

Vincent Kahiya Presentations

I have been asked to talk about the role of the media in the electoral reform agenda- Lessons from 2018 Harmonised Elections.

I have a lot to say about the conduct of the media in the 2018 elections but I hope to stick to the topic and not stray into other election issues. I had the privilege to train journalists drawn from virtually all media houses in five sessions, in Harare, Mutare, Gweru, Masvingo and Bulawayo in the order under the aegis of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists on the eve of the harmonised elections and was also invited to conduct three post-mortem sessions with the journalists after the polls.

The trainings brought in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, ZESN, The ERC, the Police, political candidates to assist in unpacking what at the time I termed the for important Ps to an election process; the People, the Process, the Policies and the Protagonists. We discussed in some detail how each one of the Ps influenced the news agenda. I asked the question: What is this election about, the people (better termed the voters), the electoral process, the protagonists (candidates) or Policies (including legislation and guidelines)

The two Ps, processes and policies are pertinent to my presentation today. How did the media fare in this regard? Perhaps before answering this, I want to refer again to one of my favourite slides during the training in which I sought to place journalists into four uncomfortable silos labelled curators, specialists, social networkers and partners. Not many said they were partners to political entities. One gentleman in Gweru was honest enough to admit being in bed with a political party. His employer expected him to be in that tight embrace.

The overall coverage of this poll was to large extent determined by the silo media houses decided to operate from. Not many chose to be experts in reporting on the election which required a firm grasp of information to clearly define the election reform agenda and its impact in determining the election outcome

What was the role of the media

There are at least four roles that the media can play during elections.

- Define the electoral reform agenda - what are the issues?
- Disseminate that critical information Zimbabwean public ensuring wider geographical reach beyond urban centres.
- Provide online and offline platforms for citizens, political players and civil society organisations to express their views on the electoral reform process as they occur and giving accentuating to public debate.
- Track progress on the reform agenda and provide a simple chart thereof.

Critical areas of focus

The media, I believe, had an obligation to present answers to these questions:

- Who articulated the agenda, why, when?
- Who designed it? That is, who put the idea of electoral reform onto the political agenda, and who had the responsibility for drawing up a proposed new or amended system.

- What as the process? What were the mechanisms built into the political and legal framework to facilitate reform?
 - What process of discussion and dialogue was necessary to ensure that a proposed new or amend ed system is accepted as legitimate?
 - Once reforms have been decided upon, how was it implemented?
 - What were the benefits to the voter?
- Sample Media Monitors election coverage matrix

Missed opportunities

- BVR and ballot paper printing dominated the stories on the electoral reform process
- Little attempt was made to completely itemise the reform agenda back from the time of Nera
- It became a story on the constituency of nera its interaction with government
- The story required media to come up with a tracker on progress on the reform agenda
- There was no real link between the reform agenda and electoral outcomes
- The issue became who owned the discourse on electoral reform agenda. The media situated this critical issue as turf war fight between political protagonists and NGOs. This unfortunately they did without necessarily telling us what the fight was all about.
- There were few stories linking the reform agenda to the voter. It became political players demanding the reforms and the voice of the voter was missing in the discourse
- There was also an over-reliance on “sound bites” with news reports developed from isolated catchy or scandalous comments by politicians at rallies, which in many cases would be taken out of context.

To help strengthen the role media plays during elections, Media Monitors recommends that:

- A case for media law reform - For these and successive elections, media legislation must be reviewed to align these with provisions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media in the Constitution.
 - Plurality must translate to diversity - Licenced broadcasters should enhance diversity of voices that represent various interests
 - Tidy up ground rules - Election regulations on media coverage must be amended so that they clearly define the election period, and further articulate what fair and equitable coverage means
 - Review the media coverage regulatory framework to ensure that there is an effective enforcement mechanism in place for monitoring compliance, receiving and acting upon infractions related to election reporting
 - Stakeholders in the media must take measures to strengthen professional journalism outside the election period, as elections do not take place in a vacuum. Create competences, acquire tools
 - In an election period media need create brain trust that assist to untangle these issues and bring out valuable information to voters
- There are four main reasons why electoral institutions in Zimbabwe are in urgent need of reform.

- Domestic laws should align with conventions such as the African Charter on Democracy and Governance.
- The Electoral Act should align with the new Constitution.

- The consistently flawed electoral process has created a crisis of legitimacy.
- Manipulation of the electoral process prevents a transfer of power in Zimbabwe.

Who must reform

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) should be the primary target for reform. It has no credibility and has long been considered independent on paper only.

Other targets for reform include:

The judiciary. Most judges are perceived as sympathetic to the ruling party's interests because they are part of its patronage network

The security sector. The military, intelligence and police are widely considered partisan

The bureaucracy, especially senior appointments. These are subject to manipulation by the ruling party

Biased state media

Regulations and laws that allow citizens to take part freely in the electoral process such as the Public Order and Security Act