



**Zimbabwe Election
Support Network**

Promoting Democratic
Elections In Zimbabwe

A photograph of a white ballot box with a sign that says 'Vote' in black letters. The box is set against a background of the Zimbabwean flag's colors: green, yellow, red, and black. The entire image is framed within a large, stylized white 'Z' shape on a green background with white wavy lines.

Vote

**SHOULD ZIMBABWE
DE-HARMONISE
ITS ELECTIONS?**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Zimbabwe must retain the system of holding harmonised local, parliamentary and presidential elections which it adopted on the 30th of October 2007 and entrenched in the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act. A harmonised election is an election in which voters cast ballots for different political offices, namely the president, Members of Parliament (MPs), and local councillors, at the same time. Globally, these are commonly referred to as simultaneous or synchronised elections.

The most familiar proposal from proponents of de-harmonisation is that local authority elections must be held separately from presidential and parliamentary elections. The theoretical logic is that this will allow voters to give adequate attention to local issues without distraction from national races. In contrast, empirical data shows that simultaneous elections have increased the competitiveness and profile of local elections in Zimbabwe which were dominated by the ruling party before harmonisation as is currently the case with local-only elections in Tanzania and Mozambique. In addition, proponents of de-harmonisation argue that holding elections at the same time can distort results as people are likely to vote along party slates, overwhelm voters and provide administrative and logistical challenges for electoral bodies. However, Indonesia with a registered voter population of 200 million compared to Zimbabwe's 6.6 million had the world's largest single day elections where citizens voted across all five levels of political office on 14 February 2024. Even in India, the world's largest democracy with an electorate of about 970 million registered voters a High Level Committee appointed by government recently recommended for simultaneous elections. The proposition that people are likely to vote along party slates in synchronised elections can be resolved through massive voter and political education by the electoral management body, civil society organisations and other stakeholders.

A considered view therefore is that synchronising local, presidential and parliamentary elections will result in high voter participation as evident in synchronised local elections such as in the Comoros (71% in 2015); Botswana (84.1%); Zambia (above 70% in 2021); Sweden (84.21% in 2022) and Indonesia (83.29% in 2024). In contrast, voter turn-out has been low in de-harmonised local elections like Namibia (38.22% in 2020), South Africa, United States (usually less than 20% when held in off cycles), Lesotho (29% in 2023) and South Africa (45.86% in 2021). Simultaneous elections increase competitiveness and profile of local elections contrary to conventional wisdom. Prior to the synchronisation of elections local government elections in Zimbabwe were dominated by the ruling party which could win more than 50% of the wards uncontested as demonstrated in the 2002 and 2006 rural district council elections. In countries with local only elections like Tanzania and Mozambique the ruling parties won with 99% in 2019 and nearly 100% in 2023 respectively. Harmonised elections also result in huge financial savings to the public exchequer and one financial plan for all spheres of government. In addition, synchronisation can lead to the regular holding of local government elections. It is easier for semi-authoritarian states to not hold local elections when they are unsynchronised than when they are synchronised as evident in Angola and Seychelles which hold no local elections as well as the cancellation or postponement of local-only urban government elections in Zimbabwe from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Holding elections at the same time reduces cycles of violence and human rights violations in the country. Data on trends of violence shows that non-election periods in Zimbabwe are comparatively peaceful to election periods. Synchronised elections will also reduce cycles of uncertainty for corporate investments. An election is an uncertainty inducing event and global data shows that during election years, firms reduce investment expenditures by an average of 4.8% relative to non-election years. Avoiding multiple election cycles also provides increased time for government, business and society to spend on development work, production and governance and aids democratic progression in Zimbabwe's post-colonial electoral transition.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (Cont...)

There is therefore no need for Zimbabwe to amend the Constitution, Local Government Act and Electoral Act to replace a system which is not broken. The electoral problems that Zimbabwe face are not because of the synchronisation of elections. In fact, Section 158 of the Constitution on timing of elections can be amended to entrench synchronised elections through providing a fixed election date to allow for procedural certainty for all contestants and not advantage the incumbent [who most of the times is also a contestant] with a constitutional prerogative to fix the date. For example, Sweden is an enduring and exemplary democracy and holds its parliamentary (Riksdag), county and municipal councils elections on a fixed date that is every four years, on the second Sunday in September. The United States also has a fixed date for the federal election that occurs after every four years on the first Tuesday after 1 November since 1845, Liberia holds elections on the second Tuesday of October after every five years, and so does Zambia whose election date is on a second Thursday of August every five years. Not surprisingly, some countries have also realised the significance of simultaneous elections such as Sweden, Indonesia, Botswana, Malawi, DRC, Comoros and Zambia and others like India, the world's largest democracy with nearly 1 billion voters, are on the verge of adopting the same whilst some modern democracies like United States and South Africa are debating the pros and cons. Sweden which is an embodiment of democratic ideals and standards has shown that synchronisation can improve electoral democracy. The retention of the harmonised electoral system will be in consonance with the quest of an aspirational and democratic Zimbabwe.

1. INTRODUCTION

The desirability of holding harmonised presidential, parliamentary and local government election in Zimbabwe remains a subject of debate for academics and practitioners despite the adoption of the system on 30 October 2007. A harmonised election in the Zimbabwean context can best be conceptualised as an election in which voters cast ballots for different political offices, namely the president, Members of Parliament (MPs), and local councillors, at the same time. In other countries and in electoral studies these are commonly referred to as simultaneous or synchronised elections. The most prominent argument in favour of holding local municipal elections separately dates back to the progressive era from the 1890s to the 1920s. It is that holding elections separately allows voters to give adequate attention to local issues without distraction from national races. In addition, proponents argue that harmonised elections can distort results as people are likely to vote along party slates, overwhelm voters and provide administrative and logistical challenges for electoral bodies. However, a considered view is that synchronising local government with presidential and parliamentary elections will result in: high voter participation and diminish voter fatigue; increased competitiveness and profile of local elections contrary to conventional wisdom; huge financial savings to the public exchequer and one financial plan for all spheres of government; regular holding of local government elections; minimisation of calculated closure of the democratic space as local-only elections can be seen as a portent for the subsequent general elections; fewer cycles of uncertainty for corporate investments; less cycles of violence and human rights violations which correspond with elections; increased time for government and society to spend on development work, production and governance and democratic progression in Zimbabwe's post-colonial electoral transition.

Synchronisation of elections is common in other jurisdictions. Botswana, which is Africa's longest-serving democracy adopted the model from 1969. In other Southern African countries, there has been a recent wave of harmonisation of elections from 2001 to date with countries such as Zambia (2001), Zimbabwe (2008), Malawi (2014), the Comoros (2015) and recently the Democratic Republic of Congo (2023), adopting the model. Southern Africa is more interesting because it provides the necessary cultural context which is important for any electoral reforms and adoption of electoral systems.

However, even beyond Africa, synchronising elections is now a common practise in countries such as Sweden and Indonesia. Even one of the world's oldest modern democracies, the United States, there are live debates about harmonisation of federal, state and local elections at law despite the country enjoying continuous democracy for more than 200 years. The same applies for India, the world's largest democracy with an electorate of about 970 million registered voters which is unmatched in scale globally and historically which intends to start the process of harmonising elections of House of the People, all the State Legislative Assemblies, and Local Bodies together referred to as One Nation, One Election (ONOE).

It is therefore imperative for Zimbabwe to retain the system of harmonisation of local, parliamentary and presidential elections because of its significance for political, social and economic stability in the prevailing cultural context. There is therefore no need for Zimbabwe to amend the Constitution, Local Government Act and Electoral Act to replace a system which is not broken. The electoral problems that Zimbabwe face are not because of the synchronisation of elections. In fact, Section 158 of the Constitution on timing of elections can be amended to entrench synchronised elections through providing a fixed election date to allow for procedural certainty for all contestants and not advantage the incumbent [who most of the times is also a contestant] with a constitutional prerogative to fix the date. For example, Sweden is an enduring and exemplary democracy and holds its parliamentary (Riksdag), county and municipal councils elections on a fixed date that is every four years, on the second Sunday in September. The United States also has a fixed date for the federal election that occurs after every four years on the first Tuesday after 1 November since 1845, Liberia holds elections on the second Tuesday of October after every five years, and so does Zambia whose election date is on a second Thursday of August every five years.

To substantiate the argument, the paper is structured in five interrelated parts. First, it provides an overview of the methods. Second, it presents snippets from all the Southern African states and other international experiences. Third, it zeroes in on the Zimbabwe experience. The fourth section provides recommendations with attendant reasons and a conclusion is set in the final section.

2. METHODS

This paper is informed by a qualitative desktop study. Data was collected through the review of electoral systems, constitutions, and legislation pertinent to synchronisation of harmonised elections in different jurisdictions in all the 15 Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states where Zimbabwe is a member, Sweden, Indonesia, India and United States. This was complemented by a systemic review of various commissions of inquiry reports on the pros and cons of holding synchronised elections. Other critical sources of information were local, regional and international newspapers. A systematic review of peer-reviewed literature covering debates on synchronisation of elections was also useful as it brought fresh perspectives and insights. At times these sources offered distinctively different views about the democratic dividends of harmonising local government elections, but a careful analysis of both views and triangulation corroborated the democratic outcomes in different contexts. An analysis of the diverse sources of data collectively, provide a systematic pattern of the pros and cons of harmonising local government elections, the experiences on the ground and what needs to be done in line with Zimbabwe's political culture, history and context. The lessons from other jurisdictions are discussed below.

3. BENCHMARKING REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE

In this section, a comparative analysis of other countries in North America, Southern Asia, South East Asia, Northern Europe and all the other 15 Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states where Zimbabwe is a member has been drawn while dealing with the issue of harmonised elections. The aim is not only to study and adopt the best regional and international practices but to understand the emerging trends and debates in order to ensure an appropriate electoral system for Zimbabwe's context.

3.1 UNITED STATES: ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST MODERN DEMOCRACIES

The quest for harmonised elections is a global phenomenon. Even in one of the world's oldest modern democracies, the United States, there is a live debate about harmonisation of federal, state and local elections at law despite the nation enjoying continuous democracy for more than 200 years. Currently, federal elections which are for the offices of President, Congress (House of Representatives and Senate members) and some governors take place every two years. During each and every federal election, all the House of Representatives and a third of seats in the Senate are elected. However, presidential elections are held during every other federal election that is after four years on the first Tuesday after 1 November since 1845.² Federal election years when the president is not up for election are called midterm elections and they elect all 435 seats of House of Representatives, a third that is 33 or 34 of the 100 seats in the Senate and 36 out of the 50 governors.³

Of importance is that the elections for state and municipal offices are held at 'the discretion of the individual state and local governments, with many of these coinciding with either presidential or midterm elections as a matter of convenience and cost saving.'⁴ Nevertheless, other state and local races may occur where there is no any federal election. Even though the federal and state elections have the widest coverage in the media the largest number of elections are in about 90 000 local governments that have about 500 000 elected officials.⁵

Why is there debate and advocacy for synchronised local elections in the United States? First, voter turn-out is pathetically low, usually less than 20% when local elections are held separately from federal and state elections.⁶ Second, the local elections burden voters and create fatigue. For example, in 'Nassau County, New York, , local elections take place on 24 different dates scattered throughout 11 months of the calendar year.'⁷ As Zoltan et al have argued, most studies in America on synchronisation of elections have shown that, 'synced local elections have turnout rates that are dramatically higher than unsynced elections. Indeed, compared to off-cycle elections, local elections held concurrently with national elections have more than double the rate of voter turnout.'⁸

²See "A Viewer's Guide to the Next Year in Presidential Politics". NBC News, November 4 2015.

³Waxman, Olivia (November 5, 2018). "Why Do Midterm Elections Even Exist? Here's Why the Framers Scheduled Things This Way".

⁴Waxman, Olivia (November 5, 2018). "Why Do Midterm Elections Even Exist? Here's Why the Framers Scheduled Things This Way".

⁵<https://effectivegov.uchicago.edu/primers/the-timing-of-local-elections>

⁶<https://effectivegov.uchicago.edu/primers/the-timing-of-local-elections>

⁷<https://effectivegov.uchicago.edu/primers/the-timing-of-local-elections>

⁸Hajnal, Zoltan L. and Lewis, Paul G., "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections," Urban Affairs Review 38, no. 5 (2003): 645–68

Benchmarking Regional And International Practice (Cont)

However, progressives have argued that even though turn out will be high, the voters are usually less informed about the local issues and candidates and that it might be better to have fewer and knowledgeable candidates.⁹ As Professor Christopher Berry has recently argued on the timing of local elections in the democracy reform primer series, 'the idea that poll access should be restricted to the most knowledgeable voters is anti-democratic and runs counter to US election law. Second, the most knowledgeable voters may have interests that diverge from "the masses."¹⁰ It is clear that not all in the United States consider the current system of holding separate local elections as the most ideal.

3.2 INDIA: THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEMOCRACY

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who leads the world's largest democracy with an electorate of about 970 million registered voters which is unmatched in scale globally and historically is pushing for the harmonisation of elections of House of the People, all the State Legislative Assemblies, and Local Bodies together referred to as One Nation, One Election (ONOE).¹¹ This followed the High Level Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections in India (popularly known as One Nation, One Election)'s recommendations in March 2024 for India to hold harmonised elections. The High Level Committee was appointed by the Government of India in 2023 to examine the legality, efficacy and modality of simultaneous elections. Presently, the electoral calendar in India is 'marked by a staggered pattern, wherein the electoral machinery is busy throughout the year in some states or the other. This pattern of frequent elections poses a multitude of challenges and also hampers the focus on good governance at both the Central and State levels.¹² The High Level Committee recommended simultaneous elections because they offer 'a pragmatic solution to streamline the electoral calendar, facilitates administrative convenience and optimises the use of financial and human resources.¹³ More specifically, chapter five zeroes in on the need to harmonise local elections in India. However, others argue that this will undermine federalism, subvert parliamentary democracy and undermine the basic structure of the constitution.¹⁴ Overall, the committee considered that there are more benefits than disadvantages to the synchronisation of local government elections. If harmonised elections are seen as feasible for a country of close to a billion registered voters, logistical challenges should be easier to overcome for smaller countries like Zimbabwe with a registered voter population of about 6.6 million people.¹⁵

3.3 INDONESIA: THE WORLD'S LARGEST SINGLE DAY ELECTION

On the 14th of February, 2024, about 170 million people voted on the same day in Indonesia making it the world's largest single day election.¹⁶ The people simultaneously voted for the President, Vice President, MPs, members of regional assemblies and municipal elections.¹⁷ Indonesia demonstrated that scale, logistical and administrative challenges are not a deterrent to holding simultaneous elections as voter turn-out was 83.29% which is above the world's average of 65. 6%.¹⁸ It held the world's largest single day elections since nearly 200 million people voted across all five levels of political office.

3.4 SWEDEN: AN ENDURING PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

Sweden is an enduring parliamentary democracy and 'holds its parliamentary (Riksdag), county and municipal councils on the same day that is every four years, on the second Sunday in September.¹⁹ In the last election in 2022, the voter turn-out was 84.21 per cent.²⁰ The voter turnout in Sweden has not been below 80 per cent since the 1950s. There are many reasons why there is a high voter turn-out including the fact that 'parliamentary elections are combined with elections to local and regional governments. The authorities of a municipality or region are chosen by local voters, and not appointed from the capital of Stockholm.²¹

⁹<https://effectivegov.uchicago.edu/primers/the-timing-of-local-elections>

¹⁰Christopher B. 2024. Timing of local elections. Democracy reform primer series. 15 January 2024.

¹¹<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/06/24/asia-pacific/modi-india-fractured-parliament/>

¹²High Level Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections in India 2024 (One Nation, One Election)

¹³High Level Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections in India 2024 (One Nation, One Election)

¹⁴<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/15/why-is-indias-modi-pushing-for-simultaneous-elections-who-would-gain>

¹⁵<https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/240/>

¹⁶<https://www.wfd.org/commentary/five-things-you-need-know-about-indonesias-2024-elections>

¹⁷Ananda Teresia and Stanley Widianto, Reuters, February 15 2024, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-votes-new-president-under-shadow-influential-incumbent-2024-02-13/>>

¹⁸<https://www.wfd.org/commentary/five-things-you-need-know-about-indonesias-2024-elections>

¹⁹<https://www.riksdagen.se/en/how-the-riksdag-works/democracy/elections-to-the-riksdag/>

²⁰<https://www.riksdagen.se/en/how-the-riksdag-works/democracy/elections-to-the-riksdag/>

²¹<https://sweden.se/life/democracy/elections-in-sweden>

3.5 SADC: A WAVE OF HARMONISATION

There has been a wave of harmonising elections in the region due to the multiple economic and democratic dividends.

3.5.1 BOTSWANA: AFRICA'S LONGEST SERVING DEMOCRACY

Botswana, which is Africa's longest-serving democracy adopted the model to hold national assembly and local government elections simultaneously from as early as 1969. This was only three years after Botswana gained independence from British colonial rule on 30 September 1966. However, the first legislative assembly elections were held separately in March 1965. This was followed by the 1966 local government elections that were also held separately after the enactment of the Local Councils Elections Act in 1966.²² The Local Councils Elections Act was then amended in 1969 to allow for elections of local council members to take place at the same time as general elections for the National Assembly to avoid duplication of costs in the running of the elections.²³ As highlighted earlier, the harmonised elections were held for the first time in 1969 and have been run efficiently and fairly since then. In total, Botswana has had eleven synchronised elections since independence. Up to date, 'Botswana is widely acclaimed as the embodiment of democratic ideals, norms and standards'²⁴ Consequently, Botswana's democratic competitive elections and responsive local government must be benchmarked against other emerging democracies on the African continent like Zimbabwe and beyond.

3.5.2 ZAMBIA: SYNCHRONISED

Zambia holds the presidential, parliamentary and local government elections at the same time, on a second Thursday of August every five (5) years which is a public holiday.²⁵ The first unprecedented simultaneous elections, which were called tripartite elections, were adopted on 27 December 2001.²⁶ The Local Government Act was then amended to bring the national and local elections in line in 2001.

3.5.3 MALAWI: SYNCHRONISED

Malawi held its first tripartite elections on 20 May 2014.²⁷ This followed the formulation of the law in 2014 that eventually allowed the conducting of Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Government elections at the same time.²⁸

3.5.4 THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC): SYNCHRONISED

DRC had harmonised elections for the first time on 20 December 2023 as part of the electoral reforms. These elections were 'the first to include municipal elections in the same cycle as the presidential, National Assembly, and Provincial Assembly elections'.²⁹

3.5.5 COMOROS: SYNCHRONISED

Comoros would usually hold elections for the national presidency and the governors of the three largest islands (gubernatorial elections): Grand Comore, Anjouan, and Moheli simultaneously.³⁰ However, simultaneous triple elections for the national assembly, three island councils and, as an innovation, 54 communal councils were held on 25 January and 22 February 2015. Consequently, voter turn-out was a record high at 71% in the first round and 73% in the second.³¹

²⁷ZESN 2014. Malawi Tripartite Elections. ZESN Press Statement. Available, https://mec.org.mw/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/ZESN-Malawi-Statement_03.06.14.pdf

²⁸<https://web.archive.org/web/20140201233745/http://www.mec.org.mw/News/TripatiteElections/tabid/11Default.aspx>

²⁹International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2023. Election FAQs: The Democratic Republic of the Congo General Elections December 20, 2023. Africa

³⁰<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/comoros/january-2024>

³¹<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/comoros/january-2024>er. "Zambia's 2001 elections: the tyranny of small decisions,'non-decisions' and 'not decisions'." *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 6 (2002): 1103-1120.

3.5.6 SOUTH AFRICA: LOCAL ONLY

South Africa is a constitutional democracy and it holds National and Provincial Elections (NPEs) separately from the local government elections but the feasibility of holding a single election remains a subject of contestation. The national assembly and provincial legislatures are held simultaneously after every five years since independence in 1994.³² The national assembly elects the President. Local government elections for all district, metropolitan and local municipalities in each of the country's nine provinces are held separately after every five years since 1996.

South Africa has held six municipal elections since the end of apartheid in 1994. However, voter-turn out for the local elections has been low compared to the high profile national assembly and provincial elections that are held concurrently. In 2021, voter turn-out for local elections was 45.86%. This was 'the lowest turnout for democratic elections in South Africa. This reflects a longer trajectory of declining voter turnout, which has been in evidence since 2009.'³³

The low turn-out has sparked debate about the need for synchronisation of the polls in order to address voter fatigue whilst introducing 'one financial year period for the three spheres of government, one system of public service provision, and a common five- year medium-term planning framework.'³⁴ However, others like Prof De Visser have argued that synchronising elections will be very complex for both the voter and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) as voters will receive up to five ballot papers. He further indicated that 'if elections are synchronised the hype will be around who has a majority in parliament and who will be the president, thereby neglecting local government.'³⁵

3.5.7 ESWATINI: A CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY, LOCAL ONLY

Eswatini is a constitutional monarchy but holds separate elections at two tiers of government that is the national and local government.³⁶ People vote for parliamentarians at a national level and for councillors at a local level for a five year term.³⁷ Political parties were banned in Eswatini since 1973.³⁸ This means contestants participate as independents.³⁹ Eswatini is not an ideal model because it does not embrace democratic multi-party elections.

3.5.8 MADAGASCAR: LOCAL ONLY

Madagascar has no synchronised electoral process at all levels. The presidential, parliamentary and local and municipal elections are held separately. The last local municipal elections were held in July 2015 and November 2019.

3.5.9 MOZAMBIQUE: LOCAL ONLY

The presidential, legislative and provincial assembly elections are synchronised. However, Mozambique holds the local elections separately. There can be less international and regional scrutiny to local elections. It becomes easier for the incumbent to manipulate.⁴⁰ For example, the 'National Electoral Commission declared Mozambique's ruling party FRELIMO the winner in 64 out of 65 municipalities (near 100%) participating in the country's sixth local elections on 11 October 2023.'⁴¹ The constitutional council only overturned the results in four towns and cities (Chiure, Quelimane, Alto Molócue and Vilankulo).

³²<https://www.elections.org.za/content/Documents/Voter-education/2019-National-and-Provincial-Elections/National-and-Provincial-Elections/>

³³<https://theconversation.com/here-are-five-factors-that-drove-low-voter-turnout-in-south-africas-2021-elections-173338>

³⁴https://www.demarcation.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Paper-on-feasibility-of-single-elections-in-SA_v03-final.pdf

³⁵<https://news.nwu.ac.za/should-2021-south-african-local-government-elections-be-synchronised>

³⁶<https://www.clgf.org.uk/regions/clgf-southern-africa/eswatini/>

³⁷<https://www.clgf.org.uk/regions/clgf-southern-africa/eswatini/>

³⁸Simelane, H.S., 2017. The evolution of the Swazi electoral process: ideological contradictions, 1978-2015. *Journal of African elections*, 16(1), pp.1-23.

³⁹Simelane, H.S., 2017. The evolution of the Swazi electoral process: ideological contradictions, 1978-2015. *Journal of African elections*, 16(1), pp.1-23.

⁴⁰De Brito, L., 2003. The Electoral system and conflict in Mozambique. *Journal of African elections*, 2(2), pp.67-85.

⁴¹Borges Nhamirre. 2023. Fraudulent municipal elections cripple democracy in Mozambique. Institute for Security Studies: Pretoria.

3.5.10 LESOTHO: LOCAL ONLY

Lesotho is a constitutional monarchy. It holds national assembly and local government elections separately. The King appoints as Prime Minister a member of parliament who leads a political party or coalition with the highest number or support of MPs. Lesotho held its first democratic local government elections in 2005, since attaining political independence from Britain in 1966. According to Shale, voter turn-out was just 30,22 per cent and in 'one electoral division, only 23 voters of a potential 2 053 (about 1,12%)⁴² voted. Voter turn-out in the local only elections have continued to decline. In 2017 and 2023 local government elections it was 26.4% and 29% respectively.⁴³ In the national assembly it was slightly higher at 37%. Voter turn-out does not significantly increase because local government elections are held separately to allow a focus on local issues.⁴⁴

3.5.11 NAMIBIA: LOCAL ONLY

Since the first 1989 elections, held a year before the attainment of independence in 1990, Namibia has regularly conducted national, regional council and local authority elections but these have not been harmonised. However, elections to determine political positions are synchronised at two levels. First, elections for the president and members of the national assembly are held simultaneously after every five years and the last were held in November 2019. Second, regional council and local authority elections to elect regional councils and local councils are held at the same time and the last elections were held on 25 November 2020.⁴⁵

As Kamwanyah et al have argued, 'Regional councils coordinate with National Planning Commission to develop plans which guide growth and development in the regions, as well assist local governments in the regions. Local authorities – municipalities, towns, and villages have responsibilities to provide services to the local citizens. In a way those Regional and Local institutions are a form of decentralized democracy.'⁴⁶

However, voter turnout in the 2020 regional council elections and local authority elections was a paltry 38.22% and 43.17% respectively.⁴⁷ This is a huge cause of concern for all stakeholders in Namibia signifying that local only elections are not the magic bullet in raising the profile of elections. On the other hand, the voter turnout for the presidential election was much higher at 60.8% and 60.4% for the national assembly in the 2019 general election.

3.5.12 TANZANIA: LOCAL ONLY (STREET AND VILLAGERS LEADERS)

Tanzania has been holding simultaneous elections for the Mainland and Zanzibar since the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1992 with the first being in 1995. Tanzania holds harmonised elections for the Union president, President of Zanzibar, directly elected members of the national assembly, members of the House of Representatives in Zanzibar and for local government councillors.⁴⁸ The last general election, which was the sixth after the reintroduction of multiparty politics was held on 28 October 2020.

However, Tanzania holds a special type of local elections to elect 16 000 street and village elders. Tanzania's ruling Chama Chamapinduzi won more than 99 percent of 16 000 seats in local elections for street (mitaa) leaders in the urban councils and village leaders in the rural councils. These local elections were last held on 24 November 2019.⁴⁹ The 2019 local elections were boycotted by the opposition due to authoritarian manipulation. The main opposition Chadema claimed that 94% of its candidates were disqualified.⁵⁰

Local government elections held on their own attract less international scrutiny and sanctions and are easier to manipulate. The local government elections for street and village leaders are also used as a precursor to the national election. In Zimbabwe's authoritarian context, the ruling party can use the local elections to gauge voter preferences and the potential outcomes of the general election to follow. If conditions are not favourable this can trigger democratic closure or a cycle of violence targeting political competitors.

⁴²Shale, V., 2005. The 2005 Lesotho local government elections: implications for development and governance. *Journal of African Elections*, 4(1), pp.100-116.

⁴³Local Government Elections 2023 Manthabiseng Convention Centre Official Closing Speech of the Election Results By the Chairperson of the independent electoral commission of Lesotho Mr. Mphasa Mokhocheane Wednesday, 4th October 2023.

⁴⁴Mudau, P. and 'Nyane, H., 2023. Reasons for the Low Voter Turnout in Lesotho's 2022 Elections. *Journal of African Elections*, 22(1), pp.121-141.

⁴⁵<https://www.lac.org.na>.

⁴⁶<https://thebottomup.it/2021/02/05/namibia-2020-regional-local-elections/>

⁴⁷<https://www.rosalux.co.za/our-work/namibia-regional-and-local-elections-2020-the-decline-of-the-former-liberation-movements>. See

⁴⁸<https://www.ecn.na/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Performance-Assessment-Post-Election-Report-2020-RCLA-Elections.pdf>

⁴⁹https://www.eods.eu/library/tanzania-final-report_en1.pdf

⁵⁰<https://www.africanews.com/2019/11/26/magufuli-s-party-wins-99-percent-of-seats-in-tanzania-s-local-elections/>

<https://africanarguments.org/2019/11/why-tanzanias-local-elections-are-more-important-than-they-might-seem/>

3.5.13 SEYCHELLES: NO LOCAL ELECTIONS

Seychelles became independent in June 1976 but there is no law governing local government. In addition, 'there are no local elections; local administrators are appointed by central government' but there are local struggles to have synchronised local government elections rather than not have them.⁵¹ Seychelles had planned to have district elections in 2018. However, the President decided not to have the local elections on account of 'the costs of running councils in each of the 26 districts.'⁵² However the decision not to have the local elections has been contested by pro-democracy movements. For example, the Association for Rights, Information and Democracy (ARID) advocated for ordinary citizens to be provided an opportunity to vote for their local representatives. In order to deal with the costs, ARID proposed for the local elections to be held at the same time with the next national assembly elections which might be held on September 27, 2025, if a proposed 11th amendment to the constitution on a fixed date for presidential and legislative elections is approved by the national assembly.⁵³

3.5.14 ANGOLA: NO LOCAL ELECTIONS

Angola has not introduced a system of elected local government since gaining independence from Portugal in 1975. This is despite the fact that Angola's 1975 constitution referred to an elected local government.⁵⁴ On August 25, 1992, the Angolan People's National Assembly ratified an interim constitution by a unanimous vote of 215-0.⁵⁵ It enshrined the need for elected local representative bodies and decentralised local units of local government.⁵⁶ Angola's constitution of 2010 establishes an autonomous local government bodies (article 213), the right for adult citizens to stand for election for any state or local authority (Article 54), the responsibility to call general and local elections on the head of state (Article 119, 2), the exclusive power to parliament to legislate for the election and status of local government officials (Article 164) and a local assembly composed of local representatives elected by the universal, equal, free, direct, secret and periodic suffrage of the citizens (Article 220, 2).

However, no local government elections have been held whether authoritarian or democratic. Angola's President Joao Lourenco indicated that the first local elections were going to be held in 2020. However these were cancelled due to Covid 19, according to the government. Local officials remain appointed.

It is easier for authoritarian regimes to avoid local government elections when they are held separately because the backlash is not as intense as for not holding national elections. The Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) sees 'local elections as a threat to central power and fears losing its grip on power. It fears introducing an element of voter control over local government, that is, citizen participation and control over the management of public funds. The government thinks that the people will wake up to the idea of the democratic state and the rule of law, and that many people will become aware of their rights and duties. This would run counter to the MPLA's intention, which is to perpetuate itself in power.'⁵⁷

In April 2024, Angola had started preparing for local government elections but no elections have been held to date.⁵⁸ Angola still holds parliamentary elections only.

In sum, some countries have realised the significance of simultaneous elections for political, economic and social stability such as Sweden, Indonesia, Botswana, Malawi, DRC, Comoros and Zambia. Others like India are on the verge of adopting simultaneous elections whilst some like United States are debating the pros and cons. On the other end, others have maintained separate elections such as Madagascar, Tanzania (for local street and village leaders), Namibia, Mozambique, Eswatini, Lesotho and South Africa. The worst case scenario is that Angola and Seychelles have not bothered to have local government elections against the winds of decentralised democracy. The different experiences will be used to inform the recommendations later. For now the next section zeroes in on Zimbabwe.

⁵¹<https://www.commonwealthgovernance.org/countries/africa/seychelles/local-government/>

⁵²<http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/8183/Regional+councils+to+replace+district+councils+next+year+in+Seychelles><http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/8183/Regional+councils+to+replace+district+councils+next+year+in+Seychelles>

⁵³<http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/8183/Regional+councils+to+replace+district+councils+next+year+in+Seychelles>

⁵⁴<https://theconversation.com/why-covid-19-cant-be-blamed-for-angolas-failure-to-have-local-governance-144685>

⁵⁵<https://pcwcr.princeton.edu/reports/angola1992.html>

⁵⁶<https://theconversation.com/why-covid-19-cant-be-blamed-for-angolas-failure-to-have-local-governance-144685>

⁵⁷<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/4849-angola-the-ruling-party-sees-local-elections-as-a-threat>

⁵⁸<https://www.africaintelligence.com/southern-africa-and-islands/2024/05/07/pressure-mounts-on-joao-lourenco-to-hold-first-ever-local-elections,110223672-art>

4. ZIMBABWE: THE EVOLUTION OF HARMONISED ELECTIONS

4.1 LOCAL ONLY ELECTIONS: 1980-2007

Zimbabwe inherited a tri-modal and not a harmonised system of local governance divided mainly on the basis of race from British colonial rule in 1980. The colonial state from 1890-1980 was divided into urban councils and rural councils for white settlers and African councils for the black majority.⁵⁹ Elections were held regularly from the colonial onset in the 1890s but they were not synchronised. In addition, there was no adult universal suffrage as the black majority's vote was constrained by a voting qualification criteria that included race, gender, land tenure, income and property ownership.⁶⁰ Since 1980, several local government reforms consolidated the councils and extended the universal adult suffrage to blacks.

However, the major reforms in the first 26 years of independence were not aimed at synchronising local government elections with national elections. The reforms enabled local governments to run their own elections guided by their enabling laws and regulations. At the core of the early local government reforms were the following legislations:

- 1980 District Councils Act
- Prime Minister's directive for decentralisation of local government in 1984
- Provincial Councils and Administration Act in 1985
- Rural District Councils Act of 1988
- Electoral Act
- Traditional Leaders Act, 2000
- Local Government Act, 2008

The pieces of legislation were at the core of local government in Zimbabwe in terms of outlining functions, governance structures, and electoral procedures. In terms of Section 121 (2) of the then Electoral Act, a general election for local authorities was to be held in August of the fourth year, after the previous general election. Before 2008, the term of office for the councillor was four years, for parliament five years and for the president six years. Urban and rural district council elections would therefore be held at different times with national elections.

4.2 INTRODUCING HARMONISED LOCAL ELECTIONS: 2007-2008

It is important to note that from the late 1990s Zimbabwe was not spared from the wave of democratic decentralisation across the global south. There was increasing internal and external pressure for Zimbabwe to democratise its electoral processes. Zimbabwe's elections were largely violent and not free, fair and credible. Even SADC had to intervene in helping Zimbabwe to come up with more credible and acceptable elections. The electoral reforms in the 2000s therefore took place within the context of the SADC mediation process led by former South African President, Thabo Mbeki, which provided other 'limited electoral reforms and engendered a more free and fair electoral environment'.⁶¹

As a result of the electoral reforms under the auspices of SADC, Zimbabwe held its first synchronised local government elections with parliamentary and presidential elections on 29 March 2008. This followed the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 18) Act, 2007 which commenced on 30 October of the same year. Amendment of Section 28 (3) stipulated that the president (previously elected separately in 2002) was to be elected on the 'day or days on which elections are to be held for the purpose of electing members of parliament and members of the governing bodies of local authorities'.⁶² Section 29 (1) was also amended to ensure that the 'term of office of the president shall be a period of five years concurrent with the life of parliament'.⁶³ Previously the president's term was six years and five years for parliament. Harmonisation was further strengthened by the amendment of Section 58 which included the synchronisation of elections. The amendment was clear that:

⁵⁹Mutizwa-Mangiza, N.D., 1990. Decentralization and district development planning in Zimbabwe. *Public Administration and Development*, 10(4), pp.423-435.

⁶⁰Kamete, A., 2003. In defence of national sovereignty? Urban governance and democracy in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21(2), pp.193-213.

⁶¹https://solidaritypeacetrust.org/download/report-files/punish_and_silence.pdf

⁶²The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 18) Act, 2007.

⁶³The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 18) Act, 2007.

Zimbabwe: The Evolution Of Harmonised Elections (Cont ...)

'For the purpose of the general election to be held after the date of commencement of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 18) Act, 2007, and all subsequent elections held for the purpose of electing members of Parliament, section 58 ("Elections") (1) of the Constitution is amended by the deletion of "A general election" and the substitution of "A general election and elections for members of the governing bodies of local authorities".⁶⁴

One political and legal problem for effecting harmonisation was that Mugabe's presidential term of office was due to expire in 2008 having been elected for a six year term in 2002 whilst parliament's term expired in 2010 having been elected in 2005 for a five year term. Mugabe tried to extend his term by two years to 2010, without going for elections in December 2007. However this failed and it was eventually the term of office of parliament that was reduced by two years to 2008. By this time, most of the urban local government elections were long overdue and the rural district council's tenure was reduced by two years to 2008. The amendment took place within the context of the SADC mediation process as highlighted earlier.

The main opposition the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) agreed to the changes as a confidence building measure. Civil society organisations led by the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) were explicitly opposed to the process of piecemeal amendments to the constitution rather than the principle of harmonised elections.

In line with the harmonisation of the local government elections the Electoral Act also had to be amended through the Electoral Laws Amendment Bill, 2007, hb.13. 2007. *Clause 16* amended section 4 of the Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13] (No. 25 of 2004) to include definitions for "local authority area", "local government body" and "ward".⁶⁵ *Clause 29* was the most important which substituted Section 38 of the Electoral Act, to provide for the harmonisation of presidential, parliamentary and local authority elections and the fixing of simultaneous days for the poll and nomination in connection with the presidential, local authority and parliamentary elections.⁶⁶ *Clause 41* replaced Section 56 of the Electoral Act with a new section that clearly contemplated the simultaneous voting for the president, members of parliament and members of the governing bodies of local authorities.⁶⁷ *Clause 66* repealed Section 121 of the Electoral Act which contemplated non-synchronous local authority elections.⁶⁸ Responsibility to run all the local authority elections was assigned to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

4.3 ENTRENCHING HARMONISED LOCAL ELECTIONS: 2013-2023

The spirit of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 18) Act, 2007 on harmonised elections was retained in the new negotiated Zimbabwe Constitution of 2013 [As amended up to 20th June, 2023]. According to Section 158 (2) of the new constitution, 'General elections to local authorities must take place concurrently with presidential and parliamentary general elections'. Section 95 (2) further enhances synchronisation by stating that the term of office for president is now five years and coterminous with the life of parliament. The synchronisation is also stated in Section 144 (1) where the president must proclaim synchronised nomination and polling dates for presidential, parliamentary and local authority elections.

Elections for local government are also now conducted in terms of the Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13, As amended up to 19th July, 2023]. This is not any different from the changes instituted through the Electoral Laws Amendment Bill, 2007, hb.13. 2007. Section 38 of the Electoral Act has remained unchanged on the need to fix the same polling day for the president, parliament and local authorities. Section 56 still uphold the contemplation of a harmonised election in electing the president, members of parliament and councillors.

According to Section 239 of the Constitution, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission now has the power to prepare for, conduct and supervise elections to the office of president and to parliament and elections to provincial and metropolitan councils and the governing bodies of local authorities.

⁶⁴The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 18) Act, 2007.

⁶⁵Electoral Laws Amendment bill, 2007, hb.13. 2007.

⁶⁶Electoral Laws Amendment bill, 2007, hb.13. 2007.

⁶⁷Electoral Laws Amendment bill, 2007, hb.13. 2007.

⁶⁸Electoral Laws Amendment bill, 2007, hb.13. 2007

4.4 THE DEMOCRATIC DIVIDENDS OF HARMONISED LOCAL ELECTIONS

In the pre-harmonisation period, it was easier for the Zimbabwe government to suspend the local-only elections when faced with a strong opposition. For example, the local councillors' elections for Harare were held in August 1995 and their term of office was supposed to expire in 1999 in line with Section 103 I of the then Electoral Act. However the Registrar General did not hold such elections and the Minister of Local Government and Housing appointed commissioners to run the city on 8 March 1999, and in terms of Section 80 (1) of the Urban Councils Act.⁶⁹ This was challenged in the superior courts and the court ordered an election for the councillors to take place in February 2002 which eventually happened in March 2002.⁷⁰ However, when the elections were due in August 2006, the relevant authorities did not hold them again contrary to Section 121(2) of the Electoral Act. In fact, commissioners were appointed till the introduction of the harmonised era in 2008. There was no much international interest to local-only elections. They were low profile in nature to an extent that they are not even well documented.

On the other hand, the local elections were not competitive and of low profile before the synchronisation era from 2002-2008. Harmonisation has improved the competitiveness of elections and raised the profile of local elections which is a good ingredient for a healthy democracy. The opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) only became competitive in rural local government elections after synchronisation. The MDC only managed to field candidates in 646 out of the 1,397 rural wards in its first participation in countrywide rural district council elections held on 28-29 September 2002. This translated to participating in only 46.2% of the wards signifying defeat before the polling day. In the subsequent rural district council elections held on 28 October 2006, the MDC failed to field candidates in 482 wards.

It was in the 2008 harmonised elections that there was a significant improvement from opposition parties as they managed to field candidates in 80.4% of the 1 958 contested wards. The competitiveness of the opposition became more evident as harmonisation became entrenched in the 2013 election. The opposition managed to field candidates in 95.9% of the wards meaning it failed to field candidates in only 81 wards. The number of wards won by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) without contestation even further dwindled in the 2018 general election. The opposition parties managed to compete against ZANU PF in 97.4% of the wards. The ruling party was this time not opposed in only 51 out of 1 958 wards. In 2023 the number of wards increased to 1 970 and the opposition failed to field in only three urban wards and 87 rural wards.⁷¹ It is evident that harmonisation has increased the competitiveness of local elections.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS & ATTENDANT REASONS

The major recommendation therefore is that **Zimbabwe must retain its harmonised electoral system of presidential, parliamentary and local government elections because of its significance for political, social and economic stability in the prevailing cultural context.** Not surprisingly, some countries have also realised the significance of simultaneous elections such as Sweden, Indonesia, Botswana, Malawi, DRC, Comoros and Zambia and others like India are on the verge of adopting the same whilst some like United States and South Africa are debating the pros and cons. There is therefore no need for Zimbabwe to amend the constitution, local government act and election act to replace a system which is not broken. The electoral problems that Zimbabwe face are not because of the synchronisation of elections. **In fact, Section 158 of the Constitution on timing of elections can be amended to entrench synchronised elections through providing a fixed date to allow for procedural certainty** for all contestants and not advantage the incumbent [who most of the times is also a contestant] with a constitutional prerogative to fix the date. For example, Sweden is an enduring and exemplary democracy and holds its parliamentary (Riksdag), county and municipal councils on a fixed date that is every four years, on the second Sunday in September. The United States also has a fixed date for the federal election that occurs after every four years on the first Tuesday after 1 November since 1845 and so does Zambia whose election date is on a second Thursday of August every five years. The next section provides nine reasons for recommending a retention of the synchronised system.

⁶⁹Stephenson v Minister of Local Government and National Housing and Others (Civil Appeal 126 of 2001 SC 38 of 2002) 2002 ZWSC 38 (29 May 2002).rtf

⁷⁰Stephenson v Minister of Local Government and National Housing and Others (Civil Appeal 126 of 2001 SC 38 of 2002) 2002 ZWSC 38 (29 May 2002).rtf

⁷¹See Zamchiya, P. 2023 for the statistics on: <https://x.com/NewsHawksLive/status/1651705968286203904>

Recommendations & Attendant Reasons (Cont ...)

- 1) Most experiences show that synchronised local government elections register a higher voter turn-out than unsynchronised ones. This has been evident in unsynchronised jurisdictions such as Namibia (38.22% in 2020), South Africa, United States (usually less than 20% when held in off cycles), Lesotho (29% in 2023) and South Africa (45.86% in 2021). In contrast, harmonised local government elections have reached more than 50% turn out. These include Comoros (71% in 2015); Zambia (above 70% in 2021); Sweden (84.21% in 2022) and Indonesia (83.29%). Voters will need to visit the polling station only once in four or five years to choose all their political representatives. Multiple election cycles within five years have potential to cause voter fatigue resulting in a decline in voter participation. This is evident in the by elections of Zimbabwe where turn out has been declining well below 50% due to lack of interest among other factors.
- 2) The competitiveness and profile of local elections has increased in Zimbabwe with the introduction of the harmonised elections in 2008 contrary to conventional wisdom. Prior to the synchronisation of elections local government elections in Zimbabwe were dominated by the ruling party which could win more than 50% of the wards uncontested as demonstrated in the 2002 and 2006 rural district council elections. In countries with local only elections like Tanzania the ruling party won 99% of the local elections in 2019 and in Mozambique the ruling party won nearly 100% of the seats in 2023 to show the degree of uncompetitiveness and manipulation. In addition, contrary to some public postulations, the profile of local government elections does not automatically rise because they are unsynchronised. No. It is because voters in Zimbabwe are aware that the important policy decisions are still mainly made by the president using executive powers and or parliament in the legislature. For this reason, implementing devolution as enshrined in Chapter 14 Section 264-279 to ensure principal decisions are made at the local level and civic education will help to raise the profile of local elections than merely holding them separately.
- 3) Harmonisation can lead to the regular holding of local government elections. It is easier for semi-authoritarian states to not hold local government elections when they are unsynchronised than when they are synchronised. This is because cancelling local-only elections attract less regional and international attention than a harmonised election that includes presidential and parliamentary elections. Semi-authoritarian states like Zimbabwe can survive with the cancellation or postponement of local-only elections as happened in urban areas from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. This is also evident in Angola which holds no local government elections at all despite the constitution mandating the government to do so. If the local government elections were harmonised it would be much more complex to disentangle them. In the Seychelles, the local government elections have also been set aside and this is partly aided by the fact that there is no harmonisation of electoral processes. Democrats in Seychelles are campaigning for harmonisation of local government elections as a durable solution.
- 4) Separate local government elections can be used as a precursor to the general elections to come as is the case with the street (mitaa) and village leaders elections in Tanzania. In Zimbabwe's semi-authoritarian context, the ruling party can use the local government elections as a measure for voter preferences and as a portent for the subsequent general elections. If conditions are not favourable and pose a threat to the hegemony of the ruling party this can trigger 'naked' election manipulation, democratic closure or a cycle of violence targeting political competitors. Historically, this was the case when the government lost the 2000 referendum for a new constitution in the context of a pending general election and triggered violent land invasions unprecedented since the end of the Cold War.
- 5) Harmonised elections are likely to result in financial savings for the public exchequer, reduce frequency of dishing out state-patronage consistent with elections in Zimbabwe and create one financial year plan for the three tiers of government than multiple election cycles held in different financial years. Setting up the infrastructure of elections once is much cheaper than multiple times. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) used 133 480 000 million from the treasury for the preparation and holding of the August 2023 highly competitive presidential election, 280 national assembly members, 80 senators and 1 970 local councillors in ten provinces. Even though this was a high figure, the subsequent by election for eight legislators and a few 12 councillors on 9 December 2023 cost a disproportionate five million dollars. This is an indication that staggered elections will be more costly to the national treasury. Finances can be channelled to other development and social welfare programs.

Recommendations & Attendant Reasons (Cont ...)

- 6) Synchronised elections will reduce cycles of uncertainty for corporate investments. An election is an uncertainty inducing event. One can learn from Julio and Yook who documented corporate investment cycles corresponding with the timing of national elections using a sample of 248 national elections in 48 countries around the world which included Zimbabwe. They found that 'during election years, firms reduce investment expenditures by an average of 4.8% relative to non-election years, controlling for growth opportunities and economic conditions'⁷² Other studies have also shown similar trends of reduced corporate investment around elections even in the United States.⁷³
- 7) Synchronising elections can reduce the cycles of violence and human rights violations in the country. None-election periods in Zimbabwe are comparatively peaceful to election periods.⁷⁴ Violence and human rights violations usually surge after the proclamation of the election day and reach its peak in the election. Albeit at different scales during the pre-election, election and post-election period violence becomes the technology of rule. The violence and human rights violations that characterise society during elections are mainly party-state sponsored and institutionalised. In addition, political violence in Zimbabwe is also sexualised and 'constructed along gendered notions of masculinity and femininity'.⁷⁵ Stand-alone elections such as the 2000, 2002, 2005 and June 2008 elections have tended to be more violent than the harmonised elections on 29 March 2008, 31 July 2013, 30 July 2018 and 23-24 August 2023. This is partly because during harmonised elections the violence machinery is spread and stretched throughout the country from the village to the national level and during separate elections the machinery can be concentrated at a particular sub-national level.
- 8) Synchronising elections increases the time the government, business and society spend on development work, production and governance. Multiple cycles of elections lead to frequent suspension of development work and plunge the nation into perpetual electioneering. During elections, the entire state bureaucratic set up from the centre to the village is pre-occupied with running elections hence it slows down considerably and all other normal functions of the government, including developmental and social service delivery work, are trivialised. Even businesses, labour, courts and civil society at large concentrate more on elections. This even affects normal governance and high performance delivery.
- 9) Holding elections separately will catalyse democratic regression in Zimbabwe's post-colonial electoral transition. Reintroducing de-harmonisation will be going back to where other countries in Southern Africa such as Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, DRC and Comoros are coming from with many yearning to follow. Some countries acclaimed as the embodiment of democratic ideals and standards such as Botswana and Sweden have shown that the harmonised system can improve democratic competitive elections and responsive local government. In addition, Indonesia demonstrated that scale, logistical and administrative challenges are not a deterrent to holding simultaneous elections as it held the world's largest single day elections with nearly 200 million people voting on the same day. Even in one of the world's oldest modern democracies, the United States, debates are alive on the need to harmonise the federal, state and local elections at law despite the country enjoying continuous democracy for more than 200 years. The same applies for India, the world's largest democracy with an electorate of about 970 million registered voters which is unmatched in scale globally and historically.

⁷² Julio, B., Yook, Y., 2012. Political uncertainty and corporate investment cycles. *The Journal of Finance* 67, 45–83

⁷³ Jens, C., 2017. Political uncertainty and investment: Causal evidence from US gubernatorial elections. *Journal of Financial Economics* 124, 563–579.

⁷⁴ ZHRC. 2023. Report on 2023 Harmonised Elections in Zimbabwe

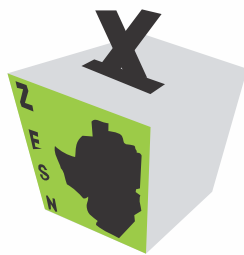
⁷⁵ <https://africanarguments.org/2020/12/the-gendering-of-violence-in-zimbabwean-politics/>.

6. CONCLUSION

Considering the overriding advantages of synchronised presidential, parliamentary and local government elections discussed above it is important for Zimbabwe to retain the system. Rather what might be at stake is to amend Section 158 of the Constitution on timing of elections to entrench synchronised elections through providing a fixed election date to allow for procedural certainty for all contestants as practised in Sweden, United States and Zambia and not advantage the incumbent with a constitutional prerogative to fix the date. Not surprisingly, some countries have also realised the significance of simultaneous elections such as Sweden, Indonesia, Botswana, Malawi, DRC, Comoros and Zambia and others like India, the world's largest democracy with nearly 1 billion voters, are on the verge of adopting the same whilst some modern democracies like United States and South Africa are debating the pros and cons. There is therefore no need for Zimbabwe to amend the Constitution, Local Government Act and the Election Act to replace a system which is not broken. The electoral problems that Zimbabwe face are not because of the synchronisation of local government elections.

Even though some argue that a harmonised election negatively affect the profile of local elections, in reality the introduction of synchronised local government elections in 2008 in Zimbabwe has increased the competitiveness and consequently the profile of local elections. The profile of local elections can further be enhanced by implementing devolution as enshrined in Chapter 14 Section 264-279 of the Zimbabwe Constitution to allow for principal decisions to be made at the local level than at the national level and by intensifying civic education rather than merely having local-only elections. In addition, the argument that synchronised elections overwhelm voters and provide administrative and logistical challenges for electoral bodies is disputed by comparative evidence. Indonesia held the world's largest single day elections since nearly 200 million people voted across all five levels of political office on 14 February 2024. The proposition that people are likely to vote along party slates in synchronised elections can be resolved through massive voter and political education by the electoral management body, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. A better view is that synchronising local government with presidential and parliamentary elections will result in: high voter participation and diminish voter fatigue; increased competitiveness and profile of local elections contrary to conventional wisdom; huge financial savings to the public exchequer and one financial plan for all spheres of government; regular holding of local government elections; minimisation of calculated closure of the democratic space as local-only elections can be seen as a portent for the subsequent general elections; fewer cycles of uncertainty for corporate investments; less cycles of violence and human rights violations which correspond with elections; increased time for government and society to spend on development work, production and governance and democratic progression in Zimbabwe's post-colonial electoral transition.

THE END



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