



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT ON THE 2023 HARMONISED ELECTIONS

BACKGROUND

1.1 The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) trained and deployed 1159 ecumenical short term Election Observers in all 10 provinces to observe the 2023 harmonized elections that have been conducted on the 23rd of August 2023. This was a build up to initiatives undertaken earlier in the year when 500 long term observers were trained and observed the pre-elections period.

1.2 The long-term observers produced periodic reports, including the national PULSE Report of 2023 by ZCC, that analysed the electoral environment in preparation for the harmonized elections. The ZCC was accompanied by 12 representatives from its regional and international ecumenical partners in the observation of these elections.

1.3 Our observation of the 2023 elections is in line with the #iprayivote Campaign which identifies elections as a patriotic duty with biblical precedence that all Christians have a mandate to participate in.

1.4 The 1159 short term observers were deployed at ward level utilizing a deployment plan that covered all the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe. The observation was focused on the opening, voting, and closing procedures of the election day.

1.5 The data from the short-term observers was collected and collated through an electronic platform. The ecumenical observers continuously submitted incident reports through the day which was analysed by the situation room. The reports from observers were processed in the situation room and through regular briefings.

2. KEY FINDINGS

2.1. Electoral environment

The Church observed that the electoral environment was generally peaceful in comparison to previous electoral years. The message of peace and tolerance that the Church has been advocating for and the messages of peace by the political parties, has contributed to the relatively peaceful environment. The Church acknowledges incidents of skirmishes that were reported, however the Zimbabwe Republic Police managed to contain the incidents.

2.2. Opening of polling stations

The Church acknowledges the timeous opening of polling stations in the rural areas particularly in Matabeleland South, Matabeleland North, Mashonaland East, Midlands and some parts of Manicaland. The ZCC observed the delay in opening of polling stations in the urban areas in contravention of section 53 (1) of the Electoral Act. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) acknowledged in a statement that polling stations opened late due to unavailability of ballot papers for local authority candidates and the litigation that preceded the elections.

Despite the provision of extension of the said polling hours in section 53 of the Electoral Act and the subsequent Statutory Instrument 151 of 2023 that was pronounced last night, the Church is concerned with the safety and security of the electorate.

The Church acknowledges the safety and security of the electorate as a priority; and notes that the constitutional right of the citizens of Zimbabwe to vote as provided in section 63(3) (a) has to be safeguarded. The implications of the extension of the polling hours have the potential to disenfranchise voters that would not be aware of the extension.

- ZCC observed that 81 polling stations had not opened by 1030 hours on the first polling day. Reasons cited for late opening included absence of voting material for local authority candidates and presiding officers that were not attending to voters that were lodging complaints. However, most of the reports for polling stations that delayed were from urban areas such as Harare Metropolitan, Bulawayo Metropolitan and some parts of Manicaland provinces.
- At 1200 hours on the voting day, ZCC observers reported 22 polling stations that had not commenced the process of voting.
- ZCC observers noted that there were significant areas that had not started the voting process by 7pm, the closing time mandated by section 53 of the Electoral Act. The areas included parts of Glen Norah, Cold Comfort, Kambuzuma, Warren Park, Chipinge, Nketa and Nkulumane.

Critical Incidents

• Unauthorized personnel recording voters

The ZCC Ecumenical observers reported that suspected political party members with branded material were setting up tables less than 300 meters outside polling stations where they were recording names of those who had cast their votes. These reports were recorded in Masvingo Province (Chiredzi), Manicaland (Mafuruse), Bulawayo (Cowdray Park), Mashonaland Central (Mount Darwin North), Glendale and Mazowe in Mashonaland Central and Gokwe Central in Midlands. This is against the country's electoral laws which stipulates that people must not assemble at a radius of at least 300 meters away from the polling station.

• Restriction and Intimidation of Observers

Isolated incidents of restrictions and intimidation of observers were recorded in Mashonaland West, Midlands, Mashonaland Central, Manicaland and Harare Metropolitan provinces. Six ZCC election observers were denied access to their designated polling stations by ZEC Presiding Officers. In a separate incident in Rushinga, the ZCC observer was threatened by a political party agent.

• Inclusivity of vulnerable groups

ZCC acknowledges the tremendous strides on inclusivity in the execution of ZEC mandate. Our observers reported that vulnerable groups such as lactating women, pregnant women and people with disabilities were given the first priority to vote. 93% of the ZCC observers cited that polling stations were not accessible to persons with disabilities. Makeshift polling stations were mounted on a soft surface making it difficult for those on wheel chair to navigate easily. The mobile toilets were also not accessible to those on wheel chair.

• Conduct of the Police

ZCC observers reported at-least 95% presence of ZRP personnel at polling stations across the country. The Church commends the preparedness of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) in containing incidents that arose as a result of the late opening of polling stations.



Recommendations

- The Church calls upon political party leaders and all stakeholders to reiterate peace messaging among its supporters and the general electorate as polling and counting continues,
- ZEC should strive to improve its communication on impending or anticipated technical and logistical challenges on the ongoing polling and counting processes to enhance transparency and accountability in the electoral processes, and avoid anxiety.
- The Church urges the electorate to remain peaceful and calm during this election period.

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