

1. *Rindai, I understand you have just returned from New York for an important engagement there, would you like to update our readers what this was all about?*

The Global Network for Domestic Election Monitors is a network of regional election observation groups in the world. Regional organisations around the world represented comprised Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa, North Africa, Europe, Asia and South America. Southern Africa was represented by SADC-Election Support Network (SADC-ESN) and ZESN as part of the drafting committee. The United Nations Election Assistance Division (UNEAD) launched the Declaration of Global Principles for non partisan election observation and monitoring by citizen organisations on the 3rd of April 2012 at the United Nations HQ in New York.

2. *I hear you came up with an important Declaration, would you care to explain what it entails?*

The Declaration seeks to strengthen the participation of citizen non partisan observation in countries. It derives its mandate from Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and political Rights (ICCPR). It stresses that non partisan citizen observation is the hallmark of democratic development. Citizen election observation is an integral part of civic participation in public affairs and is critical as citizens are the evaluators of the freeness and fairness of an election process they were part of from the start of the electoral cycle to the end of the cycle.

The declaration acknowledges that non partisan citizen observation is a form of human rights defending as it focuses on the fulfilment of civil and political rights which are central to genuine elections.

The declaration provides for states to provide access, security to observers to allow them to observe electoral processes effectively. It provides for the conditions that should be present for observation to be done successfully.

The declaration also encompasses a code of conduct for non partisan citizen participation that seeks to enhance the quality of election observation through among other issues ensuring that citizen observers maintain strict non partisanship by remaining politically neutral, to work independently of government in support of genuine elections regardless of who wins or loses, the code also calls for citizen observers to adhere to principles of non violence and call for all involved in elections to do the same, respect the country's laws, constitution and international obligations, safe guard the right of voters, report impartially, accurately and timely on all observations. These are some of the issues covered by the code of conduct for citizen non partisan observers in the declaration.

3. *Why is this Declaration important to us?*

This declaration is important to Zimbabwe as a country that already understands the important role of citizen observers to improve the conditions for citizen observer groups for example early and decentralised accreditation to allow observers to observe all processes as they unfold. In this polarised environment the declaration seeks to provide for the protection and safety of the observers. The declaration seeks to provide a platform for citizen observation benchmark that individual groups can then build on and adapt depending on the context in their country.

4. Zimbabwe is expected to hold "harmonised elections" before June 2013. What are the challenges likely to arise from this process?

- Violence which has already started in some pockets of the country is a threat to a genuine election that provides for choice to citizens.
- The voters roll which has not been cleaned is a real issue that has potential to result in flawed election. The accuracy, completeness and comprehensiveness of the voters roll is still a real issue.
- The constitution if voted for in the referendum would need to be operationalized and this is a time consuming exercise and not possible given the period between referendum and the harmonised election.
- The independence of ZEC from the executive is still very questionable given that there has not been adequate reforms and ZEC reports to a minister and not to parliament. There is need for adequate resources given to ZEC in-order to build its capacity and prepare for elections on time.

5. What about the issue of observation and monitoring of this election. Is that adequately covered in light of this new Declaration?

Observation of elections in Zimbabwe is a real issue given that citizen observers are accredited two weeks before an election, in addition, the conditions of accreditation are so stringent and not to the discretion of ZEC but the minister of justice who invites observers. ZEC has not decentralised enough to allow accreditation to take place in its district structures yet these structures are present, accreditation is only in Harare and Bulawayo which make the process cumbersome. Access to all polling is still restricted as it pertains to postal voting and voting that takes place in police camps and barracks which is not open to scrutiny.

6. What is your view of the atmosphere in the run-up to the forthcoming polls?

There is uncertainty when the elections will be held. The President has highlighted that with or without a constitution elections should be held this year. Without adequate reforms the elections will be volatile and the country might relapse to the June 2008 scenario. Already there are isolated reports of intimidation and harassment.

7. There has been talk of a 'biometric voters roll', what is this and would this be a good system to adopt for our country and is it feasible to adopt it given the time left before the polls?

Biometric voter registration has software that captures citizens' data, including fingerprints and a digital photograph, directly in the field. The biometric system is also known for doing away with multiple registrations and voting, because it can easily detect duplicates. A biometric system will capture finger-prints in order to facilitate identification and weeding out would be multiple registered voters. Taking one's finger prints guarantees that there is only one entry into the register, since every individual has distinctive finger prints. A complete and accurate voters list is the starting point of a credible election, and an election that is credible must also prevent voters from voting more than once and unregistered voters from voting.

The process requires at least more than 2 years and in countries like Zambia and Malawi it took longer over 5 years even though they were assisted by other technical experts. Given the time left it is not feasible to adopt the system.

8. *In your view, is the new Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) ready to run a free and fair harmonised elections?*

ZEC should be a truly independent election management body. The secretariat to the commission needs to be professionalised. ZEC should be given full mandate and control of all electoral processes including the voters' roll and the invitation and accreditation of observers. ZEC needs to be resourced, especially financially, in order to clean up the voters' roll and put in place ICTs in order to transmit election results on time.

8. *What is your view of the amendments to the Electoral Act currently before parliament? Do you think they would suffice to create conditions for a free and fair ballot?*

The amendments go a long way in promoting credible elections, especially if we look at clauses pertaining to announcement of results and violence. These area deterrent to the 2008 situation.

However the amendments alone do not suffice. There is need for political will from the political parties. The GPA is a plausible blue-print which is not being implemented. We still have other draconian laws like POSA and AIPPA which impinge on people's civil liberties and fundamental freedoms of assembly and expression. These laws need to be repealed or amended to be in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is need for a conducive, peaceful environment, media pluralism as well as institutional and legal reforms.

10. *What about the issue of voter education. Do you think this is being adequately catered for?*

The fact that voter education is the preserve of ZEC and has not started in spite of the call for elections in 2012 and 2013 means that it will be inadequate. There is need for ZEC to work with other CSOs to complement the work on voter education.

11. *Finally, do you see the prospect of the forthcoming election being dispute-free?*

Elections are never dispute free, there are conflict-ridden so it is critical to have strong dispute resolution mechanisms that are timeous and do not prejudice the candidates and the electorates. There is need to strengthen dispute resolution mechanisms in Zimbabwe as they are currently weak and favours the defendant at the expense of the complainant.