to allow only Mr. Kunonga's priests to preside.

At St. Paul's Church in the Highfield suburb of Harare, the congregation refused to budge and kept singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" when a dozen policemen entered the church on May 4. But the commander radioed for backup, and soon more than 50 riot police officers arrived, the church's wardens said.

Hundreds of parishioners were then drummed out of the church to the deafening beat of baton sticks banging on pews. People began taking out their cellphones to photograph the policemen who had forced them out.

The officers then charged into the scattering crowd, batons swinging. "Even myself, they hit my hand," said a stunned seamstress. "They said, 'Go back to your homes. You are not supposed to be here.'"

A journalist in Harare, Zimbabwe, contributed reporting.