

Political parties' position on the common agenda- post election period

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Holiday Inn, Bulawayo 7-8 March 2019

Introduction

The presumption that political parties can find a common agenda is an interesting one in a society as politically polarised as ours. What is clear, even from the various CSO, expert and EMB presentations that were delivered yesterday, is that we seem to be looking at where we have gaps and problems in our electoral processes from very divergent and different perspectives.

Where we seem to have consensus, however, is that for a very long time, the usual cry from opposition political parties and civil society has been the uncleanness of our voter register, which uncleanness led to accusations of electoral malfeasance and manipulation by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and the ruling party, Zanu-PF.

The 2018 elections, though not free and credible, by our standards, we will outline reasons herein, were held using a new electoral register, created, managed and kept by ZEC as prescribed by the law. Although there were initial doubts from some quarters that ZEC had no capacity to register people anew, given the time that was there between the commencement of the exercise and the proclamation of the election date, most Zimbabweans were pleasantly surprised by the EMB's ability to register voters and come up with a new register, albeit with its own problems, but a new register all the same.

In that light, I would like to commend ZEC for a job well done. I will, however, give my analysis of the few but very serious issues that we observed, as a party, pertaining to the voters roll on Election Day. But at this juncture, let me applaud the EMB for managing to give us a new register at a time many were sceptical of ZEC's ability to come up with such, given the time and budgetary implications of such an exercise.

My presentation will not dwell on election administration by ZEC, what CSOs and other electoral stakeholders should do, but largely touches on the electoral environment which I believe was inimical to the holding of a free and credible election regardless of the competency, or lack thereof, of the EMB.

I believe a correct analysis of the environment can inform how we can tackle the electoral problems we are facing even today and by dint of protracted hard work, lead us to a common agenda for political and electoral reforms.

Electoral environment

The most contentious issue with the 2018 election was the environment within which the election was held, an environment that is persisting today which I believe might be hampering even our ability to correctly evaluate the elections freely, with assurances that we won't be guests of the state after this session.

If we agree that the official election period was officially launched with the registration of former president Robert Mugabe at State House at a launch that introduced, not only the new electoral season, but the introduction of the biometric voter registration process (BVR) which gave us the new electoral register for which I have been heaping plaudits on ZEC, I think we will agree that the following period our country experienced a violent military takeover of government and the subversion of our constitution during the last electoral period.

On November 15 2017, two months after the electoral period was officially set in motion by the symbolic registration of President Mugabe and his family at state house on 14 September 2017, the political environment in our country turned upside down with very grave implications to the holding of a free and credible election by July 30 2018.

While many people would not want to identify that what happened in Zimbabwe was a military coup, the National Patriotic Front (NPF) the party I am representing at this forum, has always unreservedly described the events leading to the supposed resignation of the former president as a hostile military takeover of the state, government and Zanu-PF. The coup left us a **de facto** military state although the capture of key state institutions by the army is forcing some key state actors to insist that we are **de jure**, a constitutional state with a façade of democracy hyped by now tired dictums and slogans that talk to Zimbabwe being “open for business.”

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of the authorities about Zimbabwe being open for business under an alleged new dispensation that is supposedly built on the rule of law and values of transparency and anti-corruption, the living reality on the ground that existed during the electoral period, and persisting now, is that the country has become a military state run by a Zanu-PF-Military Junta.

The ruling party and the army have functionally and operationally become one and the same thing and this has brought about **de facto** military rule. Anyone who used to doubt this should take note of the reasons for the coup that are captured in the coup minutes that I will quote below and the confession by the Spokesperson to the President, who himself was the secretary to the army during the coup, when he recently wrote in the Herald of 06 February 2019.

Mr George Charamba, in an article titled “*Using the past as a political blackmail in the present*”, told *Herald* readers on the 6th of February 2019 that “**Carriers of Operation Restore Legacy [a euphemism for coup] are all Zanu-PF cadres to the bone**” who were “**largely motivated by the need to checkmate the alien G40 element in order to rescue the party and its government.**”

At the core of the coup, which fundamentally muddied the electoral environment, was the motivation by the army to “**rescue Zanu-PF**” and avoid an “**imminent electoral defeat.**”

The coup minutes, whose snippets form part of some annexure to this presentation, make it clear that the army, fronted by now Vice President Constatino Chiwenga and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sibusiso Moyo, staged the coup for political and electoral reasons. The minutes reveal that the army observed that “**more worrisome were the divisive, manipulative and vindictive acts by the same cabal (G40) which threatened the electability of Zanu-PF in the impending 2018 harmonised elections thus raising the spectre of an electoral defeat which harkened to the 2008 electoral crisis and more broadly, to a similar fate suffered by Zambia’s founding UNIP in the early 1990s**”.

In light of the above observation, the army used the coup to ensure it took over Zanu-PF and used any means necessary, including the subversion of the constitution, to avoid a Zanu-PF **“electoral defeat”** in the 2018 elections.

The same coup minutes also exposed that more than **“2000 commissars comprising ‘retired senior officers from the army’** were already **“embedded in the communities across the country”** and these were the ones that alerted their army commanders of the impending Zanu-PF electoral loss which gave compelling reasons for the November 2017 coup. A cursory estimation points to the presence of at least one of these so-called **“retired senior officers from the army”** in each one of the 1958 administrative wards in the country.

The coup minutes also justify the military takeover of government on the understanding that **“unfulfilled promises made in the 2013 harmonised general elections”** made **“the Command Element”** afraid **“that Zanu-PF faced another election without evidence of real economic recovery by way of completion of flagship projects, or pointers to the general amelioration of the socio-economic conditions of an expectant voting populace.”** With benefit of having lived the period between the military takeover of government, the state and Zanu-PF and the 2018 elections, it is clear that there was no economic reform that was introduced thus, one would ask, how the military managed to turnaround an **“imminent electoral defeat”** into a thumping victory for the Zanu-PF-Military Junta that took part in the 2018 elections.

One does not need to go on a rocket-science intellectual exercise to understand how this was achieved, they just need to listen, or read closely, statements that came out of senior Zanu-PF officials who campaigned for Zanu-PF and its presidential candidate, President Emmerson Mnangagwa. The various statements by these very senior Zanu-PF officials promising the electorate that the army will not let any other person takeover power after the 2018 elections except their appointee feed into the coup narrative which sought to avoid **“imminent Zanu-PF electoral defeat.”**

Then Deputy Minister of Finance, Terence Mukupe, was quoted by the *Newsday*, a local daily newspaper, saying that the **“Army won’t let Chamisa rule”**. A day later, a regional paper, *Masvingo Mirror*, quoted one of President Mnangagwa’s key allies, the then Provincial Minister for Masvingo Province, Josiah Hungwe, alleging that **“Mnangagwa will shoot to stay in power”**.

These statements came on the back of similar statements from senior government and Zanu-PF officials who didn’t make it a secret that they were going to use the army to intimidate, coerce and ‘mobilise’ the electorate to vote for Zanu-PF. The Zanu-PF National Political Commissar, a soldier who ‘retired’ after the November 15 2017 coup to takeover Zanu-PF structures, was also quoted by the local media promising to use the army to perpetrate political violence on opponents of the regime.

It is also trite here to point out that despite efforts by a lot of observer missions to cast the 2018 elections as relatively peaceful, the truth is that these elections were among the most violent the country has had since 1980. The only problem is that, despite confessions by ousted former Zanu-PF First Secretary, former President Mugabe, that a lot of people were killed during the coup, which happened after the official launch of the election season, the military regime has made it very difficult and dangerous to talk about the coup casualties.

It should be noted that for the first time since the bomb blast at a campaign rally in Masvingo in 1980, during the transition from the armed struggle, we had a much more fatal bomb explosion during a campaign rally at White City Stadium in June 2018. More than five people were killed in the blast with scores injured, including senior government officials, yet some quarters want us to believe the elections were peaceful.

Seven people were, according to the Kgalema Motlanthe Commission, gunned down by soldiers in the full glare of an international media fraternity that had come to witness our elections on 1 August 2018, two days after the end of polling, and before election results were officially announced, yet some revisionists also want us to believe this election was peaceful.

Scores of our supporters were beaten, intimidated and their houses torched in politically motivated attacks, yet some people want to force us to believe these elections were peaceful. We conducted very difficult campaigns with some of our teams resorting to putting campaign posters in trees because organised Zanu-PF militias took down every campaign posters that our campaign teams put on areas easily accessible to these militias.

Some of our candidates, for instance Sarah Mahoka in Hurungwe East, had her two campaign motorcycles stolen by Zanu-PF thugs and dumped at a police station and it took her weeks to recover the bikes rendering irreparable damage to her campaign and morale of her campaign team. More than 60ha of her maize crop was set ablaze during the campaign period as a way to decimate every avenue that could give her money to boost her campaign.

I think most other opposition political parties have their stories to tell which buttress my argument that the 2018 election was far from peaceful and therefore not fair or credible. It is our considered submission that a military state cannot, by definition, hold free fair and credible elections.

Indeed, whereas a regime that comes to power through the elective process of a constitutional democracy has an obligation to uphold the rules and values of that process, a regime that comes to power by military force necessarily relies on that force to remain in power. Put differently, a regime that comes to power through military force has no incentive or reason to entertain democratic processes that can cost it the power it got through military force.

To believe the opposite could happen is to wallow in dangerous optimism. It is not surprising that Zanu-PF officials gloated about **“Mnangagwa shooting to stay in power”**. **We therefore need to critically look at security sector reform and how the 9th parliament can help us in restructuring this key sector. There are several suggestions that we believe could be enlisted, but I believe we can discuss these.** Although the electoral environment was a poisoned chalice, it was not the only aspect that was inimical to the holding of credible elections. Let me point to a few things that are administrative that we found amiss in the past election.

Administrative issues that tainted the election

(i) Voter Register

You will reckon that I pointed out the sterling work that ZEC did to come up with a new voter register. This, however, does not mean it was all plain sailing for the EMB. After doing everything splendidly to come up with a register under a tight schedule, ZEC became overly secretive with the outcome of the voter registration exercise often hiding behind independence of the commission ending up being very dodgy and abrasive against stakeholders. In the end, there was a variance between the voter register handed to candidates and the one used on Election Day.

There are many people who registered to vote but did not vote on Election Day because their names did not appear on the election register. Our investigations revealed that there are some people who registered to vote but their national identification cards could not be read by ZEC's MOD3 system, a system that detects genuine ID numbers and ZEC did not communicate with these affected people before the election to raise issues around the incompatibility of their IDs with its own MOD3, leading to about 90 000 people appearing on what ZEC technically called an exclusion list which it used to disenfranchise the more than 90 000. Despite the list being given to each polling station, political parties, at least my political party, were never alerted of this list and therefore did not include it in our voter education during campaigns. Furthermore, the Electoral Act does not provide for something called an exclusion list and one wonders which law mandated ZEC to come up with that list. It also boggles the mind why ZEC did not make initiatives to contact the affected people to rectify the anomaly before the election rather than coming up with a list that is not provided for in the law.

It might be interesting for students of electoral politics to analyse the distribution of the people on the exclusion list in terms of their gender, demographic groups, geography of their constituencies to ascertain how many of those were in the urban areas or rural areas since such factors have a bearing on the voting patterns of our people since the turn of the millennium. It will be interesting as well, to note how many of those that were on the exclusion list attempted to vote, how many voted and what number was turned away. In an election where the winner avoided a run off by about 30 000 votes, it is quite reasonable to want to know whether the 90 000 disenfranchised through the exclusion could have influenced the outcome in one way or the other. Going forward ZEC needs to be empowered to

(ii) Results Management

The management of the results left a lot to be desired and the announcement of the presidential election result province by province made some people suspect something untoward was taking place behind the scenes. With results of the presidential, parliamentary and ward elections being posted on every polling station, why weren't the presidential election figures for each constituency announced at the time the results for each parliamentary candidate was being announced? The delay in the announcement of the presidential election result at constituency level fed into allegations that some party agents were being hunted to sign cooked up V11 forms. Whether this was true or false, certainly the failure to announce the presidential election results constituency by constituency fed into these rumours and did not help to cool the tempers that were already flaring over suspicions of electoral manipulations.

(iii) Electoral justice

There are issues that we believe the law should be changed in order to address. As the law stands today, only a contestant in the election can contest the result. It is our considered submission that voters should be given the room to contest an election result since by voting, they have a stake in the electoral outcome. We also noted the late gazetting, by the Chief justice, of the fees that one had to pay to challenge an electoral outcome and we wonder why the fees were only gazetted after the election. It was also our concern that even after the fees were gazetted, the fact that an MP had to fork out \$2000 to challenge the electoral outcome when he/she paid just \$50 to participate defied logic. As a journalist, I cannot end this presentation without mentioning the media.

(iv) Media Access

Section 160 of the Electoral Act, particularly section 160K give ZEC the powers to monitor “ the Zimbabwe News Media during any election period to ensure that political parties, candidates, broadcasters, print publishers and journalists observe the provisions of the seven subsections of section 160 of the Electoral Act which deal with “Media Coverage of Elections”. During the entire electoral period, ZEC did not comment on the unequal access that was given to political parties by public media.

Although a Media Monitoring Committee chaired by Commissioner Joyce Kazembe was set up, God knows what it did as nothing changed from the old. ZBC *Newshour* went on for more than 1hr 35 minutes per bulletin and all they did was talking about Mnangagwa and Zanu-PF with occasional comic relief from campaign gimmicks by the Brian Mtekis of the 2018 elections. There was also a customary two-minute ritual castigation of MDC’s Nelson Chamisa for one thing or the other.

Journalists fell victim to the coup, like many key palyers in the election process, and were instructed, during the coup, by the CDF, now VP, Chiwenga, that they should report “responsibly”. As a journalist myself, I know what it means, especially coming from a guy who had just toppled one of the few remaining strongmen in Africa. Reporting on the activities of the junta, playing a counter narrative from the PR the junta was paying British media and PR firms was a dice with death. In journalism we are taught that no story worth to die for and most journalists chose to be alive and tell their story some other day.

Conclusion

I want to end by saying that, we don’t raise all these issues because we want to be cynical or we want to embark on sustained demonization of our country and our electoral processes. We do so because we believe we can be better and can move towards a common agenda if we tackle our problems after correctly identifying them.

As a party, we have always said the elephant in the room, as far as our elections and governance are concerned is the military factor in our politics. Until we gather courage to tell it is at it plays out, we can gather here and waste resources without doing anything to change our electoral politics. Those who are here that are in parliament, I know we are represented in the 9th parliament but with just one member, we have a duty to raise these issues and where possible, enact laws to deter a repeat of these things in upcoming electoral contests. We can also mobile ourselves, politically, to challenge the use of the army by one political party in elections.

I also believe those in the civil society, in diplomatic missions, in bodies such as the AU, SADC and the UN, you have a job to help us move out of the bane of military rule that we are reeling under. I know many might not be comfortable with my message today, I understand your fear, but may that fear lead you to the realisation that the palpitations and discomfort you are experiencing now are evidence something is wrong somewhere.

I would like to leave you with this profound saying by William Shakespeare from his play, Julius Caesar, which I believe might soothe your fear. Shakespeare says, "It seems to me strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come." Again let me remind you of profound words by the same author that "A coward dies a thousand times before his death, but the valiant taste of death but once." Fellow Zimbabweans, it is better to die once than go through the pain of death several times before one's inevitable demise.

I thank you.

God bless you, and God bless our Zimbabwe.