

ZESN'S PRE-REFERENDUM PRESS STATEMENT

Harare-15 February 2013- The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), a network of 31 non-governmental organisations working on the promotion of democratic elections in Zimbabwe is observing the referendum set for tomorrow 16 March 2013. ZESN is deploying approximately 600 observers across the country, drawn from some of its member organisations.

This referendum, which is a culmination of efforts by the Government of National Unity (GNU) to draft a new constitution according to the demands of the Global Political Agreement (GPA), is an historic moment for Zimbabwe. ZESN therefore encourages all citizens to go out and exercise their right to vote in the referendum regardless of how they intend to vote. ZESN is a strictly non-partisan organisation and as a network takes no position on the merits or demerits of the draft new constitution. Our role is simply to observe the process in order to help ensure that all Zimbabweans can freely exercise their right to vote.

ZESN notes that, the referendum will go ahead tomorrow amid concerns regarding the timing, funding, and lack of adequate awareness campaigns undertaken nationwide on the contents of the draft. ZESN hopes that despite the aforementioned problems, ZEC will be able to deliver a credible referendum. Already ZEC has conducted two observer briefings and ZESN would like to commend the Commission for the briefings which provided essential guidelines for observing the referendum.

However, ZESN notes with concern some of the new regulations introduced by ZEC. For instance, there is now a limitation on the number of observers allowed in a polling station at any given period. ZESN believes that this will imply that at some point our observers will be asked to leave the polling station or rotate with other observers and this will compromise observation methodologies of local observers who must normally observe the whole process from opening till counting. It would be rational if this provision was only applicable for regional and international observers who will be roaming from one polling station to another. We urge ZEC to urgently reconsider this decision to enable local observers to carry out a comprehensive polling observation exercise to enable them to report empirically.

On the issue of mobile phones, ZESN has noted the explanation given by ZEC that these could be used to intimidate voters. However, observers should be allowed to discretely use their phones at polling stations as long as they do not interfere with the voting process. It is against this backdrop that we strongly deplore the continued introduction of new regulations as noted in the two observer briefings. We believe such spontaneous additions create an atmosphere of uncertainty which might culminate in the loss of confidence in the Commission as well as the whole electoral process.

Furthermore, ZESN is concerned by the refusal to accredit ZIMRIGHTS and the Director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), Ms Jestina Mukoko who is also a Board member of ZESN, citing that they are "*under police probe*". Given that the two organisations have not been pronounced guilty in the courts of law, and there is a constitutional right to be presumed innocent unless and until proved guilty, ZESN strongly urges ZEC to accredit these organisations to avoid the appearance of taking the law into its own hands. The ZEC should let the courts decide on the merit of the cases against these organisations.

In pursuit of its legitimate mandate to promote a democratic electoral environment and processes, ZESN will be observing the entire polling process in the different provinces across the country. ZESN encourages Zimbabweans to participate peacefully in this process and to exercise their democratic right. ZESN has also set up hotlines for the citizens to share their views and comments about the referendum and its contact numbers will be: 0774584669, 0715596701, and 0738918420. Citizens can also participate on our social media platforms;

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Zimbabwe-Election-Support-NetworkZESN>,
Twitter handle: #ZESN1 and **Blog: www.blogspot.zesnblog.com.**

As part of its obligation to gather and disseminate credible information ZESN will make every effort to provide credible, objective and unbiased information of the referendum processes and outcomes. ZESN intends on making its preliminary statement on the conduct of the Referendum on Sunday morning 17 March 2013./Ends//

PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

FOR COMMENTS AND FURTHER DETAILS CONTACT THE CHAIRPERSON OR NATIONAL DIRECTOR;
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