

ZIMBABWE ELECTION SUPPORT NETWORK



BIOMETRIC VOTER REGISTRATION UPDATE – NUMBER 7

26 October 2017 - The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) continues to observe the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) exercise. This update is based on observations by ZESN observers deployed to cover all the wards under Phase One.

Voter Registration Process

ZESN observed that at 98% of registration centres where observers were stationed, the voter registration process was conducted smoothly with registration officials duly following registration procedures. ZESN also observed that most of the registration centres opened and closed at stipulated times thereby affording potential registrants ample time to present themselves for registration. Of concern to ZESN are reports that some citizens with IDs written 'aliens' were turned away despite having documentation to prove that their citizenship status had been regularized.

Data Storage and Transmission

ZESN notes that as the first phase of the BVR exercise comes to a close, issues of transmission and storage of data from the various registration centers to the district, provincial and national data centers needs to be clearly explained by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) to enable electoral stakeholders to have a better understanding of how registration data will be moved to the national data center. ZESN notes that in the spirit of transparency and Open Data, the ZEC procedures on the transmission and storage of data must be clearly communicated and publicized to all electoral stakeholders and the general public. Critical information regarding kit movement in-between phases must be clearly publicized, for instance, at the conclusion of each phase will the BVR kits be reset or new registrations simply be added to what is already in a kit? In addition, what regulations and procedures are in place governing the transportation of USB sticks, the receipt and uploading of data to the central BVR database?

Political Environment

ZESN observer reports indicate prevalence of intimidation of potential registrants by political actors, especially in rural areas, with registrants being forced to submit the serial numbers of their voter registration slips. For instance, in Mt Darwin Ward 34 villagers were being asked to report to the ZANU PF leadership after registering to vote so that the particulars on their registration slips could be recorded. Furthermore, reports from Ward 17

in Gokwe Gumunyu indicate that potential registrants are being intimidated through misinformation that once they register using BVR it will be easy to see who they vote for.

The intimidation is not only targeted at potential registrations but also at observers. ZESN has received several reports of observers being intimidated by political actors resulting in the inability of the affected observers to fully discharge their duties. For instance, the ZESN observer who was deployed in Ward 2 of Epworth Local Board was denied access to the registration center after some individuals, claiming to represent the ruling party, insisted that ZESN observers should not be granted access into registration centers.

ZESN reiterates its calls for the need for the establishment of a conducive political environment devoid of intimidation and violence during the registration exercise and during the period leading to the 2018 elections. ZESN calls upon the ZEC to facilitate the creation of multiparty liaison committees. MPLCs would be an appropriate platform to elicit the support of politicians in adhering to the stipulated code of conduct for political parties.

Voter education

One of the key determinants of a successful voter registration process is that persons who are eligible to register must be sufficiently knowledgeable and well informed on how they can be enrolled on the register and why it is important for them to do so. Effective civic and voter education is such a massive exercise that requires concerted efforts from the Commission as well as its partners such as Civil Society Organizations. It is clear from observation that ZESN has made so far, that there is need for considerably more efforts to be made by both ZEC and its partners to ensure that they broaden their reach of the potential registrants during the second, third and fourth phase of the registration exercise.

The voter education drive will also need to respond to the turn out trends, so as to enhance the effectiveness of the voter education efforts.

Proof of Residence

The requirement of proof of residence is proving to make the registration process cumbersome as the majority of registration centers do not have commissioners of oaths to certify the affidavits that would have been completed by potential registrants. Consequently registrants have had to look for a Commissioner of oaths elsewhere and incur additional costs and unnecessary inconveniences during the process. The fact that 22 873 potential registrants was turned away by ZEC for various reasons including failure to provide proof of residence is testament to this. In Mbire ward 9, ZESN received reports that traditional leaders were providing proof of residence on partisan grounds.

Turnout

According to information from ZEC, 879 315 people had registered as of October 20 under the first phase of the BVR exercise, countrywide exercise. However the last week of phase 1 of the registration exercise witnessed the number of registrants tapering off. Factors that have impacted on the turnout of registrants include the quality of voter education received by eligible persons, as well as the intimidation by political parties who have set up ‘camps’ within the vicinity of some registration centers. These political actors are noting down details on registration certificates and informing registrants that they will be able to use that information to track voting preferences during elections. One such registration center where ruling party cadres have set up a permanent ‘camp’ is Mbire Ward 16. Another example is Mudzi North ward 1 and 2. In Motoko North Ward 10, the village head has been escorting his subjects to the registration centers and taking down the details of their registration certificates after they have registered.

Recommendations:

1. ZEC should facilitate the creation of multiparty liaison committees that will discuss issues related to political parties, actors and supporters adherence to the stipulated code of conduct during the registration period.
2. ZEC should issue periodic press statements to address deliberate misinformation by some political parties regarding the purpose of the BVR exercise.
3. ZEC should publicize the simplified version of their procedures and regulations governing how the data is transmitted from registration centers to ZEC.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ZESN reiterates its calls for the scraping off of birth certificate fees for those who would like to obtain national IDs to facilitate their registration. In addition, ZESN urges ZEC to upscale its voter education initiatives in order to counter the misinformation that is being given to potential registrants, particularly in rural areas. It is vital for the electorate to enjoy their rights and freedoms, free from harassment and intimidation as espoused in the Zimbabwe Constitution in order to facilitate a credible election