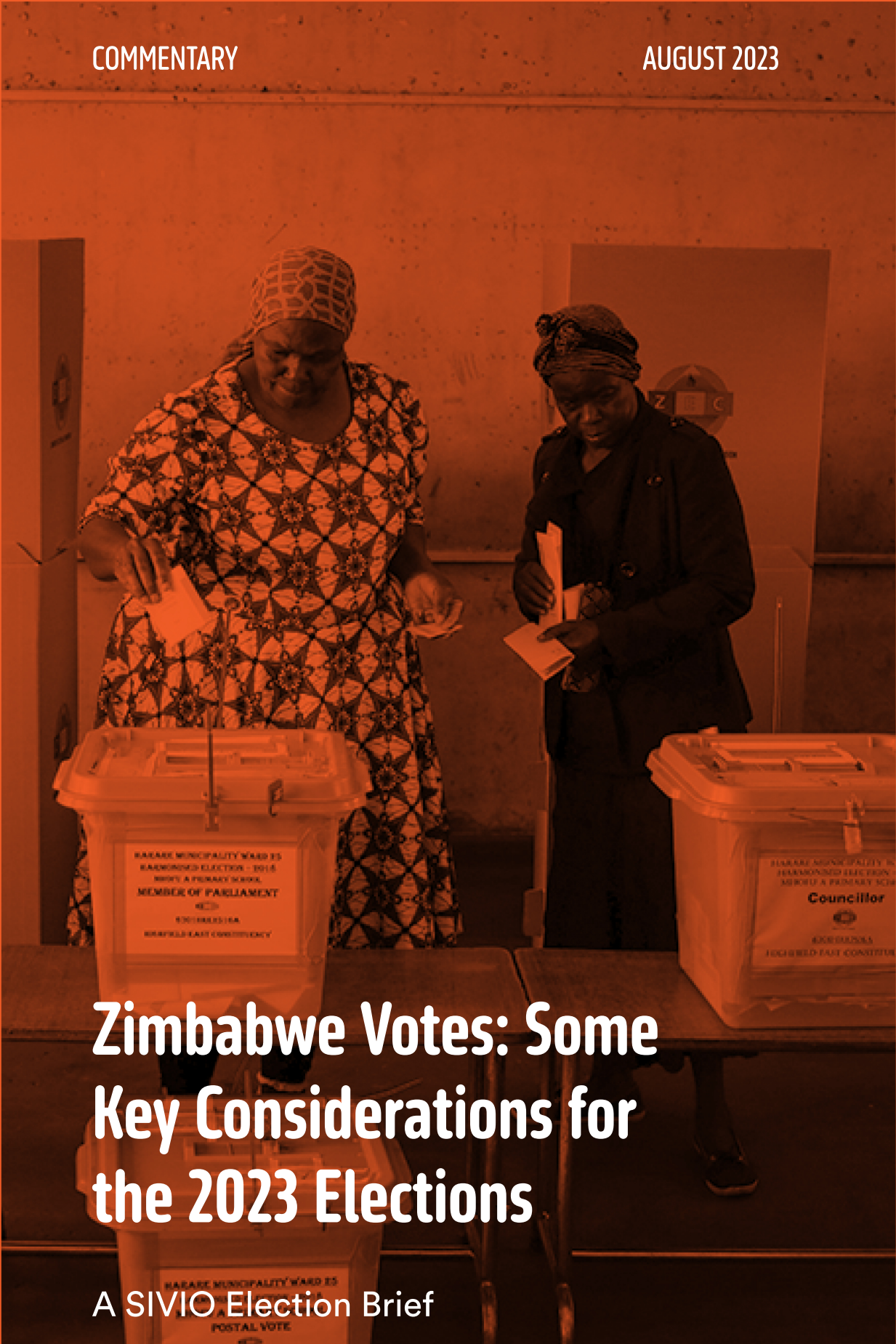


COMMENTARY

AUGUST 2023

A photograph of two women at a polling station in Zimbabwe. The woman on the left, wearing a patterned dress and a headwrap, is placing a ballot into a yellow ballot box. The woman on the right, wearing a dark jacket and a headwrap, is holding a ballot. The ballot boxes are labeled 'KARAKE MUNICIPALITY WARD 05', 'HARARONGO ELECTION - 2018', 'MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT', and 'HARARONGO'. The background is a plain wall with a sign that reads 'ZIMBABWE' and 'COUNCILLOR'.

Zimbabwe Votes: Some Key Considerations for the 2023 Elections

A SIVIO Election Brief

Introduction

The wheels of the electoral cycle in Africa have been turning non-stop in the period since the 1990s when, as generally captured in the mainstream literature, Africa joined the global third wave of democratisation. Zimbabwe has been a part of the African story of electoralism, regularly calling its citizens to the polls. Indeed, it is remarkable that despite a prolonged period of socio-economic and political crises, including hard-hitting sanctions by Western countries, the country never once missed a significant date in its electoral calendar. The 2023 elections are taking place according to the established national electoral calendar.

As elections in Africa go generally, the upcoming elections in Zimbabwe are deemed as crucial primarily on account of what they might mean for the distribution of power and the overall direction of policy. Although the broad parameters within which the elections are being held would seem to be set, there are still elements of uncertainty in the outcome of the competition among the main political parties and actors that make it worthwhile to pay close attention to the organisation and management of the voting.

Using a global comparative framework, this short piece aims to point to some key considerations which citizens and citizen groups might want to keep high on their radar in order to build an overall assessment of the content, substance, and potential consequence of the 2023 elections. The piece has been developed as a brief which, while recognising that there are no perfect elections anywhere in the world, still

proceeds on the fundamental principle that Zimbabweans, like any other people, are entitled to expect nothing but the best out of their electoral system.

Key Considerations for the 2023 Elections

- ▶ Elections are a major logistical operation at the heart of which the election management body (EMB) sits. In many respects, the success or failure of any election rests on the EMB that is in place. In the case of Zimbabwe, it is the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Close attention to the pre-election preparatory steps that the ZEC has undertaken will give an insight into what might be expected on election day and after. Issues which are generally audited closely in the lead up to elections include: **a) The adequacy and timeliness of training for key electoral personnel; b) Mode of recruitment, transparency, orientation of ad hoc staff; c) The delineation of electoral boundaries and the distribution of polling booths/units; d) The voter registration exercise and the verification of the voter register; e) The distribution of voters across different polling units; f) The production of ballot papers, with attention to transparency of the procurement process, the security of the papers, and the quantity printed; g) Arrangements for the secure transportation and timely distribution of the ballot papers and**

boxes for election day; h) Voter and civic education for smooth elections; i) Pre-election engagements with civil society; j) Pre-election engagements with registered political parties; k) Accreditation of local and external observers; l) Accreditation of party/candidate agents; m) Arrangements for persons with disability to perform their civic duty.

- ▶ Citizens and citizen groups may also be interested in monitoring the capability - and willingness - of the EMB to track and document: *a) Party and candidate expenses (difficult though it is); b) The conduct of political campaigns with close attention to incidences of hate speech and respect for general civility; c) Observance by political parties of the letter and spirit of relevant/applicable codes of conduct and electoral laws; and d) Apply pre-election incentives (rewards and penalties) to candidate and parties without fear or favour.*
- ▶ Election Day operations are usually laden with a lot of tension as much for the EMB as for other key actors in the electoral process. In so far as ZEC is concerned, citizens and citizen groups will be well to pay attention to *a) The timeliness of the opening and closing of the polls, including the timely arrival of election officials and materials; b) The efficiency of the voting process in terms of how long voters have to wait to cast their ballot; c) The extent of the secrecy of the ballot; d) Any evidence of the intimidation/inducement of voters; e) Security of the ballot box; f) Measures in place to prevent multiple*

voting; g) Integrity of arrangements for counting the ballots cast, tabulating them, and transmitting them; h) Facilitation of access to the voting area for party/candidate agents and various observers; i) Arrangements for the central collation of returns from polling units; j) Opportunity granted to party/candidate agents to review counted and collated results; k) Transparency of the process of the public announcement of results by ZEC.

- ▶ In the period following the announcement of the results of the election, the work of the EMB is not fully done, nor is it the responsibility of citizens and citizen groups. Attention should be paid to *a) The readiness of ZEC to allow claimants to access ballot materials in the preparation of their petitions; b) The robustness of the internal results and petition review system within the EMB; and c) The willingness of the EMB to receive feedback from citizen organisations and different categories of observers.*
- ▶ EMBs may be in the eye of the storm when elections are held but they are not by any means the only critical actors. Also crucial in their role are the political parties that compete for the attention of voters. In terms of the 2023 elections, citizens and citizen groups will do well to: *a) Pay attention to the manifesto documents and campaign promises of the various parties competing for votes; b) The extent to which the parties are programmatic and issue-based in their campaigns; c) The relevance of their campaign promises to the key issues*

which citizens wish to see addressed as they pursue their daily livelihoods; d) The adherence of the political parties to basic decorum and civility during their campaign, including the avoidance of hate speech; e) The robustness of the internal governance of the political parties with particular reference to internal democracy; f) The support system, if any, which the political parties have for their candidates; g) The orientation offered by parties to their agents prior to deployment for election day duties; h) The commitment of the parties to due process in seeking redress or pursuing claims before, during, and after elections; i) Voter education and citizen outreach carried out by the parties; and j) Pre-election alliances and/or coalitions among political parties.

- ▶ Alongside the EMB and the political parties, the security forces play a critical role in the quality and legitimacy of elections. By their functions and roles, they have the capacity to affect the outcome of elections. A close attention to their posture and doings before, during, and after elections will be necessary for building a fulsome picture of the quality of an electoral process. This is especially pertinent in the Zimbabwean context given the history of the involvement of the security forces with the electoral process. In this regard, citizens and citizen groups will do well to pay attention to: **a) The overall professionalism of the security personnel before, during, and after the elections; b) Any evidence of customised training targeted at security personnel for election day duties; c) The conduct of**

security personnel during political party campaigns and rallies; d) The nature and pattern of security deployment on election day; e) The chain of command over security officials on election duties and the place of ZEC in that command structure; f) Arrangements that have been put in place for responding rapidly to (violent) disruptions of the polling process and post-election conflicts; g) The nature and quality of the interface between the security services and ZEC; h) Quality of and accessibility to documented election day incidences by the Zimbabwe police; i) Security arrangements extended to key party leaders and candidates for their personal protection; and j) Perception of the security services by candidates and their parties.

- ▶ Ordinarily, the media play an important role in every electoral process, serving as sources of news and narratives that help the citizen-voter to make up their minds about different candidates and parties. In a highly polarised political context, a major challenge is to ensure that the media do not sacrifice basic professionalism and rules of fairness at the altar of raw partisanship and base propaganda. Unfortunately, from the point of view of citizens and citizen organisations, media objectivity and fairness have become increasingly rare and the voter is treated to competing blitzes of propaganda. This is a challenge that will have to be grappled with in the upcoming Zimbabwean elections. In doing so, attention should be paid to **a) The alignments displayed by the different media organisations in their coverage of the election campaigns,**

the reporting of the polling, and the narratives offered to try to shape public opinion; b) The conduct of the state-owned media, as public organisations maintained with taxpayer funds, and concerning the offer of equitable access to air time for all candidates and political parties; c) The role of the media, including social media, in generating, disseminating, and/or combatting fake news, disinformation, and hate speech; d) Respect by the media, in their various forms, of the prerogative of the EMB as the sole authorised body to announce the official results of the elections; e) The role of the media in voter/civic education; and f) The role of the media in promoting a peaceful and orderly resolution of election disputes.

- ▶ In the course of an electoral cycle, the judiciary often gets called upon to pronounce various grievances by different political and institutional actors. In most cases, the quality of the judiciary marks the difference between the triumph of due process and the resort by citizens and politicians to self-help and/or cynicism. Amidst the mixed and contested record of the judiciary in Zimbabwe, citizens and citizen groups will do well to pay attention to *a) The pre-election record of the judiciary in all matters pertaining to the national electoral process; b) The arrangements and procedures for the adjudication of post-election disputes and contestations; c) Timely accessibility of the records of the rulings of the judiciary to citizens and citizen groups; and d) The record of enforcement of judicial rulings, especially where in favour of opposition*

candidate and parties.

- ▶ Over the years, civil society groups have come to play an important role in the domestic governance environment of African countries. Zimbabwe has been no exception to this, and although there have been recent trends at narrowing the space for civic organisation and activism, there is still much that can be done to tap into the resources they embody and represent. In doing so, it is crucial to remember that civil society groups are heterogeneous and, therefore, represent different and competing interests. The civil society terrain itself is also a site of contestation which could lead to organisations being pitched against one another. Nevertheless, in seeking to contribute to the substance of elections, civil society groups over the years have built up practice and experience around the following: *a) The establishment of omnibus and/or issue-based/thematic situation rooms to monitor the pre-election period and election day operations; b) The negotiation of a modus vivendi and modus operandi with the EMB for access, information-sharing, deployment of citizen observers, and even training of election officials; c) The conduct of voter education and campaigns for voter turnout; d) Extension of support to and customised tooling of the security services, especially the police, on election-related conduct; e) Identification of election hotspots across the country for closer monitoring; f) Monitoring of candidates, political parties and the media for ethical behaviour during the campaign period; g) Training and deployment of citizen*

observers for election day duties; and h) Documentation of experiences from one election cycle to another for the purpose of lessons learnt.

Concluding Remarks

The various elements for consideration ahead of the upcoming elections in Zimbabwe

are not entirely new either to the country itself or to other electoral settings around the world. However, through a systematic focus on them, it should be possible to build a comprehensive picture of the direction in which electoral politics in Zimbabwe is trending. Put in a historical perspective, the data generated and observations made will be invaluable for deciding on areas of improvement, stagnation, or reversal in the management of the country's elections.

About SIVIO Institute

SIVIO Institute (SI) is an independent organisation focused on ensuring that citizens are at the centre of processes of socio-economic and policy change. It aims to contribute towards Africa's inclusive socio-economic transformation. It is borne out of a desire to enhance agency as a stimulus/catalyst for inclusive political and socio-economic transformation. SIVIO's work entails multi-disciplinary, cutting edge policy research, nurturing citizens' agency to be part of the change that they want to see, working with communities to mobilize their assets to resolve some of the immediate problems they face.

SIVIO institute has three centres/programs of work focused on; (i) civic engagement (ii) philanthropy and communities (iii) entrepreneurship and financial inclusion. SI addresses the following problems:

- ▶ Inadequate performance of existing political and economic system
- ▶ Increasing poverty and inequality
- ▶ Limited coherence of policies across sectors
- ▶ Ineffectual participation in public processes by non-state actors
- ▶ Increased dependence on external resources and limited leveraging of local resources

About the author

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