



Tensions Rise Ahead of Zimbabwe's Elections

On 30 July Zimbabwe will hold elections. For the first time since independence Robert Mugabe is not a candidate. His successor presents himself as a reformer – but many doubt the polls will be clean. The opposition warns that Zimbabweans will not tolerate another stolen election.

What's so important about the credibility of these polls?

On 30 July 2018 Zimbabweans will go to the polls to elect a president, parliamentarians and local councillors. The elections are an unprecedented opportunity for Zimbabweans to choose who they believe can deliver economic recovery after decades of violent, predatory and authoritarian rule by former President Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). This will be the first vote since a Very Peculiar Coup in November 2017 ousted Mugabe and made way for President Emmerson Mnangagwa, a 75-year-old ZANU-PF stalwart. Mnangagwa is contesting the election on pledges of reform and economic recovery. He vows that, in a break from the past, these polls will be free and fair.

His administration recognises that, to forge the new social contract Mnangagwa promises,

“The elections are an unprecedented opportunity for Zimbabweans to choose who they believe can deliver economic recovery after decades of violent, predatory and authoritarian rule.”

both voters and in particular Zimbabwe's international backers must have confidence that the vote was indeed clean. Having come to power on the back of a “military-assisted transition”, Mnangagwa and his advisers know they cannot reform governance and promote economic growth without sustained international re-engagement. Most major donors and investors have signalled that credible elections are an important precondition.

Earlier this year, analysts opined that ZANU-PF would win comfortably and that the opposition would struggle to prevent the ruling party from securing a two-thirds majority in parliament. Opinion polls now suggest a much tighter race that could threaten the interests of ZANU-PF elites. Those elites will be determined to hold onto power; a run-off, required if no presidential candidate wins more than 50 per cent in the first round, could be particularly fraught.

Tensions have mounted between the main opposition alliance and the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), whose independence opposition and civil society leaders increasingly question. The UN has raised concerns about the growing number of reports of voter intimidation and threats of violence, especially in rural areas where two thirds of the electorate reside. The police refused to allow an

opposition demonstration against the ZEC on 25 July – an echo of past practices of political restriction that has exacerbated friction. Some have cautioned the opposition against pursuing confrontational tactics, but its leaders increasingly worry that the election will not be free and fair.

Overall, many outside powers are eager to re-engage after years of isolating Zimbabwe, which may lead some to gloss over flaws.

Can the opposition mount a credible campaign?

Mnangagwa's main challenger is Nelson Chamisa, the 40-year-old candidate of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance, which brings together seven opposition parties. Its policy is not very different from Mnangagwa's, and both claim they are best positioned to deliver economic recovery. The electorate must choose between the largely untested MDC Alliance and a ruling party claiming it has reformed.

Many observers say that conditions for elections have improved. Most obviously, there is greater political space for opposition parties to operate in predominantly rural parts of the country where they were previously barred. The MDC Alliance has held dozens of rallies and other events in these areas over the past two months. But it must dispel entrenched misperceptions of its leaders and policies that the state-run media, the only news source with a nationwide reach, has spread for many years. In addition, the opposition has far less money than ZANU-PF, which, according to civil society groups, benefits from leveraging off state resources.

Almost 5.7 million Zimbabweans are registered to vote (out of an estimated 14 million total population), more than ever before. Surveys indicate that 88 per cent of registered voters intend to cast a ballot. This includes more urban voters (who traditionally favour the opposition) than before and an unprecedented number of youth (over 60 per cent of registered

voters are 40 or under). The government refused, however, to back the constitutional changes necessary for millions in the diaspora to vote, a longstanding opposition and civil society demand.

In the past, coercion and physical force were integral to Zimbabwe's "guided" democracy, in which the ruling party under Mugabe curtailed political rights and freedoms. So far, there have been relatively few incidents of overt violence in the lead-up to this year's polls, but June and July have brought widespread reports of threats and intimidation. As the 20 July Afrobarometer national survey shows, both the legacy of fear and the expectation of future abuse remain strong. Seventy-six per cent of those surveyed say they are still careful about what they say about politics and 43 per cent fear there will be election violence.

Do Zimbabweans trust that the elections will be free and fair?

The Afrobarometer survey, as well as a study by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, show that over 40 per cent of the public distrusts the ZEC. The ZEC has a history of partisanship in favour of the ruling party – it still has commissioners and senior staff who endorsed the violent 2008 presidential run-off, which was rejected by African election observers. The opposition have repeatedly complained about the military's influence in the ZEC. Its chairperson, Justice Priscilla Chigumba, recently acknowledged that 15 per cent of its staff had been Zimbabwe Defence Force members, but were no longer military employees.

The ZEC also could have done more to make the 2018 vote preparations more transparent and inclusive. Instead, it has adopted a narrow legalistic interpretation of its mandate, rebuffing reasonable MDC Alliance and civil society demands that would contribute to enhancing its credibility.

Overall, Zimbabweans appear happy with the introduction of a biometric voters' roll, meant to reduce the incidence of fraud. But

the ZEC did not give civil society groups and opposition parties access to the final roll until 25 July, and refused an independent audit, even though donors offered to pay for it. The ZEC claims it is not legally obligated to conduct an audit. This is true, but by passing on an audit the ZEC missed an important opportunity to boost its own credibility and that of voter data – all the more important given unresolved controversies around the 2013 voters' roll.

Other factors that undermine confidence in the ZEC include the lack of transparency in the printing and design of paper ballots. For example, no explanation was given as to why and how President Mnangagwa has one of the two top positions on the double-column ballot. Concerns about secrecy were fuelled when ZANU-PF inexplicably obtained a database of registered voters' mobile phone numbers, which it has been using to canvass support. The MDC Alliance, other oppositionists and civil society groups lodged complaints – at the time of writing, these are largely unresolved.

These issues compound growing concerns that the elections will be stolen. As tensions mounted with the ZEC, the MDC Alliance threatened to stop the elections. But on 25 July Chamisa committed to participation, at the same time warning the ruling party and ZEC that they would “face the music if they rig or cheat”. Mnangagwa and senior ministers are on record stating that they will accept defeat, but there are deep suspicions, fed by leaked intelligence reports, that the security power bloc that brought him to power in November will not. An MDC victory or a run-off may generate the conditions that lead to a repeat of the chaotic and violent 2008 polls.

A pre-election assessment by the Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, a leading civil society network of 30 civil society organisations, found widespread misuse of government resources by ZANU-PF. This practice is common in Zimbabwe, and rarely receives detailed attention from election observers, in part because it is difficult to measure. For example,

the government started distributing farming supplies under a presidential scheme in what appears to be a crude vote-buying exercise. It has also distributed food aid at the same time and place that the opposition had scheduled rallies. ZANU-PF has continued to use school buildings and busses to force student attendance at political rallies, despite a court ruling, which ZANU-PF has appealed, prohibiting the practice. The courts also ruled that traditional leaders who receive government benefits may not publicly support ZANU-PF. Civil society reports suggest that traditional leaders remain a primary source of voter intimidation at the ruling party's behest. For now, however, these court decisions have also been appealed, so the practices continue. Furthermore, even though the government is heavily in debt, in July it raised civil servants' pay by 17.5 per cent and increased special allowances for military and police personnel. The ZEC has remained silent on all these issues.

The ZEC's work is hampered by financial and technical shortfalls. It has refused Western donors' offers from of funding, because the money was tied to international monitoring of its technical capacities, the development of the voters' roll and audits of those rolls. The government has not made up the shortfalls. These limitations play out on several fronts, from weak management of voters' roll development to poor communications and public relations and insufficient transparency. These issues have compounded frustrations and contributed to rising tensions.

Will the vote go to a second round? What would that mean?

According to survey data released on 20 July by Afrobarometer, 40 per cent of Zimbabweans will vote for Mnangagwa and 37 per cent for Chamisa, with 20 per cent undecided or unwilling to disclose their choice. These results, if accurate, would suggest the presidential contest is much closer than many had imagined. If no candidate secures more than 50 per cent of

the vote on 30 July, there will be a run-off on 8 September.

The last time this happened, in 2008, ZANU-PF in cahoots with the military used massive coercion and violence to swing the vote for Mugabe. The ZANU-PF government was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of opposition activists and thousands of assaults. The ZEC certified the 2008 vote, but most international observers, including both the African Union (AU) and the regional body, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), rejected it.

President Mnangagwa recently publicly denied that violence occurred during this period – perhaps understandably, since many of his detractors hold him and other members of the executive directly responsible. Still, tensions will rise significantly if there is a second round and the ruling party's hold on power appears under threat. ZANU-PF and security elites could be tempted to use violence to influence the outcome. In the event of a run-off, international actors should step up their diplomatic engagement – and the SADC and AU observer teams should extend and expand their presence on the ground – to help deter violence.

Does the military present a threat to these elections?

Over 40 per cent of Zimbabweans fear the military will intervene in the election, according to Afrobarometer. For many years Zimbabwe Defence Forces leaders have said they would support only a political leader with liberation movement credentials. (Chamisa was born two years before independence.) In November 2017 they waded into ZANU-PF's factional struggles, forcing Mugabe to step down and allowing Mnangagwa to take over. Since then, senior ZANU-PF politicians have said the military would never accept an MDC victory.

In early July, the Zimbabwe Defence Forces gave a press conference to refute allegations that it engages in partisan political activities

across Zimbabwe. The military claimed that it would uphold the constitution. Yet critics point out that it did not do so when it pushed out Mugabe. There are ever more reports, from a range of civil society and political party sources, that soldiers are stationed across the country, with many out of uniform. At the July press conference, the military acknowledged that soldiers are dispersed throughout the country, but claimed they are home on leave or deployed for official duties, such as patrolling borders and in the state-directed Command Agriculture program. It is widely assumed by civil society and opposition parties, however, that they are assisting ZANU-PF. The defence forces label the media and civil society reports as “irresponsible”, though the same allegations originated from senior former members of ZANU-PF close to the top brass.

What happens if there are disputes or election violence this time around?

The ZEC considers its multi-party liaison committees – established at national, provincial and district levels – as the primary dispute resolution mechanism. But it has not made these committees' minutes or decisions public. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches recently wrote a public letter to the ZEC that noted the public was losing faith that these committees would settle disagreements rationally and fairly.

In May, the ZEC, in collaboration with two other largely untested and under resourced statutory bodies, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, established a special committee to investigate political violence ahead of the 2018 polls.

In late June, political parties signed a peace pledge designed to strengthen the political code of conduct. The judiciary also has set up fast-track courts to try perpetrators of politically motivated violence. Special prosecutors and magistrates have been appointed to handle such cases.

What role will election observers play?

Election observer missions will play an important role. President Mnangagwa recognised their participation would strengthen the credibility of the election process and has opened Zimbabwe's doors to a number of observer organisations, several of which were denied access over the last sixteen years. These include missions from the European Union (EU), the Commonwealth, the Carter Center, and the National Democratic and International Republican Institutes, as well as the AU and SADC from closer to home. Yet long-term observation began only in late June (EU) and early July (AU and SADC), which restricts what they can monitor, especially regarding the political environment, and both the AU and SADC teams on the ground are relatively small. The AU, for example, has deployed fourteen long-term observers with a core team of four and will deploy 50 short-term observers for polling and counting. They will remain in Zimbabwe until mid-August, unless there is a run-off. The SADC team has 63 observers deployed nationally. The EU has the biggest mission, deployed across the country, and it will expand to more than 140 persons for the actual balloting. It will remain in country for up to two months after the polls to observe the tabulation of results and dispute resolution. According to the ZEC, there are over 600 foreign observers in total.

With almost 11,000 polling stations, many in remote areas, international missions must rely on reports by political parties and approximately 6,000 accredited domestic observers. Their vigilance and the quality of their reporting, along with polling agents, will be essential for deterring election violations and informing international groups.

As always, but particularly in these elections, it will be difficult to judge objectively whether the polls are free and fair. Observer missions should ensure they factor the playing field and campaign environment into their assessments, and not just base them on voting and counting alone. They also should explain and substantiate their conclusions. Inexplicably, SADC never made its final 2013 Zimbabwe election observation report available. That omission should not be repeated.

While the EU observation missions tend to be more experienced and technically proficient, the AU and SADC evaluations are likely to generate more attention, particularly from regional states likely to give them the greatest credence, as in the past. In 2000 and 2002, the two bodies' observer missions disagreed about whether the elections were free and fair. Observer missions should try to coordinate their findings to avoid similar confusion, which could compound the challenge of a contested outcome.

According to many analysts and political players, these elections could be the country's most consequential since independence in 1980. Turnout will be a key factor. No more than 3.4 million Zimbabweans have voted in any previous poll. Yet notwithstanding all the unresolved concerns, Zimbabweans appear keen to participate this time around. If voters turn out in large numbers, and the outcome is credible, these polls may help lay the foundation for Zimbabwe's recovery from years of misrule. If, however, the outcome is disputed by either of the main protagonists, violence is likely. Violence will almost certainly dash the prospects of governance reform, international re-engagement and much-needed economic revitalisation, which would help just not Zimbabwe, but all of southern Africa.