

A Critical Analysis of the Role of Civil Society in Zimbabwe's 2018 Harmonized Elections

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse the role that civil society in Zimbabwe played in 2018 harmonised elections. The objectives of the paper were to understand the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the electoral process and the impact of CSOs in the electoral process and voter turn-out. The study used qualitative methodology to gather data from secondary data, key informants and respondents of individual interviews. The main findings of the study are that the CSOs contributed to the improved electoral process and increased voter turnout through their participation in pre, during and post-electoral interventions. The main conclusion is that the CSOs are important stakeholders in electoral processes who play a watch dog role for Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. The CSOs also disseminate voters' education to citizens. The study recommends the CSOs to engage more with the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and policy makers to influence the alignment of electoral laws with the constitution and push for full implementation of electoral laws.

Keywords

Elections, Civil Society Organisations, Electoral Process

1. Introduction

The main purpose of the paper is to critically analyse the role that the civil society organisations performed towards the 2018 Zimbabwe harmonised elections. The paper covers the background to the problem followed by the statement of the problem, the purpose, objectives and research questions. The methodology, literature review, findings, conclusions and recommendations are also covered. The background to the problem is briefly given in the next section.

1.1. Background to the Problem

Zimbabwe held her harmonised elections on the 31st of July 2018. The elections

were of the President, 201 constituency seats in the National Assembly, and seats in the urban and rural local authorities. These were the country's first elections without the participation of Robert Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for 37 years. Mugabe resigned in November 2017 after receiving pressure from the military, his party and the public. Twenty-three candidates registered for the presidential election 1631 contested for the National Assembly and 6576 for local councils. Since the formation of the main opposition political party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in the late 1990s, the voters in the rural areas always voted for Zanu PF while voters in urban areas voted for MDC. The economic hardships and the dependency of the population in some rural areas, on food aid and state development projects made voters vulnerable to manipulation and intimidation (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018).

In addition, Zimbabwe has a history of election violence and rigging thereby creating a culture of fear in the voters which limits them to enjoy their freedom of choosing the political party that should govern them. The constitution introduced a mixed electoral system for the parliamentary elections, instead of the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) which was in place for both chambers of Parliament.

The operation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe has been governed by Welfare Organisations Act (1967). During the colonial era, the legislation was to control movement and information dissemination of organisations believed to be linked to the liberation movement (Civic Freedom Monitor, 2018). CSOs in Zimbabwe reports military and police involvement in human rights abuses. This was supported by the fatal shooting of six civilians on August 1, 2018 following protests the electoral commission's delay in releasing election results.

Furthermore, voter education has generally been too restricted, severely underfunded and ineffective leading to voter illiterate. Voter illiteracy makes the use of strategies such as fear, intimidation, vote-buying and other electoral malpractices effective, thereby affecting political choices and undermining the credibility of elections (ZESN, 2018). In addition, voter illiteracy is largely a result of structural weaknesses in the regime of voter education by the Commission, which is narrow, bureaucratic, underfunded and undemocratic (ZESN, 2018).

The right to stand for election was provided for, generally the elections were competitive and political freedoms during the campaign and on Election Day were respected (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018). However, state resources were misused in favour of the incumbent and coverage by state media was heavily biased in favour of the ruling party (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The harmonised elections in Zimbabwe have been marred with electoral violence, maladministration of elections, electoral rigging and lack of legitimate results that are accepted by all political parties. The CSOs have been critical partners in influencing better management of elections but their mandate has

not been very clear in the constitution. Lack of constitutional mandate made the role of the CSOs in elections not fully pronounced. Therefore, this paper seeks to give a narration of the role of the CSOs in the 2018 harmonised elections since these were the first elections to be conducted using a new constitution of 2013.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

Analyse the critical role that the CSOs played in the electoral process of the July 2018 Zimbabwe harmonised elections.

1.4. Objectives of the Study

- 1) Understand the role of CSOs in the electoral process.
- 2) Examine the CSOs roles from pre-during and post-election period.
- 3) The impact of CSOs in the electoral process and voter turn out.

1.5. Questions of the Study

- 1) What are the mandates of CSOs in the electoral process?
- 2) Which programmes and activities did the CSOs performed in the pre, during and post-election period?
- 3) Did the CSOs' involvement in the electoral process add any value?

2. Related Literature Review

Promoting democracy and political participation improves the legitimacy of state structures and increases the democratic accountability and transparency of actions taken by governments and administrative agencies (GIZ, 2017). Holding free and fair elections contributes to the fulfillment of the right to political participation (SIDA, 2002). In order to encourage political participation, a viable civil society can never be a substitute for political parties but seen as an independent and valuable complement in a representative democracy (SIDA, 2002). This is supported by the Zimbabwe constitution section 239 (h) that provides for Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to have the power and function “to conduct and supervise voter education”. In addition, the Political participation takes several different forms, including both conventional forms which involve electoral processes and non-conventional forms which occur outside electoral processes (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).

CSOs play a pivotal role in promoting free and fair elections globally. In Ghana, eight CSOs have rejected the Electoral Commission's proposal to compile a new electoral roll ahead of the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections. The CSOs are calling for cleaning and upgrading of the current voter's roll rather than procurement of a new electoral roll (Ghana Web, 2020). In addition, in Kogi state, a coalition of over 400 civil rights organisations under the aegis of Transition Monitoring Group are in the process of writing to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, and other organs of the United Nation to com-

plain about the violence and killings which trailed the recent elections ([Punching.com, 2019](#)). The violence killed prominent people that were deemed to be from opposition political parties.

In addition, in India, the CSOs through the Pre-Election Voter Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) had a positive impact on 2017 UP panchayat elections. The CSOs increased the participation of women and other marginalised communities in a political process largely dominated by “paisa” and “pratishta” (money and feudal claims to status) ([Infochange, 2017](#)). This was also the case in Nigeria in 2019 where CSOs constantly interface directly or indirectly with relatively unwilling state and non-state actors in a bid to entrench democratic values in every facet of governance. The 2019 elections the CSOs through their programme The Vote project of Yiaga Africa they managed disseminate credible and accurate election information and recommendations for electoral reforms to citizens and government ([Thisdaylive.com, 2020](#)). Myanmar will hold a general election in November 2020 and the CSOs are expected to play a critical role in the general election as they are known for the late 2000s. The CSOs have been important actors in the political transition by mobilising citizens to vote for progressive candidates and ensuring the success of reform initiatives ([Frontier, 2020](#)).

However, the powers of the CSOs are sometimes reduced by the electoral bodies as is the case in Zimbabwe where the CSOs are only observers not monitors. This is the same as in Malawi where the Electoral Commission (MEC) has removed the election monitoring role of the civil society organisations (CSOs) accredited to take part in the May 21 Tripartite Elections. The CSOs are still contesting the position as it will not give them the power to intervene whenever anomalies arise ([Peacefonline.com, 2020](#)).

3. Methodologies

The researcher used qualitative methodology to gather data. The researcher used desk review where they google searched papers that covered electoral roles of civil society in Zimbabwe. They were about 20 papers that appeared, and they used 15 papers that had relevant information. The researcher also used documents from CSOs in Zimbabwe that are electoral based. The organisations had various documents that included programme reports, civic education manuals and newsletters that were disseminated to the government, donors and citizens.

The researcher conducted 30 key informant interviews with directors and information or communication officers of electoral based CSOs. The interviews were conducted to individuals at their offices and some at neutral venues like restaurants. The interviews with the key informants lasted for maximum one hour and an interview guide template was used to direct the interview flow. The voluntary consent was sought by the researcher before engaging in the interviews. They were 12 women and 18 men that took part in the interviews. The key informants had rich information on the roles that they played towards 2018

harmonised elections.

The researchers also conducted 150 face to face interviews with citizens that she came across both formally and informally. The face to face interviews were conducted to 50 people who were local observers of the elections, 30 were women and 20 were men. These were ordinary people who were engaged by the local organisations to observe elections. The researcher conducted 80 formal interviews with ordinary people who lives in urban areas of Harare, 50 were ladies and 30 were men. Informal face to face interviews were conducted to 20 people that the researcher met different areas such as at work, shops and hair salon. The researcher used the semi-structured interviews that enabled her to gather open responses from the interviewees. It gave the interviewees the freedom to express their views without restrictions that comes with closed interviews approach. The information generated the study's findings that are described below.

4. Findings

The findings of the study that were generated by the key informant interviews and face to face interviews were 4 sub-themes as shown in **Figure 1**.

4.1. CSOs Mandates in Zimbabwe

Constitution of Zimbabwe section 40B (3) provides that ZEC “may permit any person to assist it in providing voter education”. This means ZEC may appoint agents to work with it in providing voter education. These agents are mainly the electoral based organisations. These players fall under several CSOs in Zimbabwe under different umbrellas such as International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition and Churches. The CSOs under these umbrellas participated in voter education and electoral process in order to promote credible, inclusive and transparent elections.

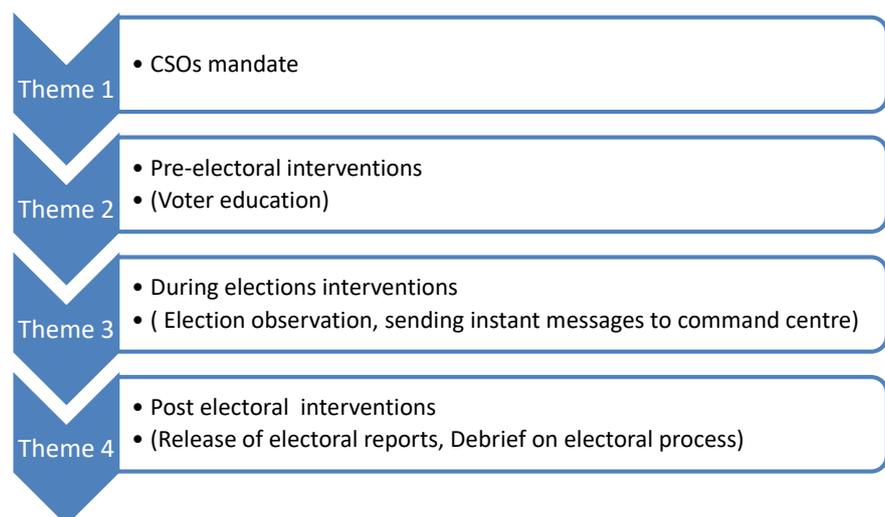


Figure 1. Sub themes for the study.

For the agents to qualify for voter education they must be locally funded and disclose the sources of funding to ZEC. Furthermore, according to section 40E of the constitution ZEC “may allocate” the foreign funding to the service provider at its discretion. With this constitutional mandate ZEC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with IFES to support the Commission in exercising its mandate in conducting fair, transparent and credible elections. ZEC also allowed several CSOs to conduct voter education, participate as electoral observers and engaged them in electoral dialogues. ZEC conducted several dialogues with CSOs such as ZESN and Elections Resource Centre (ERC) since they petitioned the electoral body on some electoral issues such as biometric voter registration.

4.2. Pre-Electoral Interventions

The pre-electoral interventions included the voter education, electoral process observations and dialogues between CSOs and ZEC over electoral issues picked by CSOs. Voter education was conducted with several community-based organisations which encouraged citizens to register to voter and empowered them on their right to participate in political processes. Most organisations indicated that they conducted more than ten meetings per district throughout the country. They also monitored electoral issues that happened before elections. The issues raised are illustrated in **Figure 2**, the KIIS was 30 and the face to face interviews were 150.

Some of the issues that were raised were:

- 1) voter buying where food aid was distributed according to political party lines;
- 2) traditional leaders conducting meetings in the rural areas encouraging their communities to vote for the ruling party;
- 3) lack of voter registration centres for some areas that denied potential voters the chance to exercise their right to vote;
- 4) free expression of the will of electors was undermined using inducements,

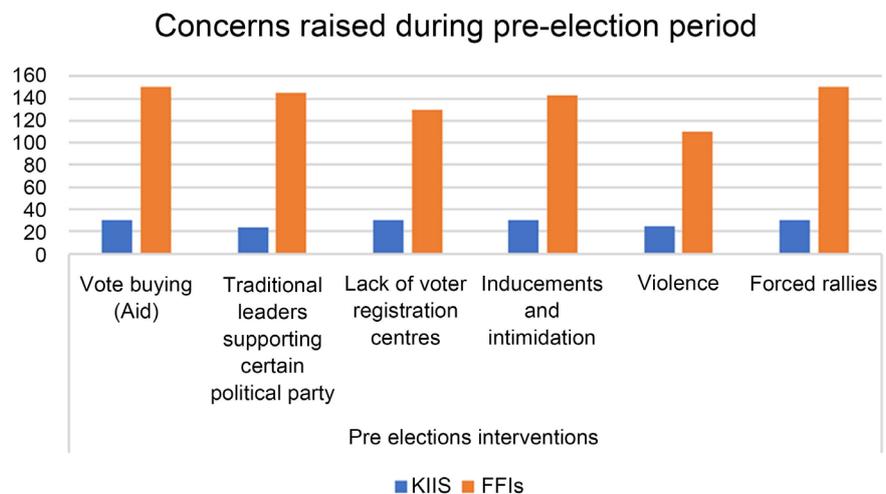


Figure 2. Issues raised as concerns during pre-election period.

intimidation and coercion against prospective voters to try to ensure a vote in favour of the ruling party;

5). reports of direct threats of violence;

6). the use of traditional leaders to force people to attend rallies, collection of voter registration slips during food and agriculture aid distribution and other misuses of state resources.

Voter Education Programmes

The constitution allows for continuous voter education. The CSOs disseminated information about the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) exercise across the country, contributing to high voter registration (Lu, 2018). The CSOs developed coherent plans for effective voter education campaigns and established social media working groups to encourage cross-organizational networking as well as greater utilization of social media (IFES, 2014). The social media managed to develop many twitter handles, WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages with huge following. Most organisations reported that they managed to influence the youth voters to register to vote using social media.

4.3. During Election Interventions

The interventions during the electoral interventions included electoral observation and sending instant messages to CSOs command centers.

4.3.1. Election Observation

During the election period the intervention was mainly election observation. The CSOs further played a pivotal role in election observation. ZESN verified the electoral results through the Sample-Based Observation (SBO) and their results were closer to ZEC results. About 2000 CSOs' election observers produced election reports that were sent to their respective organisations. These reports were the ones used to produce final electoral observation reports that were widely shared.

4.3.2. Sending Instant Messages to CSOs Command Centre

The CSOs indicated that they had national command centres where the electoral observers were sending instant messages to. The information kept the national organisation abreast on what was happening on the ground. Some organisations called the command centre "situation room" where instant messages were sent. Information sent that needed instant dialogue with ZEC officials were conducted at central level. The dialogues between CSOs and ZEC resolved some issues at certain command centres where observers were denied entry into the polling stations. The observers sent messages that informed CSOs on the times when the polling stations were opened, closed and when counting started. The observers also collected the V11 forms for the polling stations they observed.

4.4. Post Electoral Programmes

The post-electoral intervention was mostly the release of observation reports,

debriefs on electoral process and engagements on the next electoral cycles.

4.4.1. Release of Electoral Reports

There were several CSOs observation reports that were released that highlighted areas that needed to be improved on in order to have free, fair and credible elections in Zimbabwe. ZESN released their electoral results for sample-based observation whose results were closer to ZEC's. Some international organisations and donor groups also released their electoral reports. The reports captured events that happened after voting such as the violence that happened after the declaration of election results. Over 150 human rights violations were documented between 1-7 August 2018, including retributive acts against supporters, agents and candidates of the opposition ([European Union Election Observation Mission, 2018](#)).

4.4.2. Debriefs on Electoral Process

The CSOs conducted debrief engagements with ZEC officials and other stakeholders. The debriefs helped the CSOs to take stock of the whole electoral process. The CSOs directors indicated that the engagements came up with options that they should consider for the next electoral process which includes better coordination and management of electoral process. They indicated that the coordination might improve information flow and serves on costs. On the other hand, ZEC conducted a review of the electoral process with CSOs with the view of improving how the institution manages elections. Some of the suggestions that came from the debriefs are being used during the bye elections.

5. Results

The researchers managed to come out with four results for the study which are: high voter turnout, dialogue between CSOs and ZEC, empowered citizens and CSOs involved in electoral cycle.

5.1. High Voter Turn out

The CSOs contributed to high voter turnout through extensive voter education programme, provided bus fare to some voters to register and flighted adverts that encouraged voters to vote.

5.2. Dialogue between CSOs and ZEC

There was good relationship between CSOs and ZEC that led to improvements in the management of elections. The CSOs and ZEC continuously engaged in grey areas. An example given by one director was the increase in the voter registration centres during bio metric voter registration. Another director indicated that their engagement with ZEC led to increment in polling stations. Furthermore, an official from one CSO highlighted that their advice led ZEC to reverse their decision to print ballot papers in a layout that caused mayhem between political parties.

5.3. Empowered Citizens-Empowered about Their Voting Rights

The CSOs were regarded by the citizens interviewed by the researchers as the think tanks that provided them with rights information. The citizens indicated that they were empowered through voter education meetings, adverts on billboards, radio jingles and social media short videos. The information empowered the citizens to use their right to vote and to choose the leaders of their choice.

5.4. CSOs Involved in Electoral Cycle

The CSOs were also actively involved in the whole electoral process from pre-during and post-elections. Their involvement gave confidence to citizens to raise their concerns to neutral parties and knowing that the government has watchdogs in electoral management. Most citizens acknowledged the importance of the election reports that were produced by the CSOs that challenged the government and ZEC to be accountable.

6. Conclusion

This paper concluded that the CSOs are critical partners in the electoral process. Their contributions were valued by ZEC which led to improvements in the way elections were conducted. However, there are some areas that the CSOs can improve on these are highlighted in the next section.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the CSOs to be better coordinated so that they approach ZEC and policy makers with one strong position rather than different CSOs to be approaching the government officials with too many positions which are sometimes controversial. The CSOs can also coordinate on placement of electoral observers so that they do not field many observers at accessible polling stations and fail to do so at inaccessible polling stations. Coordination will help in putting together resources that can be enough to field observers to hard to reach areas. Furthermore, the CSOs should be involved in the whole electoral process instead of flooding during election period. Most CSOs were active during elections and they were few CSOs that were active in pre-electoral period. Lastly, the CSOs should have a laid-out plan that convinces the donors to give them money on time for the whole electoral cycle rather than to reserve funds for election observation only.

Limitation of the Study

The study's limitation was that it used the qualitative approach to get data from the interviewees. The information was subjective and difficult to quantify some of the information that was given. Furthermore, the study was delimited to urban dwellers who managed to engage with the researcher. Thereby compromising the sampling of the study although all the CSOs' officers interviewed had the country wide perspectives because their organisations had presence across the

country. The study covered the role of CSOs in the electoral process of 2018 harmonised elections which did not look at other stakeholders who might have played a critical role in the electoral process like the political parties, private sector and Zimbabwe electoral commission. A further study that covers other stakeholders might help in bringing other aspects that this study might have missed.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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