

Zim decides

HARARE—With the watershed election period still underway, Zimbabweans remain vigilant in maintaining peace.

Results are beginning to trickle in and, inevitably, tensions build up between winning and losing parties.

The voice of reason should prevail so that, for once, Zimbabwe moves into a peaceful post election period.

Elections are not new to Zimbabwe. So is the common denominator. Violence, intimidation, arrests and disputed results have been part of Zimbabwe's election process since Independence in 1980.

It has not been too different in the build up to this year's election.

While, in general, the lead-up to the 2013 elections has been characterised by lower levels of overt violence than the period preceding the March 2008 election and the period before the June 2008 presidential election run-off, there was a deliberate ploy to silence Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and political activists.

There were continued incidences of intimidation and politically-motivated violence, particularly in rural and remote constituencies, and high density and peri-urban areas.

Traditional leaders and political party youths allowed themselves to be used by powerful politicians with means for their personal and party-political agendas of power retention, leading to inter-party violence and rights violations. So too, cases of intra-party violence and rights violations have regrettably been documented across the political divide.

What has been of more concern in the pre-election period is the nuanced, strategic and malevolently intentional targeting of political activists and HRDs in efforts to undermine and disrupt their activities. As such, ZLHR has recorded increased instances in which mobilisers, educators, human rights monitors and those providing critical legal and psychosocial support services have been intentionally sought out for intimidation, harassment and attack.

Key political mobilisers have been, and continue to be, subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention and drawn-out trials in efforts to remove them from their constituencies at critical times in the run-up to elections. Civil society organisations (CSOs) – the watchdogs of society – have faced raids under the cover of search warrants of questionable legality; confiscation of documentation; unjustified threats and intimidation by senior law enforcement

agents; criminalisation of their lawful activities; selective application of repressive and unreformed laws; malicious prosecutions; and abuse through politicised institutions.

Intolerance and the resort to violence have unfortunately become part of the fabric of our society and there is need for continued efforts to be made to encourage conflict-prevention and resolution initiatives wherever it has manifested.

And it is not too late for Zimbabwe to turn the corner. We just have to look at our past and realise we cannot afford any more scars.

The wounds from previous elections are all still too fresh.

The last election was in 2008 and the violence associated with that disputed poll are still haunting thousands, if not millions, of Zimbabweans.

Violence was sweeping across the country with Zimbabwe resembling a war zone – only that there was no war.

Political parties, civil society reported that what was supposed to be a routine election resulted in killings, disappearances, rape and looting.

Victims of that era are still in pain and they fear the worst if this year's election is not managed properly.

Zimbabwe's ill-functioning hospitals were packed across the country with villagers severely assaulted during and after the sham June 27 2008 presidential election runoff. Thousands others fled their homes and became refugees in their own countries after their houses were burnt down.

Still, they were the lucky ones.

Hundreds of lives were lost in the political violence.

Sadly, it is not just the 2008 experience which informs of the need to change course in the way we conduct ourselves in times of political differences.

Since Independence, Zimbabwe has experienced repeated episodes of violence, at times perpetrated or sponsored by the State.

Barely a year into Independence, Zimbabwe's new government had already engaged North Korean military instructors to sharpen a brutal brigade which was later to unleash terror in Matabeleland region.

From 1983 to 1987, the Fifth Brigade is reported to have killed over 20 000 civilians, including pregnant women and children, whose bodies were dumped in shallow graves,

according to the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace.

Even those too young or not yet born to witness or survive Gukurahundi have their own scars.

In farms, close to a million black farm workers were forced to live on the mountains, sharing food and water with wild animals – thanks to a land reform programme whose violent nature affected infants and the elderly alike in the farm worker community.

Hundreds are still homeless. Others, like dozens from Mazowe being represented by Zimbabwe Lawyers from Human Rights, are still being forced out of homes they have known for decades by new farm owners.

Farm workers are not the only ones nursing the scars of being rendered homeless.

At settlements such as Hopley Farm just outside Harare, dozens of families still bear the brunt of Operation Murambatsvina (Drive out the filth). In Mutare, other families are so desperate they are living in a disused council beer hall, and even then, they needed legal help from ZLHR to continue residing in the beer hall after attempts to evict them.

This is what UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, who conducted an investigation into the operation, described it in her report: "Popularly referred to as Operation Tsunami because of its speed and ferocity it resulted in the destruction of homes, business premises and vending sites. It is estimated that some 700,000 people in cities across the country have lost either their homes, their source of livelihood or both."

"Indirectly, a further 2.4million people have been affected in varying degrees. Hundreds of thousands of women, men and children were made homeless, without access to food, water and sanitation, or health care. Education for thousands of school age children has been disrupted."

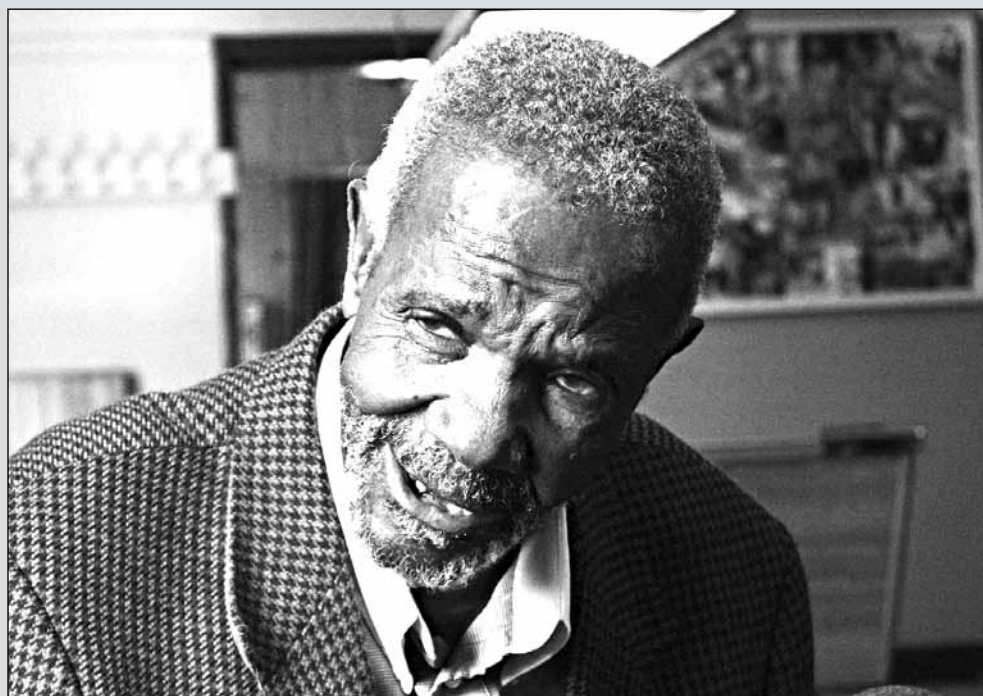
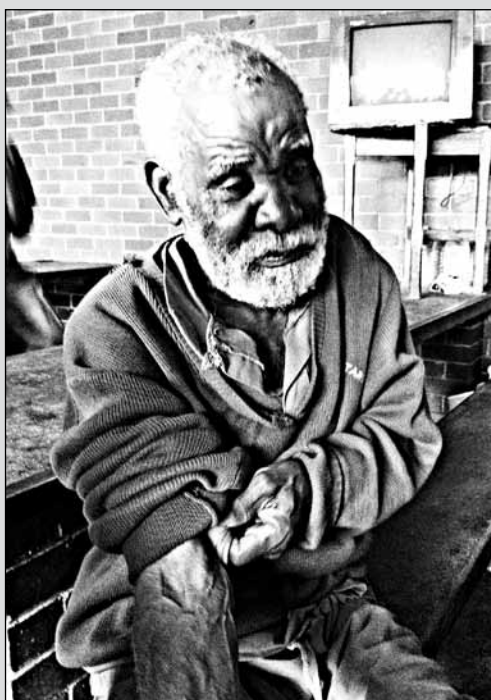
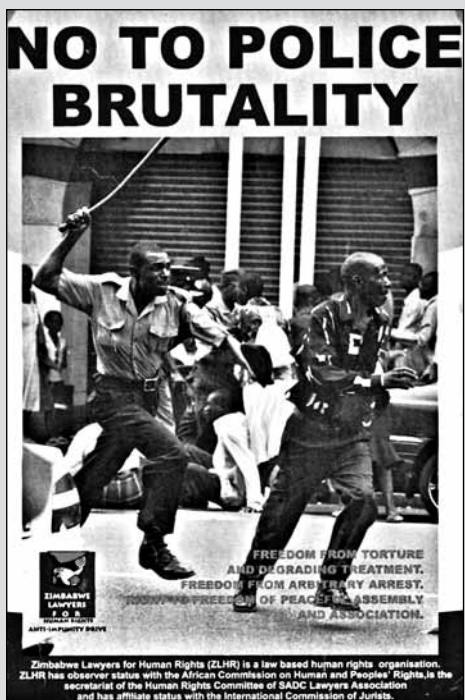
"Many of the sick, including those with HIV and AIDS, no longer have access to care. The vast majority of those directly and indirectly affected are the poor and disadvantaged segments of the population. They are, today, deeper in poverty, deprivation and destitution, and have been rendered more vulnerable."

Zimbabweans and the authorities have the chance to break from such a unhappy past and move into the future with hope and unity of purpose.

Peace, always.



Sorry state



Eyes wide shut

...AU observer mission “blindly” walks into storm

HARARE-Their mandate is to arrive with a hawk's eye but some of the missions observing today's watershed elections seem blind folded – at least according to contestants, civil society and developments witnessed so far.

And it is not the Mickey Mouse observer missions which are at the centre of controversy.

It is none other than the continental body, the African Union, which has walked into a storm, with no less than its Commission chairperson Dr.

Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma being described just short of being a “liar” by leading presidential candidate, MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

This was after Dr Dlamini-Zuma declared to journalists last Friday that none of the principals in Zimbabwe's coalition government had expressed rigging concerns to her.

Just before her, AU Long-Term Observer Mission's representative, AU Commissioner for political affairs Dr. Aisha Abudullahi, had given the Zimbabwe election preparations the nod.

Civil society and political players say such an endorsement undermined the serious concerns they have consistently raised without any action being taken to improve the conditions.

These include a chaotic voter registration exercise which resulted in thousands failing to register hence were disenfranchised, the chaotic nature of the special vote by uniformed forces and electoral officials which saw tens of thousands failing to vote because of ballot paper shortages, partisan public media and security sector commanders and intimidation.

The Abel Chikomo Human Rights NGO-led Forum said the view taken by the observer missions lacked seriousness.

“Statements from both SADC and the AU almost amount to a public certification that conditions in Zimbabwe are conducive for a credible election. They seem to be paying a lip service the voters' roll issue or ignoring it altogether. The integrity of an observer mission to a large extent depends on the liberty of the observers to critic, question, and if need be, arrive at different conclusions from others in their interpretation of the obtaining facts prior, during and soon after

the elections,” said the Forum in a statement, noting the opaque nature of the handling of the voters' roll was most worrisome. “It is inconceivable to see how the observers will rise above the official statements and views of the institutions that sent them.”

According to the Forum - members are spread across the country and range from churches, lawyers, students and community groups - without a credible, transparent and accessible voters' roll that is open to challenge, the whole election

before the election is conducted - that is a grossly unreasonable period of time left to study and use the voters roll.

“Voters rolls are meant to be used by political parties the world over to analyse who is in particular constituencies so that they can be spoken to and encouraged to vote. That opportunity is now denied us. Furthermore in the Zimbabwean context where rigging has abounded in the past it is critically important that parties be given sufficient time to analyse and audit the voters roll.

For example, in a bulletin just a week before today's vote, Heal Zimbabwe Trust reported that in Gokwe's Ward 19, an identified ZANU-PF official was removing MDC-T posters. He threatened community members telling them that if he sees any MDC-T poster he and his team will beat up all MDC-T supporters living around the area. In Nembudziya's Ward 23, an identified ex-soldier was threatening villagers that they will lose their lives on 1 August if ZANU-PF does not win the elections.

In the same area, ZANU-PF supporters have set up a political ‘base’ camp next to a polling station. Heal Zimbabwe reported that soldiers were overseeing a government food distribution programme, telling them that all those who support MDC-T risk losing their land and property if they do not join ZANU-PF.

In Gokwe North, at Mavanga Secondary School, a group of ZANU PF supporters were threatening and intimidating students.

“They are telling them that they should never wear MDC-T regalia at home or inside their uniforms because doing so will result in their expulsion from school,” reported Heal Zimbabwe Trust.

A similar situation is prevailing in area such as Guruve, Mt Darwin, Shamva Nyanga, Chipinge, Mt Darwin North and Gutu, according to civic groups who have deployed their members across the country.

Human rights advocates such as Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) have said observers needed to spend more time in the country to produce credible reports.

“Obviously with organisations that have been working on elections for a long time, we make sure that the evidence we have or the information that we have is verified before it goes out so that it is reliable,” said ZLHR Executive Director Irene Petras.

“So I think as long as there's engagement, interaction, information is shared with those observation missions, then I remain hopeful that they understand the seriousness of this election as any election really is and that we'll see a positive outcome just from having the observers on the ground.”



Abel Chikomo



African Union Commission Chairperson, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma

Source: <http://cpau.ac.int/>

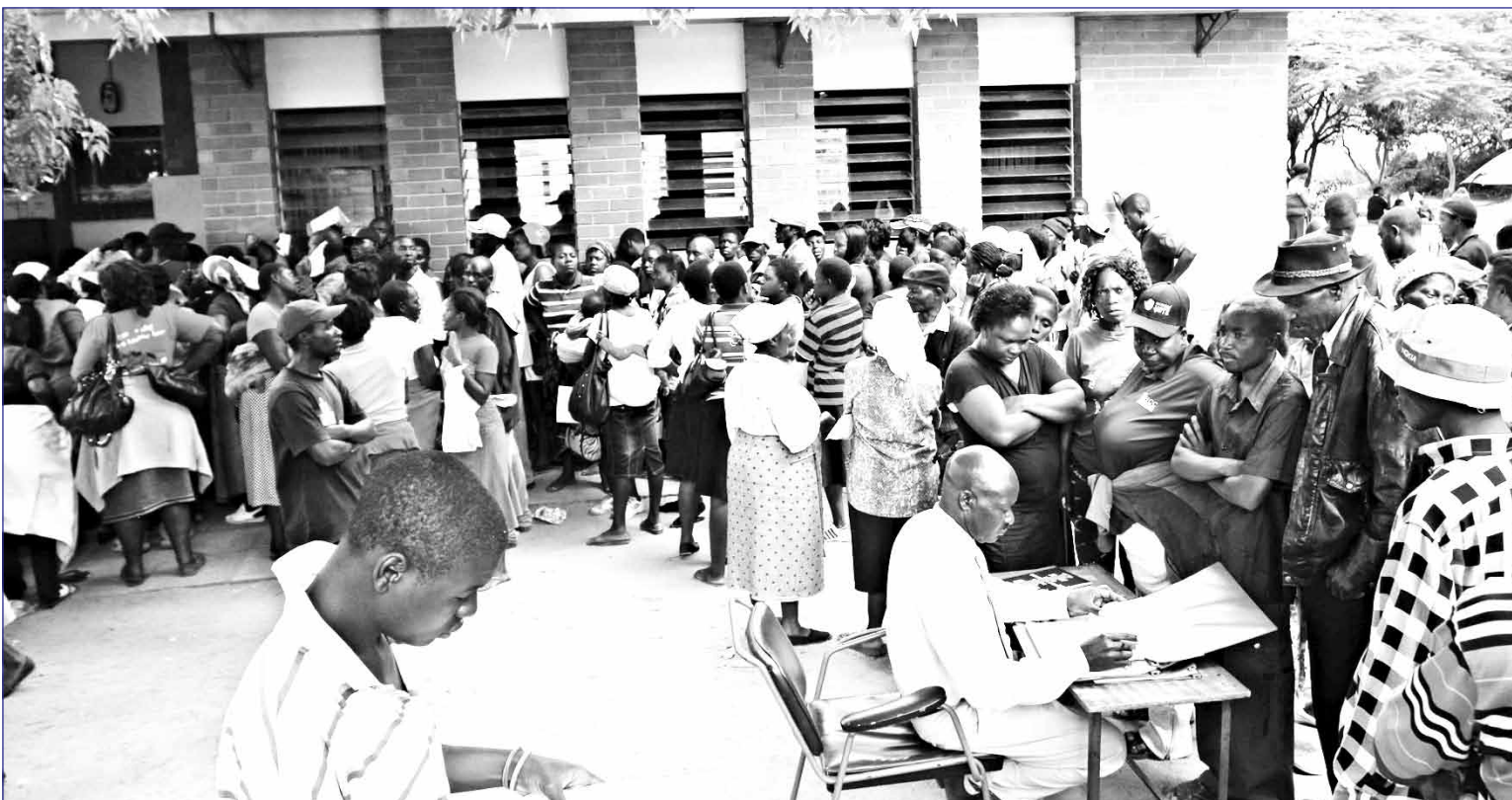
exercise amounts to “much ado about nothing” and a cosmetic exercise in futility.

The Forum noted that, just a few days before the election, political parties have not been furnished with the final copy of the voters' roll.

“A ‘reasonable period of time after the calling of an election’ means just that. The election was called on the 13th June and 6 weeks have since elapsed - and yet we still do not have a copy of the voters roll. 6 weeks to supply a voters' roll is not a reasonable period of time. Worse than that is the 5 days left

“That right has now been denied us. No satisfactory explanation has been given by the ZEC for their failure to comply with the law and to that extent its credibility as an organisation has been severely tarnished by this very serious breach of the law,” stated the Forum.

At a time when the observer missions are speaking of a peaceful, conducive environment, local groups with observers on the ground are reporting cases of intimidation and actual violence in province such as Mashonaland East and Mashonaland Central.



Left in the cold... Thousands of Zimbabweans failed to register to vote and AU is silent about it

ZEC confirms its mediocrity?

HARARE-Members of the security forces who genuinely failed to cast their vote in a chaotic early voting conducted by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) today join the rest of the country in deciding the future of Zimbabwe.

That is after the Constitutional Court on Friday gave the green light to an application filed by ZEC.

ZEC is constitutionally mandated to run all polls in the country. But the two-day special voting process left many Zimbabweans wondering if the Commission had the capacity to handle today's elections.

'Am sure those who had not voted will be happy. The fear is however that this window may facilitate illicit ballots and how that will impact on the fulfilment of duties by the affected people'

According to ZEC, about 26 000 security officers failed to cast their vote during the July 14 and 15 special voting period. The chaotic voting stretched into a third day, one more than permitted by the constitution.

That prompted Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change to say it has lost faith in the election commission.

The MDC said the number of security forces of about 70 000 voting early was inflated to rig the count for President Robert Mugabe's Zanu PF.

Commenting on the ConCourt's ruling, outspoken activist Hopewell Xwayani Gumbo said the decision must not be viewed negatively: "Am sure those who had not voted will be happy. The fear is however that this window may facilitate illicit ballots and how that will impact on the fulfilment of duties by the affected people."



Rita Makarau

The High Court dismissed an application the MDC filed seeking the nullification of the early vote.

ZEC maintained that it had nothing illegal as it depended on figures State security agents had forwarded to it.

After ZEC got its relief from the ConCourt last Friday, allowing those security agents it had failed to ensure they vote early, many Zimbabweans were left wondering why the Commission did not do the same when it failed to register some citizens who wanted to participate in the July 31 election.

"Just wondering why ZEC and the ConCourt were not keen to respect right to VOTE when thousands were disenfranchised, through registration bottle necks," wrote McDonald Lewanika on the social media network drawing debate from fellow Zimbabweans.



Hopewell Gumbo

Not to be outdone was Sydney Chisi who joined the debate saying: "How about those who failed to register to vote? Are they less important or lesser Zimbabweans?"

Whichever way, the voting goes today, the credibility of ZEC remains questionable; Why could it not manage less than 70 000 security officers to vote for two days?

Those who managed to vote had to endure the chaos that was associated with the voting. Polling centres turned rioters.

ZEC said it had printed ballot papers late hence the chaos. Yet when the election date was announced, ZEC announced that it was "ready to roll."

The real test of ZEC's readiness to "roll" on 14 and 15 July. It is now history on what the jury concluded on the readiness and capacity of ZEC to run the country's election.

ZEC later said the special voting timetable was tight, hence the chaos.

ZEC chairperson Justice Rita Makarau issued a statement attributing the chaos to unforeseen logistical "challenges."

But the damage had already been done; ZEC has created a breeding ground for a contested election.

Coming from a contested election right into another? Only time shall tell. ZEC went to court to confirm that it had failed.



Members of the police force scrambling to vote...