



A vote for life

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In 10 days, Zimbabweans are expected to go back to the polls and vote for their presidential candidate of choice. In most democratic countries, this process is fairly simple: X marks the spot and the contender with the most votes wins. In Zimbabwe, on the 27th of June, this will not be the case.

After nearly a decade of electoral violence and politically motivated psychological and physical torture, marking the ballot has become much more than a simple vote. The effects of this constant and systematic onslaught can, in some instances permanently alter the political belief systems of the voting populace. For a citizen of Zimbabwe to cast their vote for the opposition candidate (particularly in the rural areas) requires enormous strength and courage.

A consequence of this organized mental and physical abuse could be seen in a 'vote for life' pattern emerging in the run-off election scheduled later this month. That is, even if the voter knows that a vote for Mugabe will bring nothing but continued hunger, economic hardship and torment, they also know that it could buy peace. A vote for the opposition candidate, Morgan Tsvangirai often brings with it either physical or emotional trauma, if not death in the current cycle of violence.

One of the cornerstones of democracy should be the secrecy of the ballot. In Zimbabwe this has not been the case since the formation of the Movement of Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999. Each ballot box in the harmonised elections contained on average 250 ballots, which made it easier for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to identify which voting wards supported which political party.

As senatorial, presidential, house of assembly and local authority elections were held on the same day, some wards in Zanu PF strongholds voted overwhelmingly in favour of Morgan Tsvangirai for president, even though they remained loyal to Zanu PF parliamentary candidates. In addition, some areas that voted for Morgan

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Tsvangirai have been severely attacked to ensure that either they vote for Robert Mugabe in the run-off or they don't vote at all.

For a country that is so obviously in a state of decline, with inflation at over 1 700 000 per cent, (1, 5 million percent according to international accountancy firms) there was not an overwhelming majority winner. The effectiveness of the Zanu PF campaign of voter intimidation can be seen clearly in the 2008 election results.

There could be a number of reasons for this. First, that support for the MDC has been inflated given that at this juncture they are the only alternative to Mugabe? Second, that the lack of participation in the election could be due to prolonged and sustained fear which can breed voter apathy. This was clearly seen in urban areas where only 30% of registered voters cast a ballot. Finally, a mitigating factor that impacts the outcome of any Zimbabwean elections is that many opposition supporters, particularly those in Zanu PF areas, have been targeted so violently and systematically that they have fled in fear of their lives to foreign lands and were therefore unable to cast their vote at any of the 9000-odd polling stations.

Whatever the reasons, by fair or foul means, Zimbabwe is once again going to the polls in a presidential run-off, which sees Morgan Tsvangirai and Robert Mugabe going head to head for the top political position in the country.

In normal circumstances, once a winner is declared, the national structures and armed forces pledge themselves to serve and protect the government of the day from danger both 'foreign and domestic'. In Zimbabwe the army and government forces have stated categorically that they will never concede power to the MDC and it is now blatantly clear that continued support for them would result in a crackdown that can only worsen the current plight of the country. Mugabe's record over 28 years shows that he carries out his threats, and he has threatened war with increasing frequency and belligerence during the run up to the second round.

The organised violence and torture in the weeks since the last election has risen exponentially. As a result, what little faith Zimbabweans had in elections has been completely destroyed. This has led to the pre-electoral environment being a far cry from any international norms and standards. One and a half weeks before the

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election, there remains no effective electoral observation exercise on the ground from the Southern African Development Community (SADC). They may be in country but are certainly not in hot spot areas like Murewha, Gutu, Mutoko and Buhera.

Worldwide condemnation from various bodies like the United Nations has not, and will not result in any meaningful change of behaviour from Zanu PF. The only two groups that are possibly still respected by Mugabe, namely the African Union and SADC, have yet to strongly and convincingly condemn Mugabe. Forty prominent African leaders and personalities signed an open letter last week calling for an end to the violence ahead of the election. One doubts at this stage, if a letter is enough, and it is probably too late to end the president's rule when he seems hell bent on winning.

This lack of concrete action surely leaves the common man in Zimbabwe feeling completely helpless and alone. What is to stop the government of Zimbabwe shaping its own destiny, with no regard for the will of the people?

One wonders why the level of intervention from the region and international communities has been so weak. Is it because the numbers of deaths related to political violence are low enough to be classified as nothing more than unrest or friction? If a million lives were lost, would the level of assistance be any different? It begs the question - how bad does the situation have to be for concrete action to be taken?

Zimbabwe may be spared a repeat of the 1982 - 87 massacres called Gukuruhundi, but this is because Zanu PF employs more psychological torture techniques and mutilation. Brutal deep tissue beatings, falanga (beating on the soles of the feet) destruction of property, psychological interrogation and intimidation are the preferred methods of dealing with opposition supporters.

In a country that at least rhetorically once prided itself on democratic principles it has become a republic that seems to follow so few of the moral and legal standards. Only time will tell how low Africa will have to hang its head in shame for the decimation of a once thriving and vibrant country.

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