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**2011 General Election in Zimbabwe: A Panacea to Zimbabwe's  
Political and Governance Challenges?**

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## 2011 General Election in Zimbabwe: A Panacea to Zimbabwe's Political and Governance Challenges?

### Introduction

The Global Political Agreement government has clearly been rocky, and the dominant political parties in Zimbabwe this transitional government- ZANU PF and MDC-T, have both been struggling to work together.

Many Zimbabweans and outsiders have argued that the only way to resolve the problems within the GNU and the Zimbabwean crisis once and for all is to have an election which can come up with a decisive winner. Those who subscribe to this view believe that once Zimbabwe has a decisive winner (MDC-T/ZANU depending on one's political inclinations), the winner can proceed to form a strong government which will move the country forward politically and economically. According to this reasoning, Zimbabwe should therefore hold another election as soon as it has completed writing a new constitution (which ostensibly would create conditions for free and fair elections).

However, an early election is not a panacea to Zimbabwe's political and governance challenges because of a number of reasons.

### The Problems with an Early Election

**First and foremost**, Zimbabwe's problem is not an electoral problem evolving around election result deadlocks, but a political problem revolving around the lack of consensus among the main political parties about the future of Zimbabwe or what others would like to describe as the national question. Until the main political parties, at least begin to agree on certain aspects of this national question and how to co-exist as members of the same political community, Zimbabwe's political challenges cannot be expected to be resolved through elections- especially our first past the post elections which are tailored to give overwhelming power to one group to govern at the expense of the other (winner take all).

Thus, Zimbabwe's elections will always produce disputed results as long as they are held under the current system that is designed to give one political party overwhelming powers to govern. The winner take-all system fails to accommodate every Zimbabwean, especially those who lose power, in the same way that all successful transitions have (cf the 1980 transition in Zimbabwe and the 1994 transition in SA)

**Second**, resistance to change is centred around fears and uncertainties about the transition among those in power and their supporters. Though usually downplaying their personal security concerns when posturing politically, both President Mugabe and his hardliner supporters in ZANU PF and the security structures are afraid to hand over power to an alternative government, because they are not sure of what will happen to them after the transfer of state power. While Mugabe's continued rule is partly based on his high political ambitions, it is clear that his interest in holding on to power for life is pragmatically based on insecurities about what happens to him and his family after handing over power to another leader from inside or outside his party. ZANU PF hardliners, on the other hand, are more strategically concerned about their personal and economic security under a new political dispensation which they cannot trust or control. Equally worried about how the reconfiguration of the new state will affect their economic security are war

veterans who, alongside hundreds of thousands of peasants, were resettled on the government-confiscated farms.

**Third**, the conditions for a free election have not yet been created in Zimbabwe and another election before conditions on the ground have improved is going to lead to another hotly contested result. There is need for a comprehensive reform of Zimbabwe's electoral institutions first before the country can have an election. A reform of the electoral institutions, together with a new constitution, will help to establish some levels of transparency and accountability needed to ensure some freeness and fairness in the country's elections.

**Fourth**, because the country has been going through heavily disputed elections since 2000 and the limited ongoing political and electoral reforms have not been given space and time to take root, the result coming out of these elections is most likely going to be a source of political dispute. Thus, even if ZANU PF were to win these elections in a free and fair manner very few people will believe that that the victory was achieved fairly. The result is a continuation of the deadlock.

**Fifth**, an early election will most likely lead to a resurgence of violence, particularly in those communities where tensions from the previous election are still very much unresolved, and this will affect the ability of voters to cast their votes freely.

**Sixth**, even if political parties decide not to deploy violence in the 2011 election, an election within a very short space of time after the violent election of 2008 is bound to be influenced by memories of the previous election. Given the trauma of the 2008 violence, political parties will not even need to resort to violence this time around but will simply have to remind the victims of June 2008 to intimidate them. As long as the trauma of June 2008 has not been dealt with through time and practical interventions, any election held now is not only bound to destabilise the recovery processes in communities but also bound to fail to deliver a credible poll result.

**Seventh**, after the controversy around the 2008 election and the failure to change government through electoral politics, people need more time to have confidence in the electoral system, i.e., to have the belief that if they cast their vote it will really count for something. Anecdotal evidence from the media and public discussions suggest that many ordinary Zimbabweans are now more worried about government restoring the economy, creation of jobs and food security than an election that would not result in much political changes or that could further divide the country. Voter apathy will therefore most likely result in another inconclusive result. It is also likely to benefit ZANU PF, which has core supporters who have always voted for it in good and bad times.

An early election is thus most likely to result in voter apathy because the population is not ready for a new election, 2 years after going through another hotly contested and violent election. Zimbabweans have not healed from the trauma of the June 2008 election violence. For most ordinary Zimbabweans who have never experienced peaceful elections since 1980, elections are always associated with violence, death and destruction of property. An election before people are psychologically ready for another election is therefore most likely going to be shunned by most Zimbabweans, especially those affected by the violence of 2008.

## Suggestions on Way Forward

Clearly, an early election is not only bad for Zimbabwe but would definitely not resolve the long standing political and governance challenges of the country. What is at issue in Zimbabwe is not the question of whether 2011 or 2013 is the right time for Zimbabwe to hold elections, rather the relevant question is how psychologically prepared the leaders of political parties together with their supporters are to participate in free and fair elections; how mentally prepared are they to adhere to strict standards and rules that legitimize the electoral process itself; how politically prepared are losers to accept defeat gracefully however painful it might be; and how prepared are the winners to ascend to power and institute meaningful transformation without getting back at losers to abuse them.

What we must fear more than anything else is the possibility of Zimbabwe undergoing another flawed electoral process that fails to produce a winner. The consequences of going through another botched election are too ghastly to contemplate. It would be better to make do with the current problematic Inclusive Government than having another sham election that will destroy all the strides made so far particularly in the economic sectors.

The two dominant parties, ZANU PF and MDC-T, were both pushing for elections in order to gain absolute power to govern through the ballot. ZANU PF has its own internal party issues it is trying to resolve through these elections. MDC is also toying with the idea of an election its selfish party reasons.

This, in itself, raises the political stakes around elections for both parties, as it pushes up the price of both victory and defeat. Zimbabwe's political parties, therefore, need to reduce the political stakes around elections through political negotiations around how to accommodate each other in government, i.e. how both losers and victors accommodate each other in the system of governance. The best possible way through which Zimbabwe's political challenges can be addressed is through the adoption of a system of proportional representation which gives voice to all political stakeholders and other interest groups in the country.

However, the political and economic conditions in the country are not conducive for an election and the people are not ready for another election. The election is not going to help either ZANU PF or MDC much. Neither is it going to resolve the political dispute/impasse in the country. At best, the election is going to lead to a political and economic regression.

This is one election in the history of Zimbabwe that nobody in the country, except the political leaders calling for it, wants.

The GNU remains necessary in the interim to address areas of contestation and reforms as well as give political protagonists the opportunity and space to build trust and confidence in each other in the same way that the first GNU in post-independence Zimbabwe enabled the nationalists and the Rhodesians to build confidence and tolerance.

At the same time, because Zimbabwe's security structures have become so embedded in the electoral politics of the country state security reform supervised by civilians is a pre-requisite for free and fair elections. In contexts where Security Services and their civil military relationships appear contested as in

the case of Zimbabwe, it is necessary for the parties involved in elections to negotiate a Code of Conduct to alleviate tensions and to build confidence.

There is a general need for Zimbabwe to clear its underlying issues, such as the issues around the 2008 Presidential run-off, the tensions within the GPA and the general mistrust between the leadership of ZANU PF and MDC, before holding or even discussing the date of the next election.

The challenge for electoral politics in Zimbabwe lies in reassuring all those worried about possible change through elections that they have nothing to fear from electoral defeat. Zimbabwe, as in 1980 when the country was a knife-edge on the eve of the transition from Rhodesian rule to African majority rule, need to find a way of dealing with people's fears and uncertainties around elections.

The constitution is the key deliverable of the GPA and ideally it would set the stage for the holding of a free and fair election and create pillars that promote democracy. The new constitution should also present an opportunity for Zimbabweans to negotiate about the necessary constitutional guarantees they need to facilitate a smooth transfer of power from one party to another. With a clear transitional plan negotiated between the political parties and enshrined in the constitution, the chances of a disputed election in Zimbabwe are reduced.