

# Zimbabwe 2018 Elections: Shattered Hopes for Change and Economic Recovery

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**Abstract:** -This paper presents an analysis of the 2018 harmonised presidential, parliamentary and local government elections in Zimbabwe, a Southern African country with a population of about 14 million people, which gained independence from Britain in 1980, following an armed struggle. The elections engendered hope for change and development against the backdrop of a debilitating and prolonged economic crisis. Although this is a controversial position, the Zimbabwean society associated electoral democracy with economic development. As Bratton and Masunungure (2018) note, Zimbabweans were tentatively hopeful that fair and free elections would break the trend of past disputed elections, restore leadership legitimacy and launch economic reforms. The paper looks at the pre-election period, the vote casting day and the post-election period, with a view to assessing the credibility of the election. The paper concludes that the elections in a large measure lacked credibility and were not free and fair by any standard, yielding a disputed outcome, which left the country mired in political tension and economic decline. As such, the election left the generality of the Zimbabwean populace deeply disillusioned, with their hopes of returning to democracy and economic revival depressingly shattered.

**Key words:** elections, democracy, economic development, Zimbabwe

## I. INTRODUCTION

As Cheema and Maguire (2014) observe, elections are a critical component in any system of democratic governance because they are a regular and direct means of citizen participation in governance. In addition, democratic electoral processes also help to ensure that government is accountable to the citizenry. Such processes provide for a two-way relationship between the citizens and their elected representatives. Chikerema and Chakunda (2014) note that elections constitute one of the most important ingredients of democratic governance. Elections ensure the political participation of the citizenry in the election of political leadership. Elections, therefore, ideally, are intended to ensure the emboldening of political stability and democratic governance. The Zimbabwe 2018 presidential, parliamentary and local elections have been captivating for numerous reasons. They raised high hopes for democratic transition against the backdrop of the November 2017 military coup, craftily dubbed 'operation restore legacy' by its executors, which saw the ouster of long-time autocratic ruler President Robert Mugabe and the subsequent ascendancy to the presidency of his deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa. Both the local and the internal community saw the elections

as an opportunity to test President Mnangagwa's sincerity as a political reformer, who professed an overarching desire to entrench good democratic governance, open the country for business and enable it to regain its place in the community of nations. Of particular interest in this election was the involvement of foreigners and the relative peace before and during vote casting. However, this was marred by post-election violence, which saw the fatal shooting of demonstrating civilians by the army during the counting of the votes.

## II. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The paper derives its theoretical undergirding from the assumed, though controversial and contested link between democracy, as exercised through the holding of free and fair multiparty elections, and development. Adejumo (2000) asserts that the democratic aspiration of the African people is not only limited to the arena of political democracy but encompasses the demand for economic empowerment, better living standards, and sufficient social welfare. Bardhan (2008) asserts that numerous basic features of democracy directly promote social and economic development. His view is echoed by Diamond (2008) who submits that democracy promotes broad-based development. In the same vein, Somolekae (2008) pertinently observes that the huge shift from military dictatorships and one-party rule to multiparty regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s engendered renewed optimism on the prospects for development on the continent. She contends that although examples such as Korea, Taiwan and China are used to support the view that democracy is not necessary for development, there is considerable evidence to the effect that democracy provides an enabling environment for development to be realised. Similarly, Jamo (2013) points out that democracy is spreading fast due to its ability to provide the fundamental requirements for good governance and development. Relatedly, Gerring, Knutsen, Skaaning, Teorell, Maguire, Coppedgem and Lindberg (2016) note that electoral democracy has a substantial positive impact on human development. Likewise, Gberevbie (2014) argues that a democratic ethos is the precursor to good governance and development in a country. Cheema and Maguire (2014) contend that although it may not be clear whether democratic governance enhances economic growth, it is quite clear that democratic governance enhances human development. In Zimbabwe, the citizenry, thus, hoped that

through the elections the country's economic woes would come to an end as the incumbent president Emmerson Mnangagwa had pledged to hold free and elections in order to entrench democracy and good governance and to put the country firmly on an economic recovery trajectory. The hope and optimism came against the backdrop of a protracted period characterised by a culture of electoral fraud, political instability, political violence, institutionalised intimidation, lawlessness and thugocracy (Chikerema and Chakunda, 2014).

### III. POLITICAL LEGITIMACY ISSUES

The removal of Mugabe from power in 2017 through a military coup was seen as offering Zimbabwe an opportunity for a fresh start. The 2018 election was largely viewed as crucial, since it offered a chance to cure the legitimacy malaise that came with the military coup, which was sanitised as "operation restore legacy". As Magaisa (2018) puts it, legitimacy could only be achieved through fair, free and credible elections. Similarly, Media Monitors (2018) points out that elections presented a vital opportunity for President Emmerson Mnangagwa to establish his legitimacy as well as that of his ZANU PF government. The elections also provided an opportunity to test President Mnangagwa's sincerity in pledging to promote democracy in his charm offensive to the international community.

The elections presented a huge dilemma to Mnangagwa because as much as he needed to masquerade as a democrat to please the outside world, he needed to win the election to perpetuate his rule. Holding free, fair and credible elections could see the opposition unseating him, in which case he would face the grim prospect of being held accountable for the November 2017 coup, which was deodorised as "operation restore legacy". On the other hand, failure to strictly adhere to the principles of free, fair and credible elections could see him successfully holding onto his position, but would seriously dent his credibility and perpetuate his crisis of legitimacy and exacerbate the country's economic decline.

### IV. THE PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

The campaigning was apparently freer and more democratic than ever before in the history of post-independence Zimbabwe. As Magaisa (2018) notes, there were some encouraging signs of tolerance and respect for political freedoms in the post-coup period. He further contends that compared to the Mugabe era, citizens had more freedom of expression and opposition parties were holding political rallies more freely than was the case before. The Elections Support Network of Southern Africa (2018) also notes that there were improvements in the administration of the elections and the political environment, pointing out that the period leading to the elections was generally peaceful. It, however, notes that accuracy of the voters' roll; the design, printing and distribution of the ballot papers, and postal voting were issues of serious concern to the contesting political parties and civil

society. The European Union Election Observer Mission (2018) also notes that election was competitive, pointing out that a huge number of candidates and political parties took part in the elections. It also observed that the campaign was generally peaceful and freedoms of assembly, movement and expression were respected, and the main presidential candidates were able to freely hold numerous political rallies across the country. Likewise, Njeru (2018) remarks that the political environment considerably improved as compared to the preceding years, noting that in the 2018 elections there no areas where election candidates could not move freely or campaign.

The European Union Election Observer Mission (2018), however, noted that the playing field was not level as there were deliberate efforts by the government to undermine free expression of the will of the voters, through intimidation, inducements and coercion. There were also direct threats of violence and pressure was applied by the ruling party on people to attend rallies, besides partisan actions by traditional leaders and manipulation of food aid and agricultural programmes in favour of the ruling party (European Union Election Observer Mission, 2018).

Similarly, Magaisa (2018) points that the pace of electoral reforms to promote free and fair elections has been painfully slow and piece-meal. He notes that the system of patronage continued unabated as traditional leaders got pre-election rewards in the form of vehicles, apparently to influence their political conduct in favour of the ruling party ZANU PF and the incumbent president, Emmerson Mnangagwa.

### V. THE ROLE OF THE ZIMBABWE ELECTIONS COMMISSION

The Zimbabwe Elections Commission (ZEC) is the independent electoral management body provided for by the Constitution of Zimbabwe, whose main function is to prepare for, conduct and supervise all aspects of the elections. In 2008, ZEC managed the first harmonised elections in Zimbabwe, consolidating four elections, that is, the presidential, house of assembly, senatorial and local government elections. ZEC faces challenges, among which are lack of full institutional independence, lack of sufficient and timely financial resources and inadequate human resources. Above all, ZEC suffers from a serious credibility crisis because of its poor handling of previous elections. For instance, in the March 2008 presidential election, which is widely believed to have been won by the then MDC leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, who is now late, ZEC took five weeks to release election results, denting its image and credibility in that process. Even in 2018 election ZEC suffered a serious credibility crisis as it was generally perceived as biased towards the ruling ZANU PF party. This view was also expressed by the European Union Observer Mission (2018), which notes that ZEC lacked full independence and generally failed to act impartially. It also pointed out that the final

results announced by the ZEC contained several errors and lacked transparency, verifiability and traceability.

## VI. THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The media play an important role in enabling political contests to express their views. In this regard, Njeru (2018) submits that impartial, independent media that accord equal access to all political parties and contestants are essential for a fair and free election. However, during the elections period the government media were generally perceived as biased towards the ruling party, thus denying the opposition fair coverage, in blatant violation of the principles of free and fair elections. Njeru (2018) appositely observes that state media continued blatantly partisan, concluding that the media environment as a whole did not provide for an even playing field for all the contestants in the elections. This view was also buttressed by Media Monitors (2018), which asserts that the state-owned media willfully failed to fulfil their public service mandate of neutrality and their function as outlets for the expression of Zimbabweans' diverse political opinions, as they were patently biased in favour of the ruling political party, ZANU PF. In this regard the state media violated Section 61 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, which obliges all state owned media to be impartial and to afford fair opportunities for the presentation of dissenting and divergent views opinions.

The European Union Election Observer Mission (2018) also noted that the state-owned media's coverage of the electoral process was heavily biased in favour the ruling party. This was against the principles of free and fair elections, and was noted by western observers, although it was largely ignored by their African counterparts. Interestingly, African observers tend to condone democratic deficits, while Western observers tend to be stricter in their demand for adherence to principles of credible, free and fair elections. This could be a result of different political interests and political inclinations, as the West is generally associated with a regime change agenda for Zimbabwe, while African countries invariably support the status quo, as some of them also have dictatorial tendencies.

## VII. ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Cheema and Maguire (2014) note that civil society and political parties play a vital role in deepening democracy and good governance. The civil society is generally considered as one of the pillars of good democratic governance, as it represents different perspectives and values in a pluralistic society. As such, a robust civil society is essential for democracy and economic development, as it checks government excesses, while offering opportunities for people to develop their potentialities.

The 2018 elections in Zimbabwe were marked by the involvement of several civil society organisations and political parties. During election period more than a 100 political parties were active in Zimbabwe. This could give credence to the claim that the new political dispensation under President

Mnangagwa was more democratic, at the time of the elections, than the reign of his predecessor, former President Robert Mugabe. On the other hand, the involvement of several political parties could be indicative of sheer opportunism and the desire for self-aggrandizement on the part of the political players, as most of them were obviously aware that they did not have realistic chances of winning the elections. This renders their motives for involvement in the elections questionable. For the first time in the history of the country, 22 candidates contested for the presidency, although the real contest was between President Mnangagwa of ZANU PF and MDC Alliance leader, Nelson Chamisa. The unfettered involvement of several political players attests to the freedom and liberty that characterised the pre-election period, although it also betrays the selfish motives of the most of political players, who evidently contested for other reasons than winning the election and forming a government.

## VIII. INVOLVEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

A distinctive feature of this election was the involvement of several international observers. Apparently, President Mnangagwa invited several international observers in a bid to prove that he truly wanted to promote democracy and to open the country for business. He even went to the extent of inviting Commonwealth observers, although Zimbabwe is not a member of the Commonwealth. This distinguished the election from those held under the former president, Robert Mugabe, who mainly invited African observers. Adjei (2008) avers that international community, particularly the Bretton Woods institutions, has a significant role to play in opening up wider spaces for the active participation of society in Africa's development. Characteristically, African observers like those from the African Union (AU), Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) were quick to endorse the elections as free, fair and credible. Just a few hours before of the grisly post-election violence, the African Union Electoral Observer Mission to Zimbabwe (AUEOM), the SADC Electoral Observer Mission to Zimbabwe (SEOM) and the COMESA Election Observer Mission, had already endorsed the disputed election as free, fair and credible. The COMESA observer team was more emphatic in its endorsement of the election. It characterised the election as generally peaceful, transparent and adhering to national, regional and international standards (Mhaka, 2018).

In contrast, European observers adopted a more critical position. They acknowledged that the elections were relatively peaceful up to the polling day, noting that the polling was typified by peace. They, however, criticized post-election violence and inconsistencies in the results. For instance, the EU Election Observer Mission (2018) pointed out that ZEC lacked full independence and appeared not to always act in an impartial manner. It also noted that the final results announced by ZEC contained numerous errors and lacked

adequate traceability, transparency and verifiability. It also decried the restrictions on freedoms, the excessive use of force by security forces and abuses of human rights in the post-election period, noting that these undermined the corresponding positive aspects of the pre-election campaign. It, thus, concluded that in many aspects the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe failed to meet international standards. Likewise, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute from the United States said that improvements in the political environment probably were not sufficient to convince the electorate they could oppose the ruling party without facing vengeance (Guramatunhu, 2018).

#### IX. VOTE CASTING DAY

Both the local and the international election observers acknowledged that the voting day was generally peaceful and tranquil. For instance, the Election Support Network of Southern Africa (2018) noted that voting was conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner at most of the polling stations. It, however, criticised the violence of the post-election period, where demonstrations resulted in the unfortunate fatal shooting of 6 citizens by security forces. Election turnout was high, with over 70 percent of the country's eligible voters participating. The vote casting process was not eventful, as the voting took place peacefully. It was, therefore, regarded by observers as consistent with the principles of free, fair and credible elections. The Commonwealth Observer Group (2018) observed that the polling day process was well organised and the polling officials conducted themselves professionally.

#### X. VOTING COUNTING AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF RESULTS

According to the EU observer team the final results as announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission contained numerous errors and lacked adequate traceability, transparency and verifiability (European Union Election Observer Mission, 2018). As such, they concluded that many aspects of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe failed to meet international standards. The failure by President Mnangagwa to keep his promise to hold free, fair and credible elections, the blatant and callous disregard of international norms like releasing a verified voters' roll, showed that his regime's claim that Zimbabwe had changed was not true. There were apparent anomalies in the announcement of results, which ZEC claimed were being physically delivered from the constituencies and were being announced as they came. What was surprising was why ZEC started announcing results from remote parts of country before announcing results from constituencies in Harare, where the results were being announced. This triggered unrest, which resulted in demonstrations in the city centre in Harare. However, the demonstrations were controversial, since ZEC was still within the timelines within which it is legally required to announce election results. The government reacted by unleashing

soldiers with live ammunition on the demonstrators, resulting in the fatal shooting of at least six people. The unconstitutional deployment of the army to shoot unarmed civilians dented the credibility of the elections and President Mnangagwa's pledge to entrench constitutionalism and democratic governance. The shooting was followed by a police crackdown on the MDC Alliance leadership, including senior leaders Tendai Biti and Morgen Komichi, further undermining the credibility of the elections.

#### XI. CONSTITUTIONAL COURT CHALLENGE

MDC Alliance led by Nelson Chamisa had a catalogue of objections against the elections. Before the voting, it complained that the voters' role was not accurate, there were insufficient controls and the electoral computations showed it had won, alleging that ZEC's tallies were not verified. It also pointed out that more people voted in some constituencies than appeared on the voters' roll and that it could not access a fifth of the result forms that were supposed to be displayed outside polling stations. On the hand, ZEC roundly dismissed the allegations that the results were fixed. Chamisa vehemently declared that he was the winner, claiming that the election had been stolen. He challenged the election in the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe. The constitutional hearing was largely seen as a farce as the general perception was that the court was biased in favour of the ruling party, ZANU PF. Chamisa's challenge was thrown out and incumbent President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa was declared winner of the election. However, in characteristic defiance, Chamisa determinedly vowed to continue to fight the election result through constitutional means, rendering the election very controversial. Tar (2010) appositely notes that in Africa the major problems encumbering democracy are, inter alia, contested elections and corruption. Lamentably, the controversial election results in Zimbabwe could have adverse implications for the country's hopes for the consolidation of democracy and economic recovery.

#### XII. CONCLUSION

The long-drawn struggle in Zimbabwe has been for the promotion of democracy and the economic and social well-being of the people. For this reason, Zimbabwean citizens and the international community had great interest in presidential elections as they provide an opportunity for the much needed transformation, on the back of a prolonged economic crisis. Perhaps, the fact that the elections took place under a new era, which the incumbent president termed "new dispensation", which is purportedly more democratic than the Mugabe era, made the elections more interesting by making the Zimbabwean society more hopeful for change. The Western community also showed keen interest presumably because the election provided an opportunity for the long-awaited regime change. However, sadly this was not to be. The general feeling is that ZANU PF rigged the elections, thus bringing

upon Zimbabwe the pariah state curse, thereby exacerbating economic ruin.

The elections were undoubtedly of interest to scholars of various persuasions, as they showed a conglomeration of various interests that were brought to bear upon Zimbabwe. The interests ranged from neoliberal imperial interests to hegemonic interests of the ruling liberation party, which is largely seen as having failed to deliver on the economic front, but holding on tenaciously to power through repression, intimidation, cheating and an elaborate patronage system, which enables it to capture state institutions to ensure that they do its bidding to perpetuate its controversial and despicable rule. The brutal shooting of demonstrating civilians during the announcement of results attests to the fact that the ruling party is bent on retaining power through ruthless repression. As the European Union Election Observer Mission (2018) puts it, restrictions on political freedom, excessive and unjustified use of force by security forces and human rights abuses in the post-election period undermined the credibility of the elections and in many respects the elections failed to conform to international standards. Poignantly, the generality of the Zimbabwean populace was disillusioned as their hopes for political change and economic recovery were shattered and the economy continued on a downward spiral with increased velocity.

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