
Opportunity and Risk in the Proposed Polling Station-Based Voters' Roll

By Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN)

One of the major features of the proposed electoral reforms is the possible introduction of a localised voting system which will be conducted using polling station-based voters' rolls. This means a voter will only vote at the polling-station at which his or her name appears on the voters' roll. This is significantly different from the present system whereby voters can vote at any polling station within the ward.

These changes will, however, only come into effect if the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is satisfied that all polling-station voters' rolls have been adequately prepared. Given the imminence of the Constitutional Referendum, it is highly unlikely that this system will be used in that plebiscite.

Supporters of the polling station-based voters' roll argue that it will prevent instances that have occurred in past elections when voters from other areas have been moved to other areas in a bid to bolster the fortunes of a particular party's candidate in that area. If a voter can only vote at a polling station where their name is registered on the voters' roll, it will mean those who are brought into the area to artificially inflate support for a particular party or candidate will be prevented from voting at that polling station.

Supporters of this system also argue that it will prevent double-voting whereby a voter can move from one polling-station to another within the same ward in order to vote more than once in the same election.

For these reasons, a polling station-based voters' roll seems to be a plausible move that would add credibility and transparency to the voting system. This is a theoretical proposition, however, which must be measured in the context of the realities of politics and voting in Zimbabwe. It is therefore important to consider the risks inherent in this system.

The first risk is that such a system might make it more easy to use the tactic of pre-election displacement of voters from the areas where their specific polling station is located. If a person can only vote at a specified polling station, the easy way to ensure they do not vote is to displace them or otherwise prevent them from reaching that polling station. If displaced in advance of an election, it may be proposed that such voters should be able to use the facility of postal voting. The problem however is that the facility of postal voting is restricted to persons who are outside the country on government business. ZESN recommends relaxation of postal voting rules, so that the facility is more widely available to persons who cannot for any reason be at the polling station on voting day. This will be come more important if the polling-station based voters' roll is used.

The second risk is that a polling station-based voters' roll system increases opportunities for post-election retribution. In the past, voters have been targeted for punishment for voting for the wrong party or candidate by losing contestants. One approach was to target constituencies where a contestant would have lost – that gave rise to suspicions that the population in the constituency had voted 'wrongly' in that they would have voted for the opponent. Acts of violence have been recorded in post-election periods. Now, the risk is that with a more localised and specific polling-station based voters' roll, it will be even easier to identify voting patterns at small local levels. It will be easy to see which villages or

suburbs voted for what candidate and therefore make the voters easy targets for post-election retribution, i.e. punishment of having voted wrongly.

These negatives must be weighed against the positives of the polling station-based voters' roll. What makes sense in theory might not be the right thing in practice. The first question to be asked is: do the identified risks exist in the present system? They do, which is why there has been pre-election and post-election violence in the past. The second question may be: do the risks increase under the polling station-based voters' roll? It seems that they do escalate given the localised character of the polling station-based voters' roll. But there is a third question, which is, would the opportunities 'bussing in' voters and double-voting be reduced under the polling-station based voters' roll? The answer seems to be that those opportunities would be reduced.

If therefore the system of preventing election violence and intimidation discussed last week is effective, it would seem that the benefits of polling station-based voters' roll outweigh the negatives. However, this is an assessment that needs to be made seriously and voters must give their informed opinions based on experience.

A further noteworthy point on the voters' roll is that relatives of deceased or absent voters now have a clear avenue to remove their names from the voters roll, which would help to increase the currency of the voters' roll at any given time. We recommend however that people be given incentives to ensure they take initiatives to have their deceased relatives removed from the voters' roll. It is understood that Mozambique embarked on a campaign to update the register by giving incentives in the form of state-assisted burials where relatives would have informed the electoral authorities.

The authority responsible for the registration of deaths should also be compelled by law to pass on information on deaths to the ZEC for purposes of removing names from the voters' roll. As a long term measure this is likely to be more sustainable and effective as long as information is passed on efficiently. There is the advantage that people are already compelled by law to register deaths of their relatives before burial so there will be no added obligation on the part of the voters.

The biggest shortcoming of the proposals is that the ZEC still does not have sole and exclusive ownership and control of the voters' roll. This is still shared with the Registrar General's Office. The Registrar General's Office does not have a good record in keeping a clean, accurate and up-to-date voters' roll. This risks tainting the record of the ZEC. There is no reasonable justification as to why the Registrar General's Office should be involved in compiling the voters' roll. The ZEC was created specifically to take up the role of chief elections body and is constitutionally mandated to manage the conduct of elections. The creation of a voters' roll is an essential part of the electoral processes. As the body responsible for elections it should be given due recognition by taking up the sole and exclusive ownership of the voters roll including its compilation.

Finally, there is a proposal that there may be a completely new voter registration exercise. This would greatly enhance the credibility of the voters' roll because the current version is highly discredited. However, voter registration is probably the most resource-intensive electoral exercise. If this exercise is to be done, then it worth initiating it without further delay otherwise it may not meet the terms of the Elections Road-Map agreed by the parties to the current Inclusive Government. It would need huge input of financial and material resources. One possible way of getting around the problem of time is if people are encouraged to

register under the current continuous registration facility, which remains uninterrupted. This would make it easier to transfer voters from the old to the new voters' roll without the need for re-registration. It is important to note also that the ZEC now has a wider option to accept as proof of identity and residence for registration of voters what it would consider 'acceptable'. If interpreted flexibly and liberally, this would prevent problems faced by usually unemployed youths, married women who have changed their surnames and other persons who would otherwise be unable to prove identity and residence using traditional means.

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