

Reflections on the 2008 Zimbabwe Elections

Patrick Rankhumise

Elections are at the core of democratic governance, especially where universal adult suffrage determines the political leadership of the country. If elections are this significant, it is imperative that the socio-economic and the political playing fields should not only be leveled for political parties, but, more importantly, should allow the voters to have confidence and guaranteed personal security during and after the elections.¹

Introduction

Elections can be used to bring about positive changes to the political landscape on any given country or organization, as the above quote illustrates. The actualization of the election positivism mainly rest on the positive conduct of both the electorate and the contesting parties, especially with regard to the commitment to consolidate and advance the principles of accountability, good citizenry and democracy. On the other hand, there is a tendency for the electorate to fall victim to election candidates and parties which harbour counter-democratic ideals, and are characterized by selfish interests. It could thus be posited that elections could thus be used as a vehicle for political gain and/or pain for the general population with effects extending to neighbouring countries and the rest of the world.

Zimbabwe, formerly southern Rhodesia, attained freedom in 1980 following the signing of the Lancaster Agreement in 1979. From then – at least until the late 1990s – Zimbabwe was hailed as “Africa’s bread basket” and a model for the

holding of regular elections – a model of African democracy. The country’s contribution in the demise of apartheid and the general economic and political integration of countries in the southern African region remained glaring, and that earned the country and its leadership accolades both from within and outside the continent.

The economic recession of the late 1990s and the resultant political tension thus served to undermine the positive economic, political and international image of Zimbabwe. By the time of writing this policy brief, inflation in Zimbabwe was standing above 1000 %, which is the worst and highest in the world. It coupled with continued decline human rights, and further emanated in the rise of serious opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and independent candidates that contested during recent elections.

The holding of elections in Zimbabwe – including the 2008 elections – remained of interest to policy-makers, politicians, scholars and other professionals in and outside Africa. It was premised on the on-going economic recession, the

From then – at least until the late 1990s – Zimbabwe was hailed as “Africa’s bread basket” and a model for the holding of regular elections – a model of African democracy

Patrick Rankhumise is a Research Specialist at the Africa Institute of South Africa.

South Africa's intervention was premised on what has come to be known as 'quiet diplomacy' often held behind close doors, making it difficult for external actors to come up with comprehensive conclusions about the effectiveness or a lack thereof in the SADC mediation in the Zimbabwean crisis

alleged occurrence of human rights violations, and unstable political environment.

This analysis seeks to explore how the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe remained central in addressing and/or worsening the persisting political and economic landscape in Zimbabwe and its impact on regional peace and security in southern Africa and the rest of the continent. That will be done in the context of continued tensions over political transition in Zimbabwe, especially in the aftermath of the 2002 and the 2008 elections. The controversies around the 2008 elections will be used to illustrate how the political governance and possible political transition in Zimbabwe had been converted to a matter of life and death for both the ruling party and the opposition and how that drew the attention of the international community.

Methodology

This study is based on both secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources were mainly used to provide brief background on the historicity of human security and political governance in Zimbabwe prior to the 2008 elections. Primary sources which included newspaper articles, media commentaries and official documentations and speeches from various stakeholders in the Zimbabwean elections, were used to highlight varying perspectives and insights on state of the discourse on the subject. In addition, the author conducted interviews with various individuals who had firsthand experience with some of the events around the 2008 elections.

Immediate history on elections in Zimbabwe

The post-colonial presidential elections in Zimbabwe have received sufficient academic attention. The scholarship on the subject, however, became divided with one faction demonstrating how the post-colonial state managed to use the electoral process to advance the broad objective of the liberation movement – that is ensuring that the native communities are the rightful beneficiaries of the post-colonial government's policies and governance agenda.

On the opposing side there existed a paradigm that perceived the electoral process as a tool used for selective group and individual socio-economic and political gratification. In line with this logic the electoral process in Zimbabwe became viewed as coined to benefit the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), much

to the disadvantage of opposition parties. Most notably, the outcome of the elections in Zimbabwe, at least since the rise of serious opposition, were received with mixed feelings with most African observer missions, including the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) declaring the outcome as credible much to the contrary conclusion by observer missions from outside the continent, including the European Union (EU).

The emergent political mood after the 2002 elections was characterized by a fierce rivalry between ZANU-PF and the MDC. It caught the attention of international stakeholders from both within and outside the continent – including the United Nations (UN), EU, AU, COMESA and the SADC. The SADC appointed Thabo Mbeki, president of South Africa, to serve as its mediator in the ensued political *impasse* in Zimbabwe. South Africa's intervention was premised on what has come to be known as 'quiet diplomacy' often held behind closed doors, making it difficult for external actors to come up with comprehensive conclusions about the effectiveness or a lack thereof in the SADC mediation in the Zimbabwean crisis.

The SADC appointment of South Africa as its mediator emerged in the context of the sub-regional organization's principles of recognizing and respecting the autonomy of member states. According to the SADC Treaty, such principles entail the following:

- Sovereign equality of all member states
- Solidarity, peace and security
- Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law
- Peaceful settlement of disputes.²

The upholding of the above principles is grounded in the SADC adherence to the constitutional and legal framework which emphasizes:

- The guarantee of fundamental freedoms and human rights
- The promotion of good governance and the values of political stability
- The provision for mechanisms addressing conflicts management during the electoral process
- The adoption of legal intervention in addressing electoral disputes.³

South Africa continued to assert that there was substantial progress with its mediation while the human security of the ordinary citizens remained unstable. The current political conflict sometimes resulted in arrests, intimidations and restricted freedom of expression. External forces, especially from the west, perceived the continued economic

and human insecurity as a reflection of the oppressive nature of the ZANU-PF regime, and thus called for democratic reforms. SADC emphasized its role as ensuring sustainability in the holding of regular and peaceful elections that provide space for the recognition of the peoples' will.⁴ South Africa's mediation was further endorsed during the SADC Extra Ordinary Meeting of the Heads of State held in Lusaka, Zambia.

The MDC, supported by civil society and human rights organization from both within and outside Zimbabwe, saw the SADC mediation as a failure. They allege that SADC failed to put necessary pressure for the results to be released and facilitated what it called 'transition from the oppressive regime to a political order based on the principles of democracy and peoples' will.' This faction perceived South Africa as unable to use its regional hegemonic position to pressurize for positive political development in Zimbabwe. To this end South Africa's efforts were deemed as insufficient in both her role as a country and as the SADC mediator in the crisis.

The 2008 Elections

The MDC participated in the 2008 elections. However, it still alleged fraud over its loss in the previous elections, but remained confident about victory. Furthermore, the international community urged the ZANU-PF government and other contesting parties to refrain from activities that could negate the credibility of the electoral process. That was further emphasized by the South Africa-led SADC mediation, which held a series of closed meetings with the contesting parties with the aim of getting assurance that parties will create enabling environment for free and fair elections. It also formed part of the SADC strategy, in an effort to ensure that the Zimbabwe elections dovetail with its principles of forging solidarity, peace and security; promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law; and peaceful resolution of disputes.⁵ According to Eric Bost, the US Ambassador to South Africa, the mediation efforts, however:

were often viewed as 'technical agreements on legislative changes,' which, while small steps in the right direction, are piecemeal and have not yielded tangible results.⁶

In an interesting development, Simba Makoni, a former member of ZANU-PF, contested as an independent candidate for presidency. Many commentators viewed this move as a sign of growing disillusion with President Mugabe's

leadership within the ZANU-PF. This claim was however refuted by the ZANU-PF which argued that Makoni is an opportunist. The ruling party boldly declared it would win the elections amid the growing support for MDC and Makoni's potential to sway some of the party supporters to his side. Moshoeshoe Monare, a journalist for a South African-based newspaper, warned:

ZANU-PF, controversially at times has won all past general and presidential elections. Its violent track record is unnerving political observers ... [Mugabe, on the other hand was poised] not to tolerate anarchy.⁷

The other contesting party was the MDC faction, led by Arthur Muntabara.

The elections were held on the 29 March 2008 amid concerns over possible manipulation of the electoral process by the ruling party, especially from the opposition party and most of the western governments and media.⁸ On 1 April 2008 the local government, cabinet and parliamentary results were made public. It became clear that the MDC was attaining substantial number of seats as compared to its performance in the previous elections. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) announced that the Tsvangarai MDC had won the majority of the parliamentary seats. The announcement was later challenged by the ruling party which called for the recounting of votes. The recount further confirmed that the Tsvangarai-MDC had won the majority votes. Interestingly, both factions of the MDC agreed to reunite thus giving the MDC an outright majority in parliament. The results for the national assembly polls on the other hand 'showed a neck-to-neck performance between the MDC and ZANU-PF.'⁹

Delayed Presidential Polls

The MDC performance in the elections shocked the ruling party as for the first time in its history the ZANU-PF received stiff challenge. Motivated by its success in the local, cabinet and parliamentary elections, the MDC went on to announce that it had won the presidential elections by 50.3% and as such there should be a peaceful hand over of power from the ZANU-PF to the MDC.¹⁰ The announcement was made prior to official announcement of the results by the ZEC. The MDC made the announcement despite the ZANU-PF pronouncement that 'premature victory claims amount to an attempted coup.' The implication was that the MDC announcement could be treated as a coup

The MDC performance in the elections shocked the ruling party as for the first time in its history the ZANU-PF received stiff challenge

According to most commentaries, the continued presence of Mugabe in the presidential race is a major stumbling block to any move to create political and economic stability in Zimbabwe, and as a result he should be advised to retire from politics

plot thus those found responsible for making the announcement could be imprisoned.

However, no arrests were made except for some international journalists who were seen as hostile to the *status quo*. On 4 April 2008, the ZANU-PF called an urgent Politburo meeting. They decided that the president will be the ZANU-PF candidate when the country will be conducting the re-election, commonly known as run-off for presidency. The ZANU-PF talked about a run-off assuming that none of the two leading presidential candidates – Morgan Tsvangarai and Robert Mugabe – received 50 plus % to be declared the outright winner. The ZANU-PF ideas of a re-run were controversial, considering that the ZEC had not yet made the outcome of the presidential elections public.

For more than a month, the ZEC remained quiet about what the election outcome was. That created fears that Zimbabweans may become impatient and resort to violence to pressurize for the announcement of the results. The MDC went on to unsuccessfully use the supreme court to speed up the announcement of the results. The MDC later threatened to embark on a mass stay away but decided to call that off.

Tsvangarai lobbied the international community including neighbouring countries, the SADC, the AU and the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, to pressurize ZEC to release the presidential results. These external actors, including the US and Britain, acknowledged that the delay in the release of results was a cause for concern but did not take any physical action to ensure that the results were released. At that stage Eleanor Sisulu, of the Zimbabwe Crisis Coalition (ZCC), argued that Zimbabwe's national sovereignty prevailed above the international responsibility to protect the Zimbabweans from the protracted suffering and human insecurity waged by the Mugabe regime.¹¹

On the other hand COMESA, an economic regional community to which Zimbabwe is affiliated, postponed its summit of Heads of State which was scheduled for Harare from the 1 – 15 May 2008. Zimbabwe was expected to take over the chairpersonship from Kenya at that summit. COMESA notified its members about the postponement and plans to announce a new date after the election crisis in Zimbabwe has been resolved. Again, COMESA like the AU and SADC could not use any pressure to fast track the announcement of the results, and that was seen as part of the 'disappointing' African soft approach to the Zimbabwean election impasse. They joined the international condemnation on the delay in the announcement of the presidential election results. Such international condemnation was attested by the US Assistant Secretary of State,

Jendayi Frazer, who during his visit in South Africa on the 24 April 2008, lamented:

We join with South Africa as well as with the SADC [and] the African Union in calling on the ZEC to release the results. We have serious concern that even when the results are released there will be doubts about their credibility.¹²

Towards the Government of National (Dis)unity?

Neither the ruling ZANU-PF nor the opposition MDC showed willingness to accept defeat while all that happened, causing concerns about potential explosion of the situation into full-blown violence. The Zimbabweans and the rest of the world remained puzzled as to whether the outcome of the elections would bring about lasting peace and economic recovery.

The political impasse emerging out of the 2008 elections called for options to restore law and order and effective running of the state machinery. One of the options put forward was the creation of the unity government which, as earlier mentioned, was refuted by the ZANU-PF. The option was feasible considering the stand-off. The MDC appeared to consider such an option, but with the condition that Mugabe should step down as the president. According to most commentaries, the continued presence of Mugabe in the presidential race is a major stumbling block to any move to create political and economic stability in Zimbabwe, and as a result he should be advised to retire from politics.¹³

The MDC sent its high powered delegation to meet with Raila Odinga, whose party had allegedly been robbed by the ruling party during recent elections in Kenya, and following continued post-election violence both parties agreed to form the government of national unity.¹⁴ The prospect of a unified government remained among negotiation points as SADC and the international community started to exert pressure on both the MDC and ZANU-PF to find a peaceful solution to the 2008 election impasse.

Recommendations

The elections in Zimbabwe were expected to illustrate and defend the country's adherence to the use of elections as one of the tools to legitimize political leadership, and confirm the mandate needed for advancing the socio-economic development of the country. Instead, the 2008 elections

in Zimbabwe became a talking point on the contested political terrain, which often included international actors. Based on the delay in announcing the results and the continued polarized political relations, the brief submits that the responsibility of restoring democracy and socio-economic development in Zimbabwe lies in the hands of the Zimbabwean political parties, ZEC and other international organizations and actors. Therefore, the following recommendations are submitted:

- The challenge posed by the opposition party in recent elections showed that there is a need for the party to review its political strategies and its leadership style
- ZANU-PF should use the outcome of the elections to regroup and develop membership retention drive based on policies and programs intended to uplift the socio-economic wellbeing of all the Zimbabweans
- ZANU-PF should avoid using militarized politics as a tool to contain dissenting views
- ZANU-PF should use its gains from the elections to facilitate the emergence of competitive politics in Zimbabwe. The premise should be premised to address the socio-economic challenges facing ordinary Zimbabweans as compared to waging political challenge that could instigate violence and militarized politics
- The controversies surrounding the elections centered around the credibility of the electoral commission, and to this end there is a need to enact a clause that specifies the amount of time to be taken before the announcement of results
- The principle of the impartiality of the electoral commission should be practiced to the fullest
- The international community and other external parties to the Zimbabwe election process should wait for the official announcement of the elections before making any official statement about the outcome. The pre-announcement statement could be used as a trigger for violence by the contesting parties.

Conclusion

The 2008 elections in Zimbabwe served as a litmus test for the countries election credibility.

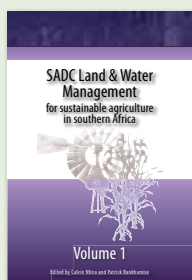
The elections illustrated challenges facing most African states, especially with regard to election management. In this case, failure to provide election results within reasonable time and reported cases of election irregularities by the electoral official made the credibility of the electoral commission questionable. This occurred hardly four months after a similar situation in Kenya.

The election illustrated the lack of coordinated effort by the international community in dealing with election challenges in Africa. Opposing views with regard to how the process was handled emerged and was highlighted in the context of opposing perspectives between the Africa and the western states and organizations. In some cases the elections reflected on an individual African state's contrasting views with regard to the electoral process and its envisaged outcomes.

Notes and references

- 1 Mutaure, M.M., 'Individual confidence and personal security in the 2005 Zimbabwean elections' in Muloongo, K. Kibasomba, R and Kariri, N. eds, (2005), *The Many Faces of Human Security: Case Studies from Seven Countries in Southern Africa*, Institute for Security Studies: Pretoria, p 103.
- 2 SADC Treaty(year, publisher?)
- 3 Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA), *Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation in the SADC Region*, pp.7-8.
- 4 *Ibid*, p.34.
- 5 SADC Treaty.
- 6 'Here's hoping for a free and fair poll', *Pretoria News*, 28 March 2008.
- 7 Monare, M., 'Fear still a factor in Zimbabwe elections', *Pretoria News*, 28 March 2008.
- 8 Monare, M. and Hlongwane, A., 'Bid to stop Mugabe rigging poll', *The Sunday Independent*, 30 March 2008.
- 9 Moshoeshe Monare, *Pretoria News*, 1 April 2008.
- 10 Sapa-AFP, 'We have won, MDC declares', *The Citizen*, 31 March 2008.
- 11 Elinor Sisulu, Interview in Morning Live South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), 25 April 2008.
- 12 Jendayi Frazer, Interview, SABC News, 24 April 2008.
- 13 Bishop Desmond Tutu, Interview, SABC News, 24 April 2008.
- 14 Adar, K. 'Leadership Crisis and the Debacle of Kenya's 27th December 2007 General Elections', *AISA Policy Brief*, No. 1, April 2008.

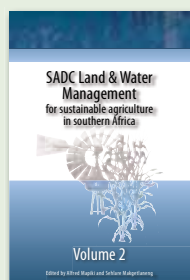
The elections illustrated challenges facing most African states, especially with regard to election management



**SADC Land & Water Management
for sustainable agriculture
in southern Africa
Volume 1**

Edited by Calvin Nhira and Patrick Rankhumise

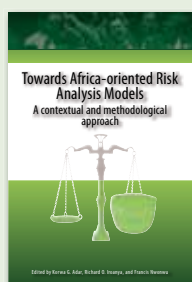
ISBN 978-0-7983-0214-2
Price R 120,00



**SADC Land & Water Management
for sustainable agriculture
in southern Africa
Volume 2**

Edited by Alfred Mapiki and Sehlare Makgetlaneng

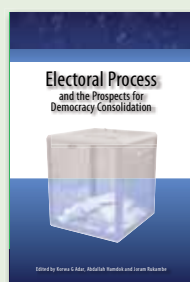
ISBN 978-0-7983-0215-9
Price R 120,00



**Towards Africa-oriented
Risk Analysis Models
A contextual and methodological approach**

Edited by Korwa G. Adar, Richard O. Iroanya,
and Francis Nwonwu

ISBN 978-0-7983-0213-5
Price R 120,00



**Electoral Process and the
Prospects for Democracy
Consolidation**

Edited by Korwa G Adar, Abdalla Hamdok
and Joram Rukambe

ISBN 978-0-7983-0210-4
Price R 120,00



**The State of Africa
Post-conflict Reconstruction
and Development**

Edited by Dirk Kotzé and Hussein Solomon

ISBN 978-0-7983-0211-1
Price R 120,00



**The Millennium
Development Goals
Achievements and prospects of
meeting the targets in Africa**

Edited by Francis Nwonwu

ISBN 978-0-7983-0212-8
Price R 120,00



**Africa Institute of
South Africa**

PO Box 630
Pretoria
0001
South Africa

No 1 Embassy House
Bailey Lane
Arcadia
Pretoria

Tel: +27 (0)12 304 9700
Fax: +27 (0)12 323 8153

E-mail: ai@ai.org.za,
Website: www.ai.org.za

AISA is a statutory research body focusing on contemporary African affairs in its research, publications, library and documentation. **AISA** is dedicated to knowledge production, education, training and the promotion of awareness on Africa, for Africans and the international community. This is achieved through independent policy analysis, and the collection, processing and interpretation, and dissemination of information.

Publisher: Solani Ngobeni

Project Manager: Rose Bopape

Editorial Assistant: Matau Setshase

Administrative Assistant: Rose Lepule

Design, layout and typesetting:
Berekile Pila Projects

Printing:
Bhubezi Printers

ISSN 1998-7994

