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Zimbabwe facing myriad 'traditional' obstacles ahead of general elections

Зімбабве стикається з безліччю «традиційних» перешкод напередодні загальних виборів

Економіка, що руйнується, законність і громадянський простір, що звужується, входять до числа «традиційних» перешкод, що стоять перед Зімбабве перед загальними виборами.

Президент Еммерсон Мнангагва оголосив 23 серпня датою виборів. Різні аналітичні центри передбачають тісні перегони між Е. Мнангагвою та його головним суперником Нельсоном Чамісом із Громадянської коаліції за зміни. Останній огляд виборів, проведений американським інститутом Fitch Solutions, передбачив перемогу Е. Мнангагви через доступ правлячої партії до державного апарату та ресурсів. Майже всі опитування прогнозували, що вибори, хоч і не будуть вільними та справедливими, супроводжуватимуться насильством, а в результаті економіка Зімбабве занепаде.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/zimbabwe-facing-myriad-traditional-obstacles-ahead-of-general-elections-20230531>

Zimbabwe to hold general election on August 23rd

A failing economy, lawfare and a shrinking civic space are among the "traditional" obstacles facing Zimbabwe ahead of its general elections.

Zanu-PF is moving fast to enact the Patriotic Bill and Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill ahead of the polls.

Media practitioners from state and independent organisations say they are unable to carry out their mandates before the elections.

A tanking economy, lawfare, a shrinking civic space, propaganda, an electoral body under fire and disinformation have all come to the fore ahead of general elections in Zimbabwe.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa has gazetted Wednesday, 23 August as the election date.

Political parties have three months to convince the electorate to cast their votes for them.

If there is a run-off, it will be held on 2 October.

Various think tanks predict a close race between Mnangagwa and his biggest challenger, Nelson Chamisa of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC).

The latest survey on the elections by US institute Fitch Solutions predicted a Mnangagwa victory because of the ruling party's access to state machinery and resources.

"Zanu-PF's overarching resources and influence compared to the opposition CCC, headed by Chamisa, will preserve its support in rural strongholds and win key votes in low-income urban areas.

"Central to our belief that Zanu-PF will win the elections is the party's far greater political and economic resources it has to sway the vote in its favour," the organisation said.

Almost all surveys forecasted the elections, while not free and fair, would have violent episodes, and the outcome would leave Zimbabwe's economy in the doldrums.

Zimbabwe Electoral Commission under fire

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) will again oversee an election where its reputation is at its lowest.

Some of its commissioners have direct links to individuals with a vested interest in the elections.

One of them is Abigail Mohadi-Ambrose who is the daughter of former vice president Kembo Mohadi.

Mohadi stepped down from the government in 2021 after a sex scandal, which he claimed was fabricated by his political enemies.

However, he remains an integral part of Zanu-PF's election bid, going around the country campaigning for the party.

READ | Zimbabwe vice president Kembo Mohadi resigns

The ZEC's biggest headache is the voters' roll.

Opposition political parties have implored the electoral body to investigate anomalies found in the voters' roll such as missing names.

"Registered voters, who appeared on the biometric voters' roll's online inspection platform, are suddenly finding their names missing from the current online platforms.

"The voters' roll, under inspection, seems not to be synchronised with the new delimitation boundaries.

"Therefore, prospective voters have been displaced from their wards," Ian Makone, the CCC's secretary for elections, wrote to the ZEC.

The Election Resource Centre, an independent organisation, told journalists it looked like "the voters' roll has been tampered with and cannot, therefore, be trusted to deliver a credible election in its current rushed format".

Failing economy

Brian Moyo is a forex dealer by day and a street vendor by night, selling groceries at a time when the local dollar is fast losing value against major currencies such as the in-demand US dollar.

"These are the two most lucrative hustles for an unemployed person with or without political links," Moyo said.

On the streets, US\$1 can fetch as much as Z\$4 500, whereas the official bank states US\$1 is equivalent to Z\$1 965.

That means when pricing goods, shops must abide by the official bank rate, but they defy this by pegging their product well above that rate.

One of the leading companies in Zimbabwe, Innscor, a fast-food chain, pegged its products at US\$1 to Z\$2 900 on Wednesday.

The rate is much higher in pharmacies, where it can reach Z\$4 500.

A pharmacy owner said:

We increased our prices in the local dollar because we buy foreign currency from the streets. For an ordinary Zimbabwean earning in the local currency, the cost of living is high.

Mnangagwa said he believed the business community was hell-bent on destabilising his government.

"We see business destabilising the macroeconomy and, in the process, undermining the very effort towards arrears clearance and debt resolution," presidential spokesman George Charamba told state media.

Businessman James Ncube told News24 the economy was much harder to deal with than party politics.

"They can rig elections, but they cannot rig the economy. We buy fuel, a factor of production, in foreign currency, and we get that currency from the streets; the government has failed to assist us in many more aspects," he said.

Zimbabweans turn towards black market as inflation rises

Like all industries, the media has also been hard hit.

State media journalists, who mostly promote the government's messaging of an economy on the rebound, recently told their employer they were being incapacitated.

Some even hinted their situation would derail the ruling party's chances of an election win.

Journalists from the independent press have echoed the same sentiment.

Many feel the state of the economy and their employers' failure to increase their salaries will affect their mandate in covering the run-up to and the eventual polls.

The African Development Bank told Zimbabwe's government politics played a big role in the country's economic woes and a free and fair election would boost the country's prospects.

Lawfare

With three months to go before the polls, Mnangagwa is expected to sign the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill into law.

Its implementation will undermine freedom of association and expression.

According to Amnesty International, "the bill threatens civic society organisations working on human rights in Zimbabwe".

Another law the regime intends to pass ahead of the elections is the Patriotic Bill, which gives the National Prosecuting Authority the power to, at its discretion, charge people who undermine or use false statements to paint a bad picture of Zimbabwe to foreign governments.

But in reality, the law will muzzle journalists, critics, and the opposition from exposing corruption to the world, which according to it would be unpatriotic.

Zimbabwe President Mnangagwa vows 'free and fair' elections

One of the ruling party's fiercest critics, Job Sikhala of the CCC and a legislator for Zengeza, has been in prison for almost a year.

As things stand, with the nomination court sitting on 21 June, he might not be around to file his papers.

Instead, his son, Job junior, might stand on a CCC ticket.

Sikhala's arrest for alleged violence appears to be politically motivated, similar to that of Transform Zimbabwe president Jacob Ngarivhume.

Ngarivhume was convicted and sentenced to 48 months in jail for inciting public violence. He is serving an effective 36 months.

His jailing emanates from anti-corruption protests in July 2021.

Speaking at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, which was held earlier this month, CCC spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere said the arrests were a scare tactic to deter those who intended to oppose the government.

"The government's war against freedom and its weaponisation of the law against myself and other government critics, such as Job Sikhala and Jacob Ngarivhume, is calculated to send a chilling message to the rest of society.

"We're watching you, even on Twitter. And this is the punishment you get for participating in opposition politics," she added.