
ZIMBABWE ELECTION SUPPORT NETWORK



Report on the Debate on the Malawi Re-run in the COVID-19 Era

Advocacy Cluster WhatsApp Platform

Introduction

On the 16th April 2020, the Malawi High Court ruled that Presidential elections will go ahead on the 2nd of July, with the initial date set at 19 May 2020. This followed the contestation of the election of the current President of Malawi in 2019. In the May 2019 General Election, incumbent President Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was re-elected with 39% of the vote, defeating Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party and Saulos Chilima of the United Transformation Movement. However, these results were challenged in court by Chakwera and Chilima, citing evidence of gross irregularities. ZESN moderated Advocacy Cluster WhatsApp group debated the feasibility and implications of these elections in light of the COVID-19 pandemic on Friday 17th of April 2020. This discussion was the first discussion on the WhatsApp platform and was more of an “ice breaker” to the subsequent Electoral Reforms discussions on Zimbabwe.

There was consensus during the discussion that the issue of elections and COVID-19 presents a complex situation, as elections are about enabling the realization of electoral accountability. Where elections are suspended or postponed, people are deprived of an opportunity to reject a leadership that they are not happy with based on its performance, for example, in respect of service delivery. The million-dollar question posed by one participant is, ***“Should democracy erode because of this pandemic?”*** is not an easy one to answer.

The arguments in support of the Elections

Some participants noted that South Korea recently held elections in the COVID-19 era and so far there has not been any evidence of upward changes in the rates or incidences of infection. Some of the precautionary measures taken in South Korea to prevent spreading of the virus during the exercise included turning away all voters without face masks, taking of voters’ temperature, giving voters disposable gloves, offering hand sanitizers on the way in and way out of the polling stations, and separating voters with a fever from the rest.

The question posed by some group members was if Malawi has the resources to take some precautionary measures and if that would work in their context. Some suggested that the international community come in to assist with resources to enable this exercise to take place.

However, a counterargument to this was that some countries do not accept foreign aid for elections for fear of eroding their sovereignty. It was also noted that in this era of COVID-19, where most countries and organizations are transferring resources from other projects towards the fight against COVID-19, that kind of assistance is highly unlikely to come.

The argument against holding elections in Malawi at the set date

Many of the group members were of the thinking that the decision by the Malawi High Court shows the Judiciary lack an understanding of how COVID-19 may paralyze the country. They explained that the decision seems to have been made without adequate technical support or evidence from scientific research on the modelling of how the infection can increase in the next few months. Elections involve many people to people interactions that is door to door passing of electoral materials which can be an engine for spreading the virus. It was agreed that allowing an election to proceed in the face of COVID-19 would be exposing voters, observers, party agents, supporters during campaigns, polling officers and election officials/personnel to the pandemic. Maintaining social distancing, the giving out of ballot papers, sharing pens, marking of voters with indelible ink are all actions that will pose a risk to some of the aforementioned people.

If elections are to take place within this time period, it may also result in low turnout, which will pose the challenge of whether the person to be elected has a mandate from the people or not.

Another concern was that this decision may put the whole region at risk, for example, through movements via undesignated borders. It was also noted that if Malawi is basing this decision on the “low” rate of cases, it may be that the investment being made into testing is also low, thus not a true reflection of what is on the ground. Yet another concern would be whether there will be adequate time to plan for the elections after the nationwide lockdown.

Conclusion and resolutions

The popular resolution reached was that the best move would be to suspend or postpone the re-run in Malawi. This is to be done in order to strike a balance between electoral rights and the right to life itself. Others were of the opinion that whatever decision is reached, there is need for wide consultations with the Malawians themselves on how to move forward. Some also noted that if voting has to continue, then there should be strict enforcement of ensuring social distancing, availability of protective masks, 60% or above alcohol based sanitizers, among other precautionary measures.