

ELECTIONS LESSONS: ZAMBABWE AND ZAMBIA

Peter Henriot

First of all, a word of prayer for President Mwanawasa's good health in Egypt, and a word of appreciation for his strong and encouraging speech at the opening of the AMECEA meeting on last Saturday here in Lusaka.

Certainly many more words have been spoken and written about the Zimbabwe "elections" than there were votes cast in the sad scandal of last week. What more could be said? At the risk of being repetitious of other political analysts, let me summarise a few major points and then ask what lessons we can learn, especially in the light of the Milanzi by-elections of last week.

Since electoral politics are not only a key instrument of authentic democracy but can also be an occasion of conflict and violence (e.g., Kenya), we really should learn whatever good lessons we can.

ZIMBABWE LESSONS

Certainly the only thing that can be said about the recent Zimbabwe elections is that they violated almost every principle of valid electoral procedures imaginable. Just recall a few highlights of the story as it has unfolded over the past few months.

First, merely listen to the voices of Zimbabweans – not the voices of British or USA leaders or media – and hear their stories of discrimination and fear, violence and intimidation. The only ones defending the distorted process of elections appear to be spokespersons for ZANU-PF, who try earnestly to tell us that everything has been done perfectly in accord with democratic principles and that any other stories are simply lies.

The independent monitors were seriously hampered in the first set of elections with their numbers and movements severely limited. The main Zimbabwe group, the independent Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network, said it was impossible to monitor last week's elections because of threats to their safety. After the March elections, their offices had been raided, officials arrested and documents seized. Not exactly a conducive environment for encouraging peaceful electoral monitoring by local citizens, let alone outsiders!

Surely no intelligent person would condemn as foreign agents the leaders of all the major churches who criticised the electoral process. How could an honest person attempt to defend the denial to the opposition of fair access to public media or permission to hold public rallies? Rallies by MDC were banned or broken up because the police said the crowds might turn violent. But ZANU-PF rallies went ahead with full protection of police and military.

And what about the banning of delivery of food aid to hungry people by independent and non-partisan humanitarian agencies?

We have never had an adequate and credible explanation of why the results of the presidential count from the 27 March elections were withheld secretly for 29 days by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. This Commission claimed ordinary "logistical problems" caused the delay. Yet this same Commission seemed to face no such "logistical problems" when it took less than 29 hours to declare the winner of the 27 June elections!

Finally, the level of terrible violence tragically escalated after the March elections as it became clear that ZANU-PF lost the Parliamentary elections and the President came in second in a controverted vote count. Horrendous pictures and stories of murders, tortures, beatings, rapes and violations of human dignity were simply verified by the visits to hospitals and clinics around the country. Homes and belongings burned, people chased into remote areas, teachers and election officials targeted, etc., etc. It came as no surprise that the opposition candidate would withdraw from such an electoral farce just to protect his supporters.

But the withdrawal does not seem to have been of any help, as “operation red finger” was immediately introduced after 27 June by the ZANU-PF to punish any voter who lacked the red paint on a left little finger to signify that she or he had voted. To have abstained from voting was taken as a sign of support for MDC and therefore punishable by gangs of police, army, cadres and criminals.

Now one can simply read these sentences and reject this story as outright lies by someone who wants to give Zimbabwe back to Britain as a colony. Or one can forthrightly ask how Mr. Mugabe can by any stretch of imagination be welcomed as a fairly elected President at the AU meeting in Egypt this week. The reputation and good name of the AU is certainly on the line. Never mind non-African judgments – think mostly of the majority of ordinary African citizens who cry out for the democratic protection of free and fair elections and basic respect for human rights and dignity..

Zambians can very rightly be proud of their President who has had the courage and good sense to challenge the Zimbabwe electoral tragedy. He certainly stood at his best in his call for postponement of the elections and his demand, as SADC President, for regional action to promote democracy and stability in Zimbabwe.

What will happen in the days ahead in Egypt will keep all of us wondering and worrying. We pray the President does not disappoint us!

ZAMBIA ELECTIONS

But to look closer at home and view the electoral process in Zambia, are there questions to be raised, issues to be addressed, lessons to be learned? We surely don't want any Zimbabwean-style elections here (or Kenyan electoral anomalies and subsequent misfortunes). So I think it is only fair to ask a few blunt questions that certainly need honest answers from Government and Ruling Party officials.

First, how much of tax payers' money was spent on the large presence of MMD officials, including the President, for several days of campaigning in Milanzi? Transportation, lodging, gifts, etc., for partisan political activity certainly is neither authorised nor included in the GRZ Yellow Book! Or is it?

Second, why was there such a lack of footage of opposition party activity shown on ZNBC-TV as the elections of last Friday drew near? Many minutes of presidential and other officials' speeches in support of the MMD candidate were shown. But it seemed that the opposition parties were not holding any meetings or rallies. Or were they?

Third, was it really ingenuous (that is, honest, candid, sincere) to begin major development works just prior to elections? No one would deny people their rights to government programmes of good social services and meeting the needs for improvements in

infrastructure and agriculture. But why does that begin only when by-elections are drawing near? Or should it?

Fourth, was the President quoted correctly when he proposed that all opposition parties “should not waste everybody’s time in contesting these elections: but should just leave it to the MMD to continue doing the good job” until it fails to do so (THE POST, 26 June, p. 4). . But that seems to be a strange view – indeed, even a rejection -- of the role of opposition parties and the meaning of multi-party democracy. Or is it?

So these are just a few of the important questions to be asked about electoral processes and politics in Zambia today. Will we hear some reasonable answers?

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