

Presidential candidates receive threats

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Student Government Association Presidential candidate Fabien Zinga received a threatening phone call loaded with racial slurs late Monday night, and he believes the University's underground fraternity-based organization known as "the Machine" was behind the threat.

The anonymous caller used the word "nigger" several times, Zinga said, and threatened to lynch him.

"I could tell by the voice on the phone that it was a white man," said Zinga, a senior in pre-med. "He mainly said a lot of curse words, but the one thing that really caught my attention was when he said they were going to hang me up on a tree."

The University Department of Public Safety is investigating, but Zinga said he believes the Machine is the culprit.

The Machine, a select coalition of traditionally white fraternity and sorority members designed to influence campus politics, has a long history on the University campus.

In 1993, presidential hopeful Minda Riley was attacked, allegedly by a member of the Machine, resulting in then-Vice President of Student Affairs Harry Knopke's shutting down the SGA.

Chris Strong, one of Zinga's opponents, received several phone calls threatening physical harm three weeks prior to the start of campaigning. Amanda Jarrell, Strong's campaign manager, also said she was threatened by phone.

Strong said there is a possibility the Machine is involved, but he does not want to point a finger yet.

Jarrell said she thinks someone is willing to do anything they can to eliminate the competition.

Strong said he did not report the calls placed to himself and Jarrell because he knew things such as that would happen when he decided to run for office.

Vice President of Student Affairs Sybil Todd said being threatened is never easy, but Zinga reached out to the right resources.



CW DAN MURPHY

SGA presidential candidate Fabien Zinga stands by his vandalized campaign signs. Zinga also received a death threat late Monday night.

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from the Congo.

University President Andrew Sorensen condemned the threat, but said talk of shutting down the SGA was premature.

"It's tragic whenever anybody has a threat made against them," he said. "I would take the issues seriously and regard it with absolute gravity and seriousness."

Zinga said he was putting out campaign signs Monday night. He returned to his Mallet Assembly room about 11:30 p.m., and 20 minutes later he received the call.

Zinga contacted University police Tuesday afternoon. He said he could not report the incident earlier because of his classes.

UADPS Lt. Beth Turner confirmed that a "harassing communications" report had been filed, but she could not comment on the details of the investigation.

Harassing communications is defined under Alabama law as communication "likely to harass or cause alarm." The crime is a misdemeanor.

"We are obviously aware of the past history, but this will be treated

as any other report would be treated," Turner said.

Zinga met with Todd and Office of Student Life Program Coordinator Carl Bacon to discuss his safety.

Zinga said the administration was very helpful, and he felt they were doing everything in their power to keep him safe.

In addition to the threatening call, 14 of the 16 signs Zinga and his supporters put out on campus have been either destroyed or vandalized.

All three of Zinga's opponents said the incident was unfortunate.

"I thought that when the SGA was disbanded several years ago that all this would come to an end,"

Strong said. "Unfortunately, threats are just one of the political parts of running for office on this campus."

Strong said he hopes the culprits do not push the matter so far that the administration is forced to abolish the SGA again.

"We've all agreed that we need to be above this sort of thing," said Matt Taylor, who has been labeled the Machine's candidate by many students.

Taylor said he did not seek the Machine's endorsement, but does not rule out the possibility that it may have been involved.

"I don't think Matt himself had anything to do with it," Zinga said. "I think his supporters had everything to do with it."