



ZESN'S STATEMENT ON THE ROLE OF THE POLICE IN ELECTIONS

18 August 2010 – Harare – This statement is a response to an article that appeared on the 13th of August 2010 in the Zimbabwe Independent on the opposition to electoral reforms by the Police Commissioner General Augustine Chihuri. Earlier this year political parties in the GNU agreed to reform electoral laws in Zimbabwe and this included among others a change in the role of the police in electoral processes. The three political parties in the inclusive government agreed to restrict the role of the police in electoral processes to maintaining law and order outside the polling stations as per international standards.

ZESN welcomed this development as the police's role in previous elections overstepped the boundaries of maintaining law and order.

ZESN has over the years raised concern about the presence of the police in the polling stations which it views as intimidatory. The electoral insecurity argument that the Commissioner is allegedly proffering in his reported efforts to stall electoral reforms is blind to a number of issues pertaining to the role of the police in enhancing electoral democracy. It is outside the polling station that voters are barred from entering the polling station. Police presence outside the polling station will aid in restraining political parties that campaign within 100 meters of the polling station. In addition, the deployment of the police outside the polling station will deter other forms of electoral irregularities similar to those that took place in June 2008 such as the recording of names of voters by some political parties.

Further, past elections have shown that electoral insecurity takes place well before and after voting while polling days have been largely peaceful, making the insecurity argument even weaker. ZESN seeks to reiterate that the role of the police in providing security to citizens has not been effectively executed as shown by the partial manner in dealing with cases of political violence in the past. The many complaints by victims of political violence between March and June 2008 that they did not get police protection for their persons and property but rather that they were arrested and prosecuted at the instance of their attackers made the electoral changes attractive.

Assisting voters: In previous elections the role of the police in electoral processes has been contentious as it went beyond maintaining law and order to being present in the polling stations and being present when assisted voters were voting. ZESN has since welcomed the move to remove police presence when assisted voters were casting their vote and further recommended that those who are illiterate bring a trusted friend or relative to assist them and braille ballot papers for the visually impaired.

Postal voting: In addition, the postal vote has been a thorny issue as the vote has been free from observer scrutiny and has been shrouded in secrecy. The application process has not been transparent and this lack of transparency has extended to the actual voting on issues that relate to the number of people in the security sector that will be

eligible for postal voting, the number of ballot papers distributed, the actual voting process and counting of votes and the documented partisan pre-election statements by the Commissioner General.

The proposed reforms that provide for police officers to vote two days prior to polling are a welcome development that can foster transparency. There is no need for the police to vote thirty days before the poll as this removes confidence in the integrity of the process as it allows for tampering with ballot boxes and the outcome of the election. While the police sector was not audited, there is evidence that not all police officers need to be deployed outside the areas where they vote and so can vote in their respective areas where they are based.

ZESN recommends special voting as the case in most countries and not postal voting for the police. Voting that takes place two days before the election and which is also open to ZEC officials, the body that is mandated to run elections in Zimbabwe. We recommend that this process must be transparent and open to observation as well by both domestic and international observers and political parties. In the past postal voting took place before the accreditation of observers, which resulted in an opaque process that lends itself to much speculation, criticism and controversy, which damages the credibility of the country's elections.

Members of the police as election officials: ZESN is concerned with the fact that in the past police commanders have been engaged as presiding officers. The role of presiding over elections is best carried out by civilians and not the security sector. The role of the security sector in elections is to promote peace and ensure that the will of the people prevails. An independent and well resourced ZEC must be allowed free and unrestricted mandate to run the entire election while arms of government only play a supportive and not a participatory role. History has lessons.

It is against this backdrop that ZESN strongly condemns the proposed return of the police officers inside polling stations during polling and the use of police and security commanders as presiding officers when the police and military vote. ZESN continues to advocate for comprehensive electoral reforms that includes media reforms; security reforms; an overhaul of the voters' roll; the creation of a conducive election environment; and transparency and accountability in the whole electoral process.

PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

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