South African Court Blocks Government's ICC Withdrawal Bid

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By [James Macharia](http://www.reuters.com/journalists/james-macharia)

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South Africa's High Court blocked the government's attempt to withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC) on Wednesday, the latest blow to scandal-plagued President Jacob Zuma from an assertive post-apartheid judicial system.

Justice Minister Michael Masutha said the government would press ahead with withdrawing from the Hague-based tribunal, noting that the ruling was based largely on procedure - that the decision to pull out did not pass first through parliament.

The ICC, which was launched in July 2002 and has 124 member states, is the first legal body with permanent international jurisdiction to prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

retoria notified the United Nations of its intent to withdraw in October, starting a year-long divorce period that would have made South Africa the first country to quit the court in October this year.

However, High Court Judge Phineas Mojapelo told the government to tear up its withdrawal notice, saying it was "unconstitutional and invalid" because it had not passed through parliament.

The opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), which brought the court application, said the ruling was a reminder of South Africa's departure under Zuma from the international idealism that typified its foreign policy under Nelson Mandela.

"This is a victory for the rule of law and indeed for our country's human rights-based foreign policy which Zuma and his cronies have tried so hard to depart from," DA spokesman James Selfe said.

"Clearly Zuma and his ANC have absolutely no respect for the constitution."

'INTENTION STILL STANDS'

Masutha said the ruling amounted to a delay that would not stop the government's bid to leave an institution that some African governments feel unfairly targets Africans and which Pretoria said was at odds with its diplomatic immunity laws.

"The intention to withdraw still stands, as this is a policy decision of the executive," he told Reuters.

Pretoria announced its intention to leave in 2015 after the ICC criticized it for disregarding an order to arrest Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, accused of genocide and war crimes. Bashir has denied the accusations.

Since taking office in 2009, Zuma, 74, has been plagued by accusations of corruption, which he has repeatedly denied, while senior ANC officials have backed him. But near record unemployment has exacerbated discontent with his government.

In March, the Constitutional Court ordered Zuma to repay some of $16 million spent on enhancing his Nkandla home in rural KwaZulu-Natal province. Zuma, who weathered a motion of no-confidence in parliament over the cost of the renovations, has since paid back more than $500,000 as required by the court.

The ICC has had to fight off allegations of pursuing a neo-colonial agenda in Africa, where most of its investigations have been based.

Three African states - South Africa, Gambia and Burundi - last year signaled their intention to quit the ICC. Gambia's President Adama Barrow, elected in December, said earlier this month that the tiny West African nation would remain in the ICC.