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Electoral Cost Assessment- Zimbabwe (2017-2018)

Introduction

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) submitted a budget to the Parliament of Zimbabwe for consideration in the 2017 national budget in November 2016. It is also working on getting donor support and partnership in implementing Biometric Voter Registration (BVR), improving its technological capacities and other technical assistance. The importance of investing in elections can never be overstated. Its centrality in cementing a sustainable social contract between citizens and the government is unquestionable. The supreme law of the country states unequivocally that the state must do everything necessary to ensure the mandate of delivering free, fair, and peaceful elections. The mandate of ensuring the successful implementation of this critical juncture towards ensuring legitimacy and credibility lies with ZEC.

Scrutiny, therefore, is directed towards the priority areas earmarked for investment, that is, the share between integrity costs and core costs and further, the prioritisation within integrity and core costs. This brief, analyses costs related to elections in Zimbabwe. Overall, it argues that cost allocations by ZEC are not well prioritised and are unnecessarily increasing the cost per voter to the highest in the region, if not the world. The paper further argues that the government of Zimbabwe is deliberately disabling functionalization of the people's end of the social contract, leaving it free to manipulate the process and freely effect voter suppression. The assessment is for 2017, the year before harmonised elections in Zimbabwe. It therefore covers pre-electoral processes of voter registration, voter education, polling specific demarcation and administrative preparations for elections.

The Political environment

High election costs are usually associated with transitional democracies and those emerging out of conflicts. Of these, integrity costs, that is, costs aimed at increasing public trust in electoral processes and increasing the security of voters (and the vote) take centre stage. The political environment therefore determines, under normal circumstances, the costs of elections. The Zimbabwe environment defies the odds. At independence in 1980, 1985 and maybe 1990, the country was coming out of conflict and justifiably could have high integrity costs. However, the country seems, arguably, to have been in transition ever since.

Studies on costs of elections are a relatively new field. Evidence of costs of previous elections in Zimbabwe is hard to come by. Effectively, the establishment by law, of the Zimbabwe

Electoral Commission (ZEC), an independent Electoral Management Body (EMB), in 2004 signalled the beginning of traceable election costing. More importantly, the decision in 2015 to finally allow ZEC to directly receive funds from the treasury make their allocations more public, thereby allowing for more scrutiny by stakeholders.

The country still suffers from integrity shortcomings. The voter registration survey conducted by the ¹ERC and Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI) showed 48% trust in ZEC. Any assessment should therefore recognise that questions of security of the vote, the voter, and general integrity are still to be satisfied. Investment in other core costs, while important, still lead to illegitimate elections without stakeholder buy in.

2017 projections

The 2017 budget was presented on the 10th of December 2016 and ZEC was allocated USD9, 761,000 out of a requested USD59 209 476. This leaves a deficit of USD49 448 478. The allocated share does not cater for pre-election core costs including voter education, voter registration, and polling station demarcation. In the budget outline, ZEC gives five key result areas being; voter registration, voter education, conduct of elections and referendums, stakeholder engagements and delimitation of electoral boundaries. Of the key result areas, only USD 1, 5 million was allocated for by-elections. Nothing has been allocated for voter registration, voter education, stakeholder engagements and 2018 harmonised election preparations.

The budget allocated to ZEC is largely for employment costs with a variance of USD 166 224 having been allocated USD 6 061 000 of the requested USD 6 227 224. ZEC budget share of the employment costs raises questions particularly where it allocates 40% of the costs to “other allowances.” Whether these are for field allowances during by-elections, or general employment allowances such as travel and boarding is not explained. At a time when core costs are not provided for, ZEC cannot afford the luxury of having more than USD 2, 5 million allocated to “other allowances.”

ZEC allowances for staff overseeing elections are also a cause for concern, especially in a country undergoing the meltdown Zimbabwe is experiencing. These range between USD20 for polling officers to USD55 for presiding officers, a day. Considering that these officers are already on fully paid salaries by government, such allowances are a drain on the taxpayers’ money and make the cost of voting extremely exorbitant. A paper by the ERC in 2015², noted that the average cost per voter in 2013 was USD22, a regional and international high.

2013 election budget

While the current budget allocation does not cater for the 2018 harmonised election, the preparatory processes are equally important. This is relevant especially, where voter registration and voter education processes are concerned. The case of 2013 is one in point.

¹ <https://ercelibrary.wordpress.com/2017/01/31/report-on-state-of-voter-registration-zimbabwe/>

² <http://nehandaradio.com/2015/05/05/voting-in-dollar-an-insight-into-the-cost-of-election-administration-in-zimbabwe/>

The allocations were late, as the processes were already underway or long overdue. This had overbearing effects on the overall credibility of the election on July 31, 2013.

In 2013, total budgeted cost for voter education was set at US\$23 million with US\$11.4 million set for the voter inspection period and US\$11.4 million set for specific voter education³. The biggest expense was the actual conduct of the election, which gobbled up 39% of the budget. The costs for allowances of polling officers were high and was estimated at US\$27 million to pay 85,500 polling officers. Travel and Subsistence (T and S) rates for personnel is based on current rates of US\$55 with fees set at US\$15 per day. The 2013 ZEC budget set the number of presiding officers at 9,500 and the cost of retaining the presiding officers at US\$4.2 million. The T and S rates for the officers was set at US\$55 and daily fee per day at US\$20.

The lessons of 2013 show that election costs cannot be budgeted for during the year of the election if credibility, transparency, and legitimacy are to be achieved. Furthermore, integrity costs are only useful before the election is conducted to allow for testing and sustainability thus building confidence and trust among election stakeholders.

Does the economic environment control the political?

Understandably, the country is going through difficult economic challenges that make it difficult to effectively support the needs of the country. However, the budgetary vote given to the EMB says a lot about political will for electoral reforms, credible elections, and general improvements in the democracy of the country. More so, if compared to budgetary allocations made to the President's office, Defence and Home Affairs portfolios.

The prevailing budget allocation threatens the electoral reform agenda. It threatens the efficiency and sustainability of the country's democracy. It opens up for increased disenfranchisement and voter suppression. Effectively, it is now threatening the implementation of Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) process, which was premised on support from the state.

Harmonised elections in 2018 are under threat of being illegitimate and not credible, way before they are conducted.

Recommendations

1. The state must prioritize funding of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and meet their constitutional obligations, in particular, provided for in Section 155.
2. ZEC must fundraise from other international sources to deliver a credible election.
3. Parliament of Zimbabwe should not pass the Money Bill for 2017 if it truly represents the wishes of the people.
4. Without adjustments to the budget allocation for ZEC, the impending Harmonised election will not deliver credibility and legitimacy, therefore must be postponed.
5. Political parties should closely monitor the funding of ZEC to inform their participation in electoral processes.

³ HOW MUCH WILL THIS ELECTION COST?

http://archive.kubatana.net/docs/locgov/chra_maz_rti_issue_2_130729.pdf