

Critical Steps in implementation of BVR

By ZESN

Implementation of Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) system requires careful planning, preparation and implementation to ensure that it is successfully implemented. Failure to follow due process in the implementation could jeopardise the process, with devastating consequences for electoral integrity and credibility.

ZESN is calling for transparency in the various stages of the deployment of BVR system in Zimbabwe. The continued silence regarding the steps being taken in the adoption and implementation of the BVR system apart from print media pronouncements is particularly worrying.

ZESN's position is that the implementation of BVR requires transparency in processes such as tendering and procurement in order to enhance confidence, integrity and credibility of the process. There is need for ZEC to conduct comprehensive stakeholder consultations such as political parties, the media and CSOs on the BVR system in order to conscientise the electorate on what it entails as well as busting some negative myths about the system

BVR system accompanied by other electoral reforms has great potential to transform electoral processes in Zimbabwe. It is therefore imperative for the Government to clarify its position and clearly spell out the critical steps for the adoption of BVR in light of the limited time before the 2018 elections.

ZESN calls upon ZEC to provide a detailed guideline on the critical steps that will be taken in the implementation of the BVR system in Zimbabwe as a way to enhance transparency among stakeholders.

Some of the critical questions which must be addressed to ensure the successful implementation of the process include; has a feasibility study been conducted? Is there going to be a pilot of the system as witnessed with the polling station based voter registration? Has a vendor been identified or is there going to be a tendering process for the BVR equipment? When is the process going to be rolled out? What is the technical capacity of ZEC to relate with the new technology? Are there adequate resources to place for the successful implementation of the BVR?

ZESN's view is that steps such as conducting a feasibility study, pilot of the BVR, timely procurement procedures, staff training on use of BVR, setting up of mechanisms for IT support

and data recovery and consolidation and mechanisms for the electorate to check their registration status must be taken for a successful deployment of the technology in Zimbabwe.

Feasibility Study

There is need to conduct a comprehensive feasibility study to determine the workability of biometric voter registration in Zimbabwe. The feasibility study would enable the Commission to analyse the economic, political, social factors and technical capacity issues and how these will impact the successful implementation of the BVR system.

Pilot

ZEC should pilot BVR in future by-elections as it prepares to introduce the system in 2018, the adoption of BVR will go a long way in enhancing transparency and integrity of the voter registration processes in Zimbabwe. In addition, the pilot would enable the Commission to determine the possible costs of implementation as well as to receive the views of stakeholders for incorporation in the final deployment.

Procurement

ZESN notes that this is one of the most critical steps in BVR deployment, in countries (e.g. Kenya) where they have had challenges with BVR it is mainly as a result of late and/or inappropriate procurement of equipment. ZESN's view on procurement is that there must be clear procedures relating to the composition of the procurement committee, drafting of tender documents and review of bids. Furthermore, the procurement committee must take into account the experience of the vendor in handling similar projects and ensure that the vendor conducts a Site Validation Test of the system before it is rolled out. BVR technologies are an intensive process hence the process of procuring the vendor and equipment must be done in time.

ZESN chairperson, Ms Irene Petras said that "Procurement is one of the most critical steps in BVR deployment therefore there is need to ensure that adequate time is allocated for it. In addition, ZESN calls for a public tender process and public scrutiny of the decision-making process and engagement of the service provider."

Staffing, Support, Data recovery and Consolidation

There is need for capacity building of ZEC staff members who will be in charge of the BVR enrolment process. ZESN notes that training programmes and study tours to countries that have successfully deployed BVR will be helpful in skills enhancement for ZEC secretariat. ZESN believes that there must be clearly outlined support mechanisms for data recovery and

consolidation in the event of kit failures or thefts. There is need for all field equipment to be consolidated with the central servers and storage units to act as back-ups.

Deduplication

ZESN reiterates its belief that one of BVR's major strengths is the ability to deter duplicate voter registration, therefore; there must be clear measures to show how the captured biometric data will be used to identify suspected duplicate voter registrations and whether this will be done by human operators or by computer software. In the case of voter registration offences there is need for clarity on what penalties will be levied against the offenders.

Claims and Objections

In addition to the public verification of the provisional voter lists, ZESN urges the Commission to ensure that there are adequate mechanisms in place for citizens to check their names on the voters' rolls both physically and virtually. ZESN believes that such an arrangement would speed up the rectification of any errors in registration details in the system.

ZEC should consider integration of SMS systems into BVR to enable citizens to verify their registration status via SMS. Election technologies in use in other countries include the use of SMS and social media to communicate with the electorate. In Pakistan, for instance the EMB used SMS to have voters check whether their voter registration details and statuses were accurate. Out of the 85 million registered voters 55 million successfully utilized the SMS platform at nominal financial cost to both the Commission and the voters.

Conclusion

Given that there have been contestations over voter registration and the consequential voters' rolls in previous elections the adoption of BVR technologies offer an opportunity to address issues of transparency and inclusivity in key electoral processes. A demonstration of political will is essential for the successful implementation of BVR.

For comments and views about this article, please contact ZESN on info@zesn.net or zesn2011@zesn.net. Follow us on Twitter:@ZESN1 and like us on Facebook Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN)