

## **Warning of "Logistical Nightmare" on Election Day**

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With four ballots taking place simultaneously, completing the March elections in a single day while ensuring everyone gets a chance to vote may be well-nigh impossible.

When Zimbabweans go to the polls on March 29, they will be presented with not one but four ballot papers, adding a possible element of chaos to an already fraught political event.

As well as deciding whether President Robert Mugabe should finally retire or stay on for a further term, voters will choose members of both houses of parliament, plus local councillors.

The country's election commission says the four ballot papers will be printed in different colours to make the process easier, but analysts fear the sheer volume of activity taking place at polling stations within the space of one day could prove logistically impossible.

After much agitation by the opposition, the Zimbabwean authorities introduced the one-day rule for national ballots in 2004, in an attempt to align electoral laws with those of other countries in the region. The reform followed electoral guidelines produced by the Southern African Development Community, SADC.

Before that, Zimbabwe had held elections over two or even three days. In one case, for example, a ballot ran into a third day after the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, complained of a shortage of polling stations in urban constituencies which meant many people were being denied the right to vote.

The one-day rule recommended by the SADC was designed to reduce the scope for tampering with ballot boxes and the count, - the argument being that malpractice is easier if voting takes place over a protracted period.

The one-day system was used for the first time in Zimbabwe in the March 2005 parliamentary election, won by the ruling ZANU-PF.

The election of March 2008, however, will be the first of its kind, synchronising presidential, parliamentary (House of Assembly and Senate) and local government polls. Because voters will take longer to cast their multiple ballots, the polling stations could rapidly become congested if turnout is high, and one day might simply not be long enough.

A political analyst in Harare told IWPR that the practical problems of conducting multiple ballots had been overlooked when the one-day system was introduced.

"It is now clear nobody had foreseen a situation where a single voter would be required to vote for four candidates at one time. It simply means in the event of a huge voter turnout, most potential voters will not vote," said the analyst, who did not want to be named.

"That will create problems which have the potential to turn awry as we have seen in Kenya - except that in

Zimbabwe it was the opposition which called for this change.”

This unease over the implications of completing the vote in one day was flagged up in a poll conducted last year by the Mass Public Opinion Institute, MPOI, whose head is Eldred Masunungure, a political science lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe.

The MPOI survey, conducted in urban and rural areas in April and May 2007, showed that 66 per cent of respondents nationally rejected the reform.

“The rejection was across the board - it cut across the traditional lines of polarisation,” according to the MPOI report’s executive summary. “In the rural areas, 64 per cent did not support the reform while 29 percent supported it. The rejection rate was even higher in the urban areas, where seven in ten (71 per cent) rejected it compared to the 25 per cent who endorsed the new procedure.”

Among young people, 65 per cent were against the change, and even more middle-aged voters - 73 per cent - rejected it. Support for one-day voting was highest among the least education population group, and lowest among those who had been to university or college.

The capital, Harare, showed the highest disapproval rate at 75 per cent, followed by the Midlands and Mashonaland West - two regions where opposition to Mugabe is strong. But interestingly, MPOI found that there was “no major difference on partisan lines”, with both ZANU-PF and MDC supporters in the 65 to 70 per cent range opposing the rule.

“In short, it appears the one-day voting innovation has no takers,” concluded the MPOI. “Those who administer elections (specifically the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission) may have to take a second look at this, especially given that the 2008 elections will be multiple elections.... Otherwise we foresee many potential voters being disenfranchised because of failure to vote when they want to.”

The MPOI said at the time that it was not too late for the electoral commission to review arrangements for the joint March 2008 polls in the interests of “common sense and fair play”.

But the political analyst interviewed by IWPR said it was now unlikely that the electoral commission would act to counter the risk of chaos on election day, unless ZANU-PF and/or MDC were to ring alarm bells about it.

That does not seem feasible, as both parties have been preoccupied with a confrontation over the timing of the vote itself. In a negotiating process mediated by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, aimed at ending the country’s political and economic crisis, the MDC has pressed for the elections to be postponed from the anticipated March date to later in the year, which would allow time for a new constitution to be introduced to ensure a free and fair vote. On January 25, however, President Robert Mugabe eliminated that possibility by setting a firm date of March 29.

According to the analyst, “In the event that there is no review, as the parties are still engaged in negotiations over a new constitution and a postponement of the poll, it might be necessary for the High Court to intervene again, as it did in 2005, to extend the voting period; that is, if there is an appeal against the practicality and unfairness of single-day voting,” he said.

“It’s evidently [going to be] a logistical nightmare.”

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

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