

ZIMBABWE ELECTION SUPPORT NETWORK



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT: BIKITA WEST PARLIAMENTARY BY-ELECTION

Harare – 22 January 2017- The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) as part of its observation of the 21 January 2017 Bikita West by-election deployed 33 observers consisting of mobile and static (polling station) observers. The static observers were deployed at every Ward Collation centre in the Constituency as well as at selected polling stations whilst the mobile teams were roving around the Constituency assessing the political environment outside the polling stations.

The by-election was necessitated by the incarceration of former ZANU PF Member of Parliament (MP) Mr Munyaradzi Kereke for raping his niece. In accordance with Section 129(i)(i) of the Constitution which provides for the tenure of seat of an MP the seat was declared vacant.

Observation Methodology

ZESN conducts its observation efforts in conformity with the Declaration of Global Principles for Citizen Election Observation and Monitoring which was launched at the United Nations on 3 April 2012 as well as the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation in the SADC Region (PEMMO). The findings and recommendations of this election observation are made in reference to the laws of Zimbabwe, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections as well as other regional and African election standards.

Turned Away Voters

There were significant numbers of turned away voters owing to various reasons including voters turning up at the wrong polling stations and bringing wrong identity documents such as drivers' licences and not appearing on the voters' rolls. High numbers of turned away voters were observed at Duma Chief Hall and at Jaravaza Primary School where 28 and 26 voters were turned away respectively.

Redirected Voters

ZESN observed that as in previous by-elections voters who turned up at the wrong polling stations were redirected to other polling stations. Worryingly, some of the voters were redirected to polling stations that were very far from where they had turned up. For instance at Chikukutu Primary School in Ward 12 two voters were redirected to Bikita minerals which is approximately 18 km away from Chikukutu Primary School. In addition, 3 voters were redirected from Nyemba Primary to Fambidzanai Secondary School a distance of about 13km away ZESN notes that redirecting voters over such long distances may result in their disenfranchisement and urges ZEC to enhance publicity of the new polling stations based voter registration and voting system to avoid the turning away and redirecting of voters.

Voter intimidation / Electoral irregularities

ZESN observed that the campaign period in Bikita West Constituency was characterised by political tension, threats to life, physical violence, partisan food distribution, vote buying, abuse of the provisions for assisted voters and intimidation by traditional leaders. On Election Day ZESN received reports of voters being instructed to 'register' with their village head and party structures before and after casting their votes. In the run up to the by-election, the NCA candidate Mr Murdock Chivasa was attacked by suspected ZANU PF supporters. More cases of electoral irregularities and incidents were reported by observers in wards 9, 10, 11, 5 and 32. It is imperative for ZEC, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) and the Police to investigate the reports and take relevant action against the offenders.

Polling Procedures and Conduct of ZEC Polling Staff

ZESN observer reports showed that all polling stations successfully completed setup and opening procedures on time. In addition, observer reports revealed that at 100% of polling stations where ZESN had observers all the required voting materials such as ballot boxes, ballot papers, ZEC official stamp, indelible ink marker pens and the voters roll were available at the time of opening. Everywhere ZESN observed there were adequate polling personnel with an average of six (6) officials at each polling station. ZESN commends ZEC for the professional conduct and adherence to procedures and regulations throughout Election Day.

Voting and Counting

ZESN observer reports show that voting went on smoothly at all the polling stations. At all polling stations, counting took place according to procedures and results were displayed outside the polling stations. At all the ward and constituency collation Centres where ZESN observed, party agents who were present agreed that the process had gone well and signed the V11 form.

Assisted voters

Reports from ZESN observers revealed that there were significant numbers of assisted voters recorded during the by-elections mostly of illiterate and elderly voters. However some assisted voters were of a relatively young age. The unusually high number of assisted illiterate voters is inconsistent with Zimbabwe's high literacy rates and may be an indication of the levels of intimidation especially in rural constituencies. For instance, high numbers of assisted voters where recorded at Maregere polling station were 21 voters had been assisted by 6 PM.

Turnout

ZESN observed long queues in the morning with the majority of the voters being women. For instance, at Mupamaonde Primary School in ward 22 of the 301 that had voted by 4PM 206 were women while 95 were men and at Makondo primary 224 women had voted as compared to 88 men.

Election Agents

ZESN observer reports showed that of the six contesting candidates only the ZANU PF, Zimbabwe People First and Independent candidates deployed election agents comprehensively while the other contestants had a limited number of election agents at polling stations. The inability to comprehensively deploy agents limits the capacity of political parties and candidates to authoritatively speak on electoral processes.

Recommendations

1. ZEC should put in place mechanisms and measures to reduce the number of redirected voters as in some instances voters are redirected to polling stations several kilometres away.
2. Political parties must put more effort into observing key electoral processes in order to enhance their ability to speak authoritatively on the running of the elections.
3. ZEC should devise voter education programmes that lure the youth to fully participate in electoral processes as the level of participation of youths in electoral processes remains low.
4. ZEC should invest in more comprehensive voter education programmes to improve voters understanding of key electoral requirements in order to reduce numbers of turned away and assisted voters.
5. Practical dispute resolution mechanisms must be put in place by ZEC and other key stakeholders to deal with the cases of electoral violence and intimidation. Enforceable sanctions must be introduced for political parties and candidates that violate the Political Parties' Code of Conduct.

6. During voter registration exercises, the ZEC should collect data on special needs groups and to enable them to adequately prepare for provisions such as braille ballots for voters with visual impairments to safeguard free choice for the special needs groups.

By-Election Results

Candidate	Political Party	Sex	Votes Received
Chabaya Beauty	ZANU PF	F	13,156
Gopo Kudakwashe	Zimbabwe People First	M	2,453
Chivasa T Madock	NCA	M	343
Makumbo T Terrence	PDZ	M	132
Muzvimbiri Innocent	Independent	M	725
Shoko Heya	Independent	M	76
Rejected votes			247

Source: ZEC

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