

Presentation of Fr. Joaquin Bejar, CMF, on SDG 16 in Zimbabwe

JCoR Network of Zimbabwe: MONITORING 2023 ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

INTRODUCTION

The Mission noted that the 23 August 2023 Harmonized Elections in Zimbabwe were regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe and the Electoral Act [2:13]. According to Section 158 (1)(a) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013, General Elections should take place not more than thirty days before the expiry of the five-year period specified in Section 143 of the Constitution. The Mission noted that this section applies to the duration and dissolution of Parliament, and stipulates that Parliament is elected for a five-year period which commences from the date which the President-elect is sworn in and assumes office.

The Mission further noted that Section 144 of the Constitution requires the President, by proclamation call, to set the date for a General Election after consultation with the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. Pursuant to this provision, His Excellency Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, on 31 May 2023 issued a proclamation fixing the 23 August 2023 as the date for Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Government Elections, referred to as the Harmonised Elections. The elections were further extended to the 24th of August 2023. Furthermore, President Mnangagwa also proclaimed 2 October 2023 for the run-off election to the office of president if such a poll becomes necessary.

The Mission noted that this Proclamation was in line with Paragraph 4.1.3 SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing the Democratic Elections, which requires that the date or period of elections is prescribed by law.

The whole process started with training of 24 religious brothers and sisters from different congregations local and international. We had, 17 sisters and 6 priests and 2 brothers. As observers we joined thousands of other observers who were deployed in polling stations across the country. We played an important role to ensure that the electoral process is transparent and free from electoral irregularities. Our main task was to look, listen and record **what was happening during those days.**

Our observers **were trained in two different areas for this task and given allowances of transport and food and some regalia, in order to do this service to the community.** They were deployed to Harare, Bulawayo, Mashonaland East, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Midlands, Manicaland, Mashonaland Central. Since our numbers could not cover all the provinces.

We had mixed feelings fear and excitement, for most of us it was the first time to observe. It was a great opportunity to get involved in this exercise. It was exciting and eye opening. Such involvement should be encouraged. Pastorally we felt we are steps ahead. This exercise also helped our members to participate on national issues as also indicated in the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church on 'Participation'. **Other religious that saw us during the observation or listen that we participate, came to us after the elections indicating that they would like to participate, so we have still work in this voting education and sensitization in our communities and Congregations.**

For our members especially those observing for the first time, it was an eye opener on the processes in which elections are done. It helped them understand all the stages done during the election period. Generally, most of our members spent the night at the polling station and some of them knocked off the following day. They did this with joy as they felt it was their duty and responsibility to make sure that the whole electoral processes are done accordingly. We did not receive any report on injuries and intimidation on our members. We appreciate this great opportunity and we will continue supporting, promoting peace and good governance as part of the mission of the Sustainable Development Goals according to the United Nations Conference of Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro of 2012.

Summary of the observations

Prior to the Election:

- Generally, the environment was peaceful
- All political parties managed to display their posters though it caused serious environmental pollution
- We had few cases of posters that were removed and replaced by other political parties
- In the national broadcasting station that is ZBC towards election date there were now able to broadcast oppositional campaign rallies though few
- Workshops were being done by ZEC to train people on voting and also posters to promote peace.
- Derogatory words and name calling was less during the campaign period
- There were very few isolated violence incidences
- One of the concerns that our observers had was on the nomination fees for a person to stand for election which have become too high and therefore restrictive to political participation. In June, the government, through the Statutory Instrument 144 of 2022, increased the presidential nomination fee from 1,000 to 20,000 U.S. dollars. Nomination fees for a constituency election increased from 50 to 1,000 U.S. dollars. These amounts were also cited as unduly restrictive to less well-off members of the community such as women who lack the means. This did not guarantee an environment of open contest with no undue exclusion and restrictions on anyone who is eligible and qualified to stand as a candidate in any election.
- Many decried the delay in the release of the voters roll in a searchable and analyzable format as prescribed by the Electoral Act.
- Some stakeholders expressed displeasure that the delay in releasing the voters roll resulted in missed opportunities for them to audit the voters roll and therefore give the public confidence about the veracity of the voter's roll.

Election Day

- Generally, in most polling stations the environment was calm and peaceful and most polling stations the officials for ZEC and our observers were present by 06.30am.
- Professional and attentive police presence enhanced the overall peace and secure environment in all the polling stations observed.
- different political party agents were present but not all of them were represented.
- There two main parties that were dominant in most polling stations that is CCC and ZANU PF.

- We observed very unfortunate incidents whereby in most polling stations they opened a bit later than expected
- As a result of the excessive delays in the opening of polling stations in Harare and Bulawayo provinces, at least 36% of the voting stations observed did not close at the scheduled closing time of 1900hrs, while some had not even opened by that time. It was announced that voting would be extended to proceed into 24 August 2023 to compensate for the late opening.

Some of the reasons for these delays include:

- Delay of ballot papers: Unavailability of voting materials like ballot papers at polling stations which led to the extension of the voting process to the 24th of August.
- Missing names of some candidates on ballot papers
- Unclear pictures of candidates that were not visible
- The local government ballot papers were not available especially in Bulawayo and Harare and this affected the whole electoral processes
- The reasons stated above led to some polling stations opening in the afternoon and others as late as 7pm and this led the President of Zimbabwe to add another day of voting.
- The delays stated above especially in Harare and Bulawayo frustrated some voters.

To the Voter:

- The voters turnout was good with many youth participating
- In a country where literacy rate is high it was surprising to observe that many people were assisted to vote.
- The elderly, People living with disability and pregnant women were assisted
- Some people did not find their names on the voters roll
- Some who carried expired documents like passports were turned away
- Some whose names were not at their polling station were referred to other stations this could have been caused by the issue of delimitation whereby most polling centres were changed. So we had some voters who had to move from one station to another looking for their names. This led others to give up the whole process.
- We generally observed with serious concern some exit polls created by some political parties whereby people who had voted, had to pass by that poll and register their names, we felt this was a way to intimidate voters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To work hard in convincing the government to have a system in place to allow those in Diaspora to be able to vote
- To encourage young people to be in the forefront to bring about change and remind them that the future is theirs.
- The church to continue influencing the people on issues of Justice and peace

- Parliament to enhance the equal participation of women as candidates in electoral processes by benchmarking the revised fees in the context of Zimbabwe's economic realities.
- to promote transparency and accountability on the part of the Zimbabwean Electoral Commission
- To allow many international observers to be part of the electoral process
- ZEC should be an independent board rather being owned by other major political parties
- Delimitation of constituency should be done on time and involve many stakeholders especially the voters.
- The voters roll should be made available on time
- The national broadcasting Stations should cover all political party's campaigns without fear or favour
- The security force should protect everyone throughout the process
- Every Zimbabwean citizen above 18 should be encouraged to vote and associate with any political party of their choice

CONCLUSION

On behalf of the observers, we want to thank the organizers for this great opportunity to get involved in this exercise for the first time for many of us. It was exciting and eye opening. Such involvement should be encouraged and move with signs of time. We live in the world that knows very little about who we are. Many revered our presence. Pastorally we are steps ahead. We are grateful for the support you gave us from JCoR UN office, the moral and the financial. Be blessed, You have increased the zeal within us to promote peace and justice.

Thank you.