2018 Elections: Panacea to Transformation or More of the Same?

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Zimbabwe's election season is now in full bloom as political parties launch their manifestos and criss-cross the country holding campaign rallies ahead of the elections set for 30 July 2018.

Of significance is that former president and Zanu PF leader, Robert Mugabe, together with his longstanding nemesis, but now deceased MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai, will not be factors in the coming elections.

Mugabe who dominated Zimbabwean politics through his iron-fist rule and stranglehold on the nation since independence in 1980, was pushed out of power by the military in November last year. Tsvangirai who was at the helm of his party since its formation in 1999, succumbed to cancer of the colon in April this year.

The absence of the two prominent Zimbabwean politicians undoubtedly changes the complexion of the elections game given their longstanding rivalry and dominance of the country's political landscape.

What sticks out between the two, is that their bitter rivalry and contestations were at the centre of Zimbabwe’s disputed elections dating as far back as the 2000 polls. The 2008 elections are a case in point in that regard after Tsvangirai pulled out of the presidential run-off elections citing violence and the murder of his supporters.

It is against allegations of rigged elections exacerbated by an uneven playing field skewed in Mugabe’s favour, that the former strongman’s successor, Emmerson Mnangagwa, is repeating the mantra of the importance of convening free, fair and credible elections.

That Zimbabwe needs to exorcise itself of the ghost of disputed election outcomes, cannot be over-emphasised and thus informs the theme of this edition of Thinking Beyond: 2018 Elections: Panacea to Transformation or More of the Same?

This question is addressed through various articles published in this edition by an array of diverse writers who offer their opinions, views and ideas on fundamental issues underpinning the 2018 elections. One key issue is on what needs to be done to secure free, fair and credible elections whose outcome will not be disputed as happened with the previous polls.

Other issues relate to whether the presence of elections observers such as SADC, African Union and from the previously banned European Union, will assist in opening the political space and ensuring a conducive elections environment. Also key to this is the credibility, impartiality and independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to conduct democratic elections.

What is at stake therefore, is whether the 2018 elections will pass the test in terms of the SADC Guidelines on the Conduct of Democratic Elections and African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance, among other regional and international instruments and best practice on democratic elections.

Suffice to say, another disputed election outcome will rob the nation of the opportunity to address the longstanding socio-economic ills and stagnation characterised by 90% unemployment, corruption and mismanagement of national resources.
In 2018 Zimbabwe finds itself in a novel situation which its admirers affectionately call a ‘new dispensation’ while its critics dismiss it as a ‘new error’.

It was occasioned by two momentous events that have reconfigured the country’s politics. The first was the dramatic, military-executed and mass-supported ‘soft’ coup of November 2017 which eased out the long-ruling Tsar of Zimbabwe, then 93-year old Robert Gabriel Mugabe, ushering in his long-time confidante and Vice-President, 75-year old Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa (popularly known as ED).

The soldiers, previously playing crucial but covert roles in the politics of the country, now entered the centre of the political stage with the former Commander of the Defence Forces (CDF), General Constantino Chiwenga, assuming the No 2 position of Vice-President of both the ruling ZANU PF and the State. Now ED is President of ZANU PF and Government while Chiwenga is one of the two Vice-Presidents in both institutions. The second VP is Kembo Mohadi, a prominent war veteran.

Thus, the top three in the party and Government have a martial background. More than ever before, Zimbabwe is now a fully-fledged party-military regime, raising questions about which of the two institutions is supreme and exercises veto power over the other.

The related and troubling concern is whether this alliance deepens democracy or reconsolidates electoral authoritarianism in Zimbabwe.

The second crucial event was in February 2018, that is, the untimely demise, through the Hand of God, of 65-year old Morgan Tsvangirai, veteran opposition leader of the 20-year old MDC-T. He was replaced (in a dramatic, albeit controversial Machiavellian style), by the 40-year-old Nelson Chamisa who immediately sought to re-energise his popular base and has done so with considerable success, so far. Combined, both events resulted in tectonic shifts in the country’s body politic. Thus, in a large sense, Zimbabwe finds itself in uncharted territory, without its two rival titans who had become political fixtures at the apex of the polity.

Paradoxically, the demise of both also raised waves of hope where there was despondency. The first wave of hope was when ED took over in November 2017 promising several public goods anchored on a ‘new, open and unfolding democracy’ and that the upcoming elections would be ‘free, fair, credible, transparent and peaceful’ to which international observers are invited to observe because there is ‘nothing to hide’.

On the economic front, the mantra since then has been that “Zimbabwe is open for business” and that, henceforth, economics will trump politics in the decision-making calculations of the new Government: “It is not anymore politics and politics, we are saying politics and economics”, he reiterated in late April 2018. The second wave was when Chamisa took over and reinvigorated his otherwise moribund party. Support for the MDC-T has surged from 16% of adult Zimbabweans sampled in February 2017 to 28% in May 2018.

Zimbabwe’s high stakes elections

It is election season in Zimbabwe, again. On 30 July 2018, Zimbabweans will be back in the ballot box for their sixth presidential and ninth parliamentary elections since independence in 1980.

Despite the fact that regular elections in the last 37 years neither produced an alternation of the party in power nor improved their welfare (which declined markedly post-2000 with the economy shrinking by half),
Zimbabweans are still enamoured of elections as the preferred method of choosing the political leadership of the country (see Figure 1 below).

As is clear and unambiguous, huge majorities across partisan affiliations, age, and education “agree” or “agree strongly” that people should choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections.

Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections. Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country’s leaders. (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Marching forward toward July 30, 2018, most Zimbabweans and many in the international community ponder over the likely quality of the elections, their outcome, and what this portends for the country and its citizens. For instance, a recent scientific survey conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI) in May 2018, exactly a quarter (75%) “agreed” or “very strongly agreed” that they can use their power as voters “to choose leaders who will help us to improve our lives”. Only a fifth (20%), felt that “no matter whom we vote for, things will not get better in the future”. This is a very strong testament to the power of the vote.

Will elections deliver?

Zimbabwe is presently a nation in despair but the ‘new dispensation’ and upcoming elections have generated high, if not over-inflated, hopes about the future. As of May 2018, more than six in 10 Zimbabweans (62%), said the country was going in the wrong direction and nearly three quarters (74%), describe macro-economic conditions as “fairly bad” or “very bad”.

However, a full half of the adult Zimbabweans (51%) expect the country’s economy to improve in the next 12 months i.e. after elections. An equal proportion (63%), regard voting as a civic duty and not just a matter of personal choice. Further, and despite saying the country is going in the wrong direction, a majority expressed high hopes for a good quality election and that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) is prepared for the harmonised elections.

That said, only a slim majority (53%), said ZEC performed its duties as a neutral body guided only by law while less than half (46%) trust the electoral management body. Overall, more than six in 10 Zimbabweans (62%), expect a free and fair election in July 2018.

Most significantly, there is a wide window of opportunity for Zimbabwe to turn the corner, consolidate the fledgling democratic transition and deliver what Zimbabweans say they want most i.e. jobs, an improved and stable economy, better health and education, all under a corruption-free, accountable government.

Zimbabwe’s two-horse race

Mnangagwa and his ZANU PF as well as Chamisa and his MDC-T/Alliance are not the only political gladiators on the political stage. In fact, the Zimbabwe political universe is inhabited by a bevy of more than 120 parties - many dismissed as ‘fly-by-night’ outfits - but only two really matter, i.e. ZANU PF and the MDC-T/Alliance.

Both anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that in the upcoming harmonised elections, the other parties and their leaders are not likely to attract more than miniscule popular support. The May 2018 MPOI/Afrobarometer survey fully attests to this with only a total of about 1% supporting parties other than ZANU PF and the MDC-T/Alliance. In short, Zimbabwe’s political system has, since 2000, coagulated into a two-party polity – see Figure 2.
On the basis of circumstantial and empirically-based evidence, this article speculates that the 30 July election will be a ‘turnout election’ i.e. the outcome will depend on who gets out the vote. As it is essentially a two-horse contest, the verdict will be decided on who of the two horses mobilises his popular base.

Which of the political parties and their respective leaders will be able to marshal the electorate on election day. Further, and given that more than a quarter of the electorate (26%, is reticent about its voting intentions, who will harness this large pool of voters? The history of post-2000 elections (and even before, teaches us that ZANU PF has both the organisational presence as well as more mobilisational capacity to do get its supporters to the polling booth, especially in the rural areas.

I further speculate that, ceteris paribus, the incumbent regime will be endorsed, most probably in the lower to mid-50% in the first round of the presidential election and achieve a simple majority in Parliament. However, all things are not always equal and there are still many big unknowns - including the weather! - that may upset the best predictions.

**post-election Zimbabwe**

While Zimbabweans are yearning for a good quality election - which is a public good in and of itself - they hope that such a credible election will be the vehicle that will carry the country from Egypt to Canaan, from the old, broken, and unhappy Zimbabwe to a new and better socio-economic and political order that is governed in the interests of all i.e. a Zimbabwe for all and free of the pariah status it was burdened with in the last one-and-half decades.

As we see it, and notwithstanding that old habits die hard, the auguries are good and promising. The paper is more sanguine about the future since ‘Black Friday’ in November 1997. The political climate and, with it, the electoral environment, have never been freer, even when restrictive legislation - POSA and AIPPA being most notorious - that limits some political rights, liberties and freedoms remains on the statute books,

All things being equal, Zimbabwe is poised for free and fair enough elections that in all probability will be found to be acceptable by most stakeholders, inside and outside the country.

In terms of post-election governance, and regardless of who wins, Zimbabwe is likely to take a liberal trajectory, more so in its economic path and perhaps less so in its politics. At worst, we are poised for the so-called ‘China model’ (also called the Rwanda model) that entails liberal economics and illiberal politics.

Many also wonder whether the current, apparently more open and freer political environment is sustainable and will endure beyond the elections. This is the too-good-to-be-true tendency in Zimbabwe political society. I am inclined to think the ‘good times’ will outlast the elections. There is a strong sense that the post-November 2017 momentum is irreversible and that the chances of backsliding are minimal if not blocked. Though it is difficult to rule out regression, I would say that relapse, though possible, is improbable.

Further, there is a moderately high probability of a post-election coalition government. Though the victors might find it irresistible to go solo and consolidate their rulership, it would be unwise to do so in the context of a fragile economy in a polarised society and where nation-building is a compelling imperative.

Moreover, members of the coalition government need not be partisan political gladiators but could and ought to be drawn from the wide spectrum of Zimbabwe society.

Whatever the outcome, new Zimbabwe will never be the same again.

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**Figure 2:**
Understanding the fall of big wigs in mainstream political parties

The November 2017 coup deposed President Mugabe from power but at the same time demystified his godly-cult on the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF).

Following the departure of President Mugabe under acrimonious circumstances was the tragic death of MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai on the 14th of February 2018. These two events inadvertently led to seismic shifts in Zimbabwe’s main political parties as shown by the results of their primary elections.

A significant number of the so-called political heavy weights fell by the wayside in the MDC-T/Alliance and ZANU PF primary elections. In some cases, special political arrangements had to be made to accommodate the fallen ‘Big Wigs’. While there have been a number of plausible explanations ranging from accusations of vote rigging and a host of electoral malpractices by the losers, one unexplored explanation is the silent transition that has been brewing in Zimbabwe’s body politic.

The loss of the big wigs has to be understood within the context of a silent transition, voting demographic shifts and fatigue with the old.

reconfigured political economy

Zimbabwe’s 2018 electoral battle lines will largely be based on Professor Raftopoulos’ (2014) reconfigured political economy. Ever since the launch of the Fast Track Land Reform Settlement Programme, Zimbabwe has experienced a processes of new class formations that is creating new social classes with their own set of electoral demands.

Various social groups have emerged in Zimbabwe’s reconfigured economy and these include vendors, cross border traders, small business operators, new farmers, artisanal minors (makorokoza), commuter omnibus and taxi operators, rank touts and marshals, saloon and backyard shop owners, among many others, in the informal economy.

On the surface these groups appear inconsequential and might hide from the analyst some very important realities about Zimbabwe’s social base and its import to the electoral field configuration. Crucially, a cursory look at these different groups does not reveal the ‘structural forces’ that must be understood by those seeking political office. Yet when the aggregate voice of these groups is marshalled together, it builds a cogent political narrative yearning for change and transformation of the state to produce solutions that address livelihood questions.

This is the reality that had eluded most of Zimbabwe’s political leadership within the MDC-T and ZANU PF. Put simply, the difference between Zimbabwe’s major political parties is now just in name rather than alternative political culture and practices.

Public office, either at central or local government level, had been reduced to dinner tables where political elites have been conspiring against ordinary citizens. In essence public office was reduced into an exercise in ‘Eating’ and not service delivery. As the elites dined and wined, they forgot to maintain their relations with their constituencies.

The lesson to the Big Wigs has been that elections are not only about fulfilling symbolic and periodic rituals, but also consist of the socio-economic and political forces that inform and condition voting behaviour patterns.

For the Makorokoza it is about how they will be able to continue or expand their gold scrounging activities; the cross border traders, how they will be able to bring their merchandise with less hassle from ZIMRA; the commuter omnibus operators, how they will be protected from the marauding police on the roads and the new farmers, how they will have access to inputs, markets and cash after selling produce, is what will most likely give compelling reasons to the electorate on why it is necessary to vote for certain candidates.

Voters always cast their votes for those who identify with their cause and this explains why most of the political Big Men fell.

the end of big men

The demise of Mugabe - due to the coup - and Tsvangirai - due to nature - was a significant defining moment that put an end to the politics of the Big Men. These two nemesis had become the thesis and anti-thesis of Zimbabwe’s body politic.
building larger than life personality cults and domineering politics. Those opposed to Mugabe’s rule bore the brunt of the emperor’s whip as he was meant to rule from the grave. Expressing ambition to succeed Mugabe was considered treasonous and Joice Mujuru had to pay dearly for this as well as Emmerson Nangqwa having to be saved by the military.

The disciplining of those expressing ambition to succeed Mugabe had the net effect of bottling clamours for internal renewal and change, but failed to extinguish the ambers of internal change within ZANU PF. Critically, Mugabe survived three rebellions: Tsholotsho Declaration in 2004; Bhora Musango in 2008 and Gamatox of 2015. He finally, succumbed to the November 2017 coup.

Within opposition politics, Tsvangirai had become a colossus and deity who couldn’t be questioned. Those who dissented with him, experienced the wrath of the infamous Morgan’s whip which was equated to God’s whip - ‘Shamhu yaMorgan yakafanana neshamhu yaMwari’ - within opposition and civil society circles.

Morgan’s whip was either exercised through violence against opponents via a Vanguard or what is known as physical counselling in the pro-democratic movement and squeezing of funding taps by the Black Donors ( Local donor workers who acted as gatekeepers to those opposed to Morgan’s rule).

Tsvangirai survived three revolts: Welshman Ncube’s 2005 split; Chamisa/Biti Project 2016 plot at the 2014 Congress and Biti/Mangoma 2015 Renewal split. Morgan finally succumbed to nature and this marked the fall of the last strongman of Zimbabwe’s opposition.

Mugabe and Tsvangirai were the last strongmen of Zimbabwe’s politics and with their demise, the cults that they built will crumble like a deck of cards, giving opportunity for the birth of a new order. The post-Mugabe/Tsvangirai period will most likely see the emergence of pluralistic politics and put rest to politics of the Big Men. This is a phenomenon that Mugabe and Tsvangirai loyalists failed to read and understand, that once their High Priest fell, it was time to leave the pulpit.

King Midas beautiful clothes and the baboons.

By the time Mugabe and Tsvangirai exited the political stage, it had become clear that winds of change were slowly brewing up in Zimbabwe’s major parties. However, within both parties, expressing ambition to challenge the dear leader was considered treasonous. Dissent was muzzled and all fissures closed, yet beneath the surface pressure was boiling and waiting for one opportune moment to blow up.

Apologists in ZANU PF and MDC-T sang relentlessly and in trance style on how the Emperor’s clothes were beautiful, despite being naked. In ZANU PF, it was Gushungo chete, chete (Mugabe only, only). In MDC-T it was Save chete, chete (Tsvangirai only, only) in reference to occupying the presidency. This is despite that Mugabe’s advanced age and misrule was cause for concern as well as Tsvangirai’s failing health and becoming an electoral issue.

Mugabe and Tsvangirai’s supporters, like ostriches, buried their heads in the sand in the face of calls for renewal. They resorted to authoritarian tactics to stay in power, ignoring the voices of change. Mugabe and Tsvangirai had loyalists to effect their domination, who also became the faces of their rule within the constituencies.

Unbeknown to the two Big Men and their loyalists, was that people wanted real change and could no longer be taken for granted as once remarked by the late Vice President Simon Muzenda, that even if ZANU PF puts a baboon, the electorate had to vote for it. These winds of change are still blowing and will shake down more ‘Big Wigs’ in the general elections especially, where the political parties have ignored the people’s will.

The time of putting baboons (into public office), is over as there is a silent transition brewing.

when the genie is out

The Coup and Tsvangirai were the final acts that let the Genie out of the bottle and the impact has been earth shaking. The shift in voting demographics where the majority of the voters are below 35 years is instructive in understanding why the old fell on the wayside.

This demographic is the one that dominates the various social groups identified in this essay and bore the brunt of the burden of the political and economic crisis whilst the elites across the political divide has been pre-occupied with their public emoluments. Politics was reduced to an exercise in scavenging for residential and commercial stands, government and municipal tenders, Member of Parliament and Councillors’ allowances and the Cars (Ford Rangers), that comes with being in Parliament.

In essence, politics in Zimbabwe had become defined by the congruency of elite interests across the divide or what Blogger Takura Zhangazha terms ‘The permanence of elitist politics’.

concluding thoughts: when milk is spilt.

A combination of the reconfigured political economy, fatigue with the old and shifting voting demographics, are instructive in understanding the casualties of the ‘Big Wigs’ in the primary elections of Zimbabwe’s two major political parties.

The message to the young over the years was that politics is all about eating and not public service, hence the intense contestations and big thuds that were heard in the primary elections. The milk is already spilt and there is no going back on the silent transition. It is now a matter of Dan Fulani’s “God’s Case, No Appeal”. The dice is cast and the winds of change are blowing and more of the old will succumb to the young.

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IN any democratic state, people must be able to voice their opinions on any subject, especially if their rights are guaranteed by the constitution. Every individual has a right to make their ideas known to the community and others.

Ideally, individuals with the same ideas come together and form a group and it is such groups that eventually decide to seek power and become a part of a country’s political system. On this basis, political parties are formed so that these groups can be noticed and given attention while pushing its ideas.

For political parties to gain traction, they need to find or attract many people who approve and share the same ideas with them. It is when armed with the large numbers of people that a political party will have the confidence to take on the sitting government because it knows it has the necessary support.

Due to the contestation of ideas and multiplying number of political parties, the government feels pressure and not wanting to lose its political power also tries to come up with its own innovative ideas that will maintain the confidence and possible votes of people. Therefore political parties are necessary watchdogs to keep the government of the day in check. Interestingly, Zimbabwe, a country with a population of 13 million, has more than 120 political parties that have expressed interest to participate in this year’s elections to be held in July.

Unlike previous elections, the 2018 elections will not feature Robert Mugabe, the former president who was deposed last year in a coup d’état after ruling for 37 years. In the same vein, this election will not feature the ‘godfather’ of oppositional politics - Morgan Tsvangirai, who had been battling Mugabe for years, after he succumbed to cancer of the colon early this year.

Former Vice President, Joice Mujuru, is leading her own charges -the Peoples Rainbow Coalition while disgruntled former Zanu PF members will also contest under their own National Patriotic Front. But these are not the only reasons why the light will be shone on Zimbabwe’s elections.

The army, which took over from Mugabe’s administration, led by Emmerson Mnangagwa, is fervently hoping for voters to cement and sanitise its hold on power while the MDC alliance led by a youthful Nelson Chamisa hopes to take full charge. Adding more glamour or humour to the elections is that a total of 123 parties, according to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) are participating in the vote.

With 123 political contestations, one can imagine the insurmountable amount of candidates that would be on one ballot paper.

The question that most people have been asking is does having 123 political parties make sense and what is their purpose. Perhaps these parties are spurred by the rot (economic, socially, politically) that has enveloped the country for 38 years. Political parties, as they are known - state their philosophies, put forward candidates to represent, explain this philosophy and lastly organise people to vote for them. Research has also proved that political parties serve these key functions: mobilise voters, choose suitable candidates to 
represent their cause, come up with governance strategies and monitor the party that is in government.

If one looks at the major political parties in Zimbabwe, Zanu PF and the opposition MDC, factionalism in the former and jostling for positions in the latter, shows that nowadays political parties concern themselves more with nominating candidates, blabbering about winning of office rather than governing and creating influential policies.

It can also be argued that politics in Zimbabwe has become highly commercialised. Our politics have become that of self-interest and making profit. Individuals are no longer motivated by the need to serve but are spurred on by greed and feeding their own bellies.

An alert electorate should quiz themselves about the motives of the 123 political parties. Do these parties seek to bring transformation or disaster? Will these political parties be able to field capable, credible candidates willing to serve or are they fielding a team of wannabes? A majority of these 123 political parties are start-up organisations and it is prudent to ask if they will be able to mobilise voters or if they have the energy to actively seek out people.

More controversially, what is the fundraising structure of many of these parties considering that the Zimbabwean economy is stagnant and suffering from a cash crisis?

In short, who is funding these political parties? Do these parties finance their candidates or the candidates are left to finance their own campaigns?

As in the case in Zimbabwe, political parties that meet a particular threshold of representation receive access to funding and the only parties that access this money from the national budget is Zanu PF and the MDC-T.

This raises more question as to how the start-up or smaller political parties will access fundraising to advance their political aims.

It is no secret that a well organised political campaign needs funds to run efficiently and it is evident that bigger political parties need more resources because they have larger constituencies, high administrative and operational costs.

For instance, as the country approaches July, political party funding has come under the spotlight in Zimbabwe.

The ruling Zanu PF managed to purchase regalia and vehicles worth an alleged US$70 million for its campaign bragging that “…we have 15 million T-shirts, 15 million caps…This year we want every party member to have at least three caps and three t-shirts. We want to paint the country with our regalia…”

Yet, the opposition is struggling to do the same for its own members.

Zanu PF spending large shows that running a political campaign is no child’s play and to showcase its own worth as a party is flaunting that it has the funds to do so. If the major opposition parties that have been in existence for years are struggling to keep up with Zanu PF with regards to oiling their campaigns, will these smaller and start-up parties be able to do it? If they can, will they be able to present their funding statements to the public? In fact are all these political parties, at the very least able to publicly present their budgets and operating costs for public scrutiny?

Political parties, mostly the opposition, are supposed to keep a close eye on the ruling party and confront it when it does a policy misstep and inform the public about it. The important role of political parties cannot be denied in a proper functioning political system, but is it beneficial for a country such as Zimbabwe to create a whole slew of them? There is a likelihood that all of these 123 parties will overburden the electorate, which is already fatigued from too much political rhetoric. It is also possible that if people with many similar ideas run against each other, voters may choose a candidate based on who was more exposed to them rather than who was more qualified to lead.

The growth of political parties is still very important for understanding Zimbabwean electoral politics and the electoral environment today, but without the backing of a major political party, there are fewer chances that a candidate from a start-up party can be elected president.

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By Takura Zhangazha

Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) chairperson, Justice Priscilla Chigumba made an important national announcement in February 2018.

Speaking at a Parliamentary committee on Justice and Legal affairs organised meeting, she made it known that thus far (February 2018) in the Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) process of the 5 million plus number of registered voters, 60% of them are between the ages of 18 and 40 years.

If one expected the mainstream media to go apoplectic with this officially announced statistic, it didn’t happen. Across the state and the private media in Zimbabwe. At least in the immediacy of Justice Chigumba’s statement.

Social media on the other hand went slightly haywire. And this is particularly with reference to users sympathetic to the mainstream opposition MDC-T and its informal offshoot, the MDC Alliance. They expressed their optimism in lieu of the new ascendancy, controversial as it may seem, of one of the appointed acting presidents of the same party, Nelson Chamisa.

The ruling Zanu PF side of social media was understandably somewhat muted. Probably because shooting from the hip about age and political capacity may be a slightly vulnerable point for them. At least on social media.

In both respects, and no matter how much raving, ranting or muting that may occur on social media platforms, I am certain that the main political parties that will contest the 2018 harmonised elections, should they be serious about their political ambitions, are probably frenetically crunching the electoral numbers. And this should be in at least three respects.

Firstly, they need to crosscheck their own numbers (membership lists and so on) against those that the biometric voter registration process has produced so far. That is to say, on their membership and supporter estimates, how many young people of the same did they get to finally become registered voters? In this they must then cross check their own figures with those of ZEC. By polling station, ward, district, province.

Then after putting together their figures and again, by way of the mathematical calculus that is ‘probability’, measure the likely voter turnout in what they perceive to be their respective strongholds. And after such a serious process, work on the figures they perceive they do not have in areas that they know are not their traditional strongholds.

I know it’s a hard ask especially of a divided but more significantly deliberately repressed Zimbabwean political opposition. Whether it be in the form of newfound attempts at an ‘Alliance’ or as various splinter or new parties.

For the ruling Zanu PF party, it’s an easier ask. Mainly because it is a ruling party, an incumbent. Even after a ‘coup-not-a-coup’ in November 2017. It however has to contend with queries as to who mobilised the voter registration process in its own rural strongholds.

And whether it can claim these new registered young voters did so as mobilised by the party or as a result of its own factionalism. And in the latter, which faction in or out of power can persuade them to vote for the party in its own perceived traditional strongholds.

The second key consideration for political parties in the 2018 harmonised election is the fact that they have to think about the social aspects of the 60% young voter demographic. Who exactly are these young people? What do they do? Where and why? What is their gender?

Where they understand this, they then fashion out policies that relate to solving problems that these young voters face in aide of giving democratic value to their campaign requests for support from these young voters.

Should the political parties hunker down to these key questions, they will find that a majority of young Zimbabweans are looking to survive. Not only by way of subsistence (vendors, kombi drivers), but on a more ambitious, desired lifestyle basis (money-changers, car-dealers,
informal wholesale suppliers, tobacco farmers, ranchers, urban transport/kombi owners). In their wildest dreams they want the materialistic lifestyle that benefactors can offer them.

Or they want to be left in political patronage ‘peace’ to get there via the many patronage, religious and other networks that they are invariably part of.

The third and final consideration is that of not forgetting the 40% by ostracising it in favour of the young voter. This is particularly so because in most instances the 40% remains decisive in ‘political’ opinion leadership and where it concerns the rural vote is in the great majority of socio-economic leadership positions (chiefs, headmen, teachers, businessmen, and clergy).

But more importantly, there is no single political party that can win a majority of the 60% young voters. They will require significant chunks of both the 40% and 60% to win the presidency and have a majority in parliament.

And even if ZEC’s final figures reduce the proportion of young voters to older ones, it will not be far from its initial registered young voters count of 60%.

Given our political realities, 60% alone will not win it for a singular party. But any serious political party will know that it has its work cut out to get a majority of these registered young voters on their side.

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It is a mistake to think that the upcoming watershed elections will be fought in the realm of ideas. That is an elitist approach which will not bear fruit this year.

Those in the ghettos of urban settlements and rural areas where we are from will support this assertion.

This year’s elections are like that battle between Will Smith’s Suicide Squad and The Enchantress in the movie, Suicide Squad. They are a literal fight between good and evil and it will be folly to expect less than this thinking from the electorate. Ask me, I live in the ghetto and am from the rural areas.

ZANU PF is The Enchantress, it has been there since before our time, has been given a mandate to govern and failed countless times. Though it was ‘rejuvenated’ by the November 2017 coup which toppled its former leader, its tainted history over his 37-year rule is its Achilles heel.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa has a lot to prove and what his party has to offer will not be considered in this year’s context, but that of previous elections, the ones which brought ZIMASSET, the 10-Point Plan, MERP and ZEDs.

It is very difficult for ZANU PF to promise anything other than democracy in this year’s elections, especially after failing to create the 2.2 million jobs they promised the ghetto youths now drowning in Broncleer (Bronco) deep down in Mbare.

It will not be easy for Zimbabweans to accept the ‘new promises’ and forget the ‘old ones’ except of course if those Zimbabweans are part of the Mbare Chimurenga Choir which in lightning speed had changed allegiance from Mugabe to ED.

Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-Alliance) presidential candidate, Nelson Chamisa’s presidential card will not pass because he has promised bullet trains, airports or $15 billion from US President Donald Trump. Chamisa stands a chance to win the next election because he is offering hope to the people of Zimbabwe.

After close to four decades in the doldrums, Chamisa stands as the only way...
through which Zimbabweans can finally put a nail in the coffin of Mugabeism which is manifesting itself in ED and vice president, Constantino Guvheya Nyikadzino Chiwenga.

Of course, the opposition leader seems to get over excited whenever he gets close to a microphone and ends up going the White City way where he told the world that former vice President Joshua Nkomo’s family had endorsed him.

Chamisa is offering bullet trains and an airport for each town, which simply translates to economic and infrastructural development.

I understand though, ZANU PF rule under former president, Robert Mugabe limited Zimbabwe’s dreams. That autocratic son of Gushungo drilled doubt into our hearts and that is the reason it took so long for him to go.

This is no ordinary election. Not only because the two figures (the late MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai and former president Mugabe), who have dominated the Zimbabwean political scene are no longer part of it but because of the ‘1980 Independence’ feeling it is exuding.

No one can guarantee that under Chamisa, the country will experience growth and at the same time no one can dispute that Mnangagwa is Mugabe’s protégé. They ran down the country together.

Words mean a lot in politics but history has a way of coming back to haunt and judge even the most powerful men. It is easy to talk about ZANU PF and the MDC Alliance while forgetting the other parties.

However, it is important for the media to cover the more than 120 political parties and alliances which have mushroomed these past two years. This will assist the electorate in making informed decisions. The question is still the same. What do they offer?

The challenge with these other political parties and alliances is that they are made up of disgruntled politicians who after being chucked out of the ‘big brother’ parties seek either to spoil the party or gain power so as to have the last laugh. It is very difficult to talk of Rainbow Coalition presidential candidate, Joice Teurai Ropa Mujuru’s campaign without taking into cognisance the reason she is in opposition and how it came about. It is necessary to remember that she too was part of the Zimbabwean failure and only got into opposition politics after being bundled out of the revolutionary party by the former first lady, Grace Mugabe, in humiliating fashion.

Though she is now a critique of the system, her ties to the oppressive ZANU PF system can never be questioned. At one time she declared that ZANU PF is the only home she knew. I doubt that Mujuru, having been part of the system can succeed to end tyranny within the country. I have no idea what exactly she stands for except that she wants to be president too.

Coalition of Democrats (CODE) presidential candidate, Elton Mangoma is a good man, but his noble project is not for this generation. He is a principled leader but with the euphoria that Chamisa has brought and the ‘heroic’ ED, he might not be visible in the final lap.

If ED legitimately takes power in this year’s elections we should expect an economically liberal but politically autocratic state. Mnangagwa might take a capitalist approach to governance as he has already hinted by opening us up to business at Davos, in China and at any other opportunity he has been given to say ‘Zimbabwe is open for business.’

He might represent economic development but will definitely retain the disastrous oppressive characteristics of his father, Mugabe. More of the same.

His greatest undoing is the doubt which Zimbabweans have about him whenever they consider his label as ‘Mugabe’s henchman,’ or the spine chilling ‘Garwe’ (crocodile).

Chamisa despite all the hope the youths have in him, he is not a Morgan Tsvangirai. He has many more flaws but what Zimbabweans can expect under his rule is the return of the rule of law which is the main thing lacking in Zimbabwe if we are to move forward as a country.

With proper planning and implementation, he alone can unseat the Junta. He stands a better chance of leading Zimbabwe into the promised land which Chiwenga and ED were made to believe was theirs for the taking by Zion Christian Church (ZCC) leader, Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi.

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Elections are a central feature of democracy. For elections to express the will of the electorate, they must be ‘free and fair’.

‘Free’ means that all those entitled to vote have the right to be registered and to vote and must be free to make their choice. In Zimbabwe every citizen over the age of 18 is entitled to vote. An election is considered ‘free’ when you can decide whether or not to vote and vote freely for the candidate or party of your choice without fear or intimidation. A ‘free’ election is also one where you are confident that who you vote for remains your secret.

‘Fair’ means that all registered political parties have an equal right to contest the elections, campaign for voter support and hold meetings and rallies. This gives them a fair chance to convince voters to vote for them.

A fair election is also one in which all voters have an equal opportunity to register, where all votes are counted, and where the announced results reflect the actual vote totals.

To ensure credible elections, the opposition alliance which is led by Advocate Nelson Chamisa is seeking as many as 10 electoral reforms that include scaling down the role of military or ex-military officials in the electoral commission, an audit of the voters’ roll, transparency in the procurement of ballot papers and voting materials, and the presence of international observers during the elections.

President Emerson Mnangagwa has promised a free and fair election, but can he walk the talk for a man who is accused of toppling Mugabe out of power using military back up.

“We will ensure that Zimbabwe delivers free, credible, fair and indisputable elections to ensure Zimbabwe engages the world as a qualified democratic state,” Mnangagwa said.

Mnangagwa is also accused of being behind the 2008 violence which saw more than 100 people being killed during the 27 June 2008 (presidential election) run-off.

Can we trust this man to bring a credible election in Zimbabwe? If he loses can he hand over power to the opposition?

Can the Mnangagwa-led government ensure all this prior to the 2018 plebiscite? We have seen people in rural areas being asked to produce their registration slips to ZANU PF activists in rural and urban areas something which is illegal.

Zanu PF has been moving around giving people food and denying opposition supporters such aid accusing them of being “sell outs”. Can we expect a free and fair election from such people.

Tawanda Chimhini the Director of Election Resource Centre offered some solutions for Zimbabwe to achieve a credible election process.

For Zimbabwe to achieve a free and fair elections our chiefs in rural areas should be politically neutral rather than siding with one political party, there must be a return to constitutionalism. This means that Mnangagwa must respect
constitutional constraints on his power such as term limits and that the security forces must agree to respect the outcome of elections and not seek to influence them regardless of the liberation credentials of the successful party or candidates.

Human rights must be protected. It is essential that both the military and ZANU-PF commit to this principle. Their failure to do so has been a constant problem in previous elections. Zimbabwe needs to see an end to the intimidation of voters and the politicisation of food aid and other services, especially in rural areas.

The military has taken on a more prominent political role because of its removal of Mugabe and its installation of Mnangagwa in power. This needs to be swiftly reversed. A free and fair election can only happen under a civilian government.

The military, therefore, needs to return to barracks and there needs to be a public commitment that all security forces, including the police, are meant to serve and protect all the people of Zimbabwe without fear or favour.

These changes need to be effectively communicated so that ordinary Zimbabweans know that they can participate in the election without risking their personal safety.

This means that the government needs to lead in the peace and reconciliation process, to acknowledge past wrongs, apologise to victims and persuade the population that similar things will not happen again.

Philemon Jambaya is a social political commentator

THE moment one echoes ‘elections’ in an African locale, violence nippily unsettles the political nerves of the electorate mostly in the rural communities.

In the Zimbabwean context, the military meddling in politics on partisan lines is unconstitutional and thus, Mr Robert Mugabe (former president), had legitimacy challenges after every election.

Having mentioned this, drawing lines for the military and urging them to stay out of polls as European Union has already advised, becomes a huge and primary requisite for free, fair and credible elections in Zimbabwe this year.

The military’s presence in rural areas on the eve of the election entrenches fear among the people and it is a disenfranchisement stratagem targeted at opposition’s voters. Deploying the army in rural areas also violates the Constitution, precisely Section 211 (3) which says: “The defence forces must respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of all persons and be non-partisan, national in character, patriotic, professional and subordinate to the civilian authority as established by this constitution.”

Reading Section 211 together with Section 214, further elaborates the unconstitutionality of the deployment of the army in the rural areas. Section 214 reads in part: “the President must cause Parliament to be informed, promptly and in appropriate detail, of the reasons for their deployment and (1) where they are deployed in Zimbabwe …”

President Emmerson Mnangagwa has not told parliament about army deployment in rural areas. Thus, upholding the Constitution becomes important for legitimacy sake in this election.

Zimbabwe’s political environment especially during the election period is compounded and led by liberation struggle phobia. This sets up a war mode which contradicts the conduct of fair, free and credible elections in July. The military henceforth should be withdrawn from villages for the chlorination of the electoral environment.

This will also promote freedom of association which forms one of the fundamental keys to free, fair and credible elections.

The elections are also being conducted on the back of the military’s declaration that the army will not salute civilian leadership in the event that he or she wins an election. This statement, MDC-T president (Nelson Chamisa) has called for it to be reversed so that the election is conducted on a corrected bad precedence.

Sanity must be restored in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) so that it conducts itself autonomously before and during elections in a transparent manner. ZEC needs a serious cleansing amid allegations that more than half of its working staff comprises of serving and retired military personnel. The military is
alleged to be fronting President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s candidature just like they did with Mr Robert Mugabe before. In that regard, demilitarisation of ZEC is another prerequisite for credible elections to succeed in Zimbabwe.

Still on ZEC, the ballot paper printing and ink to be used for voting processes must be treated with uttermost democratic respect. Chamisa, speaking at the launch of the peace document in the capital (Harare) said: “We will not do anything without dealing with the issue of ballot papers and the ink that is going to be used.

On this one we are prepared to surrender ourselves before we surrender our victory, this is so important.”

All contesting parties should be served with the information regarding the number of ballot papers to be used in this election. The ink to be used must be known. All the contracted companies to supply all concerned election material must be clearly known to all contesting parties. ZEC must also submit voters roll for inspection to all political contestants and there must be a rational satisfaction from the contestants. ZEC need to act in good faith with the number of polling stations intended to serve the electorate.

The vote count must be transparent in the presence of all political parties’ representatives. In memory of Joseph Stalin: “The people who cast the votes decide nothing; the people who count the votes decide everything.” Counting of votes in this regard is the final important stage and ZEC must be faithful in that regard. The opposition political parties should also play a role for the country to have an accepted election outcome. They need to set up a team comprising of technical, legal and political experts as well as activists who are immune to manipulation across the country prior to and during the election.

The team must be trained so that it watches with vigilance in order to be able to pick anomalies during voting and counting. Another important area to look at is the political positions of traditional chiefs in rural areas. Their position influences the election outcome, a pattern that has characterised Zimbabwe’s elections. The 2013 Zimbabwe-adopted constitution draws the line for traditional chiefs, advising them to conduct themselves in an apolitical manner.

Section 281 (2) says: “Traditional leaders must not be members of any political party or in any way participate in partisan politics … further the interests of any political party.”

On the contrary, the Election Resource Centre (ERC) in January 2018 dragged the Chiefs Council boss, Fortune Charumbira, to court over his allegiance to Zanu PF which he pronounced publicly urging traditional leaders to support Zanu PF in this coming election.

Traditional chiefs have thus been turned into Zanu PF political commissars embarking on an intimidation overdrive and politically victimising defenceless villagers. Going forward, traditional chiefs should revise and retract the statement made by their boss Mr Charumbira. This will set a conducive environment for credible elections.

Another critical benchmark in order for this election to produce accepted outcomes is to allow the media to conduct itself freely without being influenced along political party lines. This is in line with the media’s universal grand design which is to disseminate information on an impartial basis.

This is the fourth estate’s great commission in which the expectation is to discharge watchdogging roles on the executive, judiciary and the parliamentarians. For Zimbabwe to have fair, free and credible elections the media’s original commission must be restored first. The state media should be encouraged to give all political players equal space. This will enable the electorate to sufficiently elect contestants on informed basis.

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, has often been employed as an intimidating tool on the eve and during elections in the past. The famous video footage that used to dominate adverts on ZBCTV’s prime time, shows two cars colliding in a fatal accident followed by a non-sympathetic voice saying: “Another is to die, don’t commit suicide, vote Zanu PF and live.” The international election observer team must be allowed to assess ZEC’s capability to conduct elections. The observer team must be also served with information to do with ballot paper printing for them to approve the outcome.

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Elections used to be easier and simpler when there were few political parties to choose from.

But when you have 118 parties as well as a large number of aspiring independent candidates, you are not just spoilt for choice but quite confused too.

Political parties provide a sense of belonging and moral support for candidates. They also frown on independence of thought which might not be in line with what is dictated by the leader. There is a slim chance or no room for an independent mind in organised political parties.

As Zimbabwe heads for elections in July, the number of people seeking public office who feel restricted by party politics continues to increase. There are young men and women who have registered their intention to contest for council or legislative seats.

They all have one thing in common - a strong abhorrence for the restrictions imposed by political parties. They also feel that political parties have failed to drive economic change and to promote political renewal.

Disenchantment with traditional political parties has given rise to the number of aspiring independent candidates. Some of these aspiring candidates know exactly what it is that needs to be done to fix Zimbabwe’s problems. They are determined to see change but they do not want to be restrained by strictures of political parties so they are going it alone.

While competition in all spheres of life including in politics is important and good for democracy, the large number of independent candidates will certainly upset whatever gains in numbers the established political parties hope to get. There are people who will only vote for Zanu PF, MDC-T (MDC Alliance) or Zapu, but every party wants to entice the fence sitters and these are the people most likely to vote for independent candidates.

There are also voters who traditionally vote for specific parties but have with every election become less inclined to vote for their party of choice but they might abstain from voting rather than vote for an independent candidate.

Aspiring independent candidates assume they will hold sway over governing decisions, but the reality in a country such as Zimbabwe is that the ruling party always has control on how resources are allocated and how fast any projects on the ground will move. Voters know this and will likely take that into consideration when voting.

There has been an argument advanced that independent candidates will split the vote, but this only rings true in a situation where they manage to entice supporters of political parties to vote for them, but most political supporters in Zimbabwe are loyal to a fault when it comes to their support and membership to parties. They rarely if ever stray from their voting patterns.

At the launch of the People’s Own Voice (POVO), a coalition of independent candidates some potential voters said they were tired of empty promises from seating councillors or Members of Parliament, all drawn from political parties, but it is hard to say if that will translate into votes for independent candidates.

Some of the aspiring independent candidates have a chance of winning but most will simply get the votes of those who are not sold on party politics or votes of those who are more fluid in their choice of a candidate. They might not win but they will take away some votes from the parties.
Impact and chances of independent candidates in the 2018 elections

by apathy and these will see the mind-boggling number of both party and independent candidates as just too big a puzzle to unravel or try to understand. They will not bother sifting through the list to make a choice. Some people are likely to give up on voting.

As it is the number of registered voters especially in urban areas is lower than in the 2013 elections and this could be an indication that apathy will also play against both independent and party candidates. In every election there are some people who register but never bother to vote especially in urban areas.

The major challenge will be for independent candidates to arouse the interest of voters enough for them to make the effort to get to a polling station. With so many candidates contesting, those who will stand out will either be backed by a party or they will have to possess a lot more than a winning personality and the gift of spin.

For most of the independent candidates contesting in this election will only be good for their ego but they lack the ability to cause a major upset because most of them are unknown by voters. This is just an upsurge in candidates that will not cause a dent on recognised party candidates.

This is just an indication of the new political climate where more people feel they can also try their luck.

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ZIMBABWE’s 38-year political trend speaks volumes about public office aspirants who choose to contest an election employing the autonomous (independent) ticket.

This history needs to be juxtaposed with the 2018 elections to allow logical prediction to discover the awaiting fate of independent candidates.

Karl Max warns that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and secondly, as a farce. Since independence, only three candidates with strong links to the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF), have made it through to parliament as independent candidates.

However, this piece also appreciates that records have been made to be broken. The extent to which independent candidates can draw shocks in this election remains the task of this entire calligraphy (writing).

To start with, Margret Dongo, probably one of the finest female activists Zimbabwe has had, dared the historical odds when she contested the 1995 elections as an independent candidate for the Harare South constituency. Initially, she had lost the election under controversial circumstances but successfully challenged the outcome in court.

She became the first Member of Parliament to have won an election as an independent candidate. It is this feat that validates the latter submission of this article regarding breaking historical records which the independent candidates can draw motivation from.

The second were Professor Jonathan Nathaniel Moyo and Temba Mliswa who won in Tsholotsho North constituency in 2005 and 2008, and in the Norton 2016 by-election respectively. These are no cheap politicians. Jonathan Moyo is arguably one of the best spin doctors Zanu PF has had. He was also at the centre of government policy programmes.

Thus, the 2018 elections come on the back of a hostile history vis-à-vis the independent candidates who are this time much more than in the past. While this signals a democratic environment for this election, the question is: will they win or lose? How can they influence the election outcome?

The first challenge facing independent candidates is to contest with incumbents, both MPs and councillors. Pitting independent candidates against the incumbents or main opposition political parties is not only fiddly but a Himalayan task.

Issues of political security is a major setback for independent candidates in the coming elections trimming their winning chances close to zero. The electorate as well, would not want to be associated with individuals who do not guarantee them political security prior to, during and after elections. There is belief that political-party-
belonging guarantees security during violent times as has been the case with Zimbabwe’s election trajectory. Thus, independent candidates winning chances become minimal.

In Zimbabwe, political parties have established themselves as institutions resting on ideological apparatuses that enforce the values and beliefs of a political party to its fan base. Examples are Zanu PF and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T). Thus, coordination of party activities through structures starting from the cell group, village, ward, provincial up to the national stage, solidifies them.

The electorate becomes subjected to politics of identification. Either one identifies himself with MDC-T or Zanu PF. In that context, pitting an independent candidate with any other candidate from an established political party robs them of the chances of winning in the coming elections.

Political coalitions have become common in this coming elections a development that leaves independent candidates with little to fish from the electorate. In this election two common coalitions have emerged in the name of People’s Rainbow Coalition (PRC) led by former Vice President Joyce Mujuru and MDC T Alliance led by Advocate Nelson Chamisa.

The recent political gatherings and campaigns have been tilting in favour of the Chamisa-led alliance. The alliance formations persuades the electorate to believe that a combined force of different political formations have a chance to win this election and therefore chose to identify themselves with the winning team. This works against the independent candidates. Mainstream political parties submit to the electorate their contesting candidates in a systematic manner; the President at the top, Senate, MP and a councillor at the bottom in that order. Some voters may not want to disrupt this structure thereby leaving independent candidates outside the election pod.

Mainstream or registered political parties benefit from campaign assistance from the state under the Political Parties Finance Act. The Political Parties Finance Act (PPFA), obligates the state to fund political parties. Parties that harvest 5% or more of the total number of votes cast in a general election qualify to make an application to the Minister of Justice and Legal Affairs as the custodian of the funds. This does not include independent candidates which is a setback to their aspirations in the coming elections.

Incumbent MPs and local authorities have accumulated resources in the name of allowances for the past five years implying that incumbents have a big financial muscle to elbow independent candidates off the political ring.

Another important key point worth noting is that, incumbent candidates have projects that have been started but have not been finished. In that scenario, previously mandated candidates become the first preference compared to independent candidates in this election for the sake of continuity.

It is also a fact that some provinces and constituencies are no go areas for certain political parties let alone an independent candidates. Bulawayo province has for the previous elections been dominated by the MDC-T while Zanu PF enjoyed unchallenged support in Mashonaland West and Central provinces. The constituencies have become no-go zones. Thus, having an independent candidate in such places would be more of building castles in the air.

The impact independent candidates are bringing in this election must not be undermined though. There are extraordinary independent candidates like Advocate Fadzai Mahere and the cleric, Pastor Evan Mawarire. They have accolades to their names ranging from academic, social and political.

They have potential to disrupt political establishments in the constituencies they are contesting. Which political side will be favoured by such disruption is unknown. Independent candidates may benefit from the new electorate that has not participated in an election before. In some constituencies served by both MDC-T and Zanu PF MPs and councillors, development has been alien.

Thus, independent contestants may have a chance to influence the election outcome and probably make it difficult for the main political parties to get the required percentage to form a government.

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WHILE it is constitutionally acceptable and might also be deemed as an indication of an open political space, the hard truth of the matter is that most independent aspiring candidates do not stand a chance.

This is not because they lack merit, support or the ability to buy beer, but that Zimbabwean politics is torn between Zanu PF and MDC-T and anyone who harbours political ambitions will do themselves good by joining one of them to stand a better chance.

Most aspiring candidates don’t know what they are talking about and thereby promising what is beyond the jurisdiction of positions they are targeting and it is a known fact that they will fail to deliver.

Zimbabwe does not have a history of independent candidates doing well, except Temba Mliswa in Norton where MDC-T did not participate and Professor Jonathan Moyo in Tsholotsho, but again MDC-T did not field a candidate (in Tsholotsho then). Otherwise, many other independent candidates just fell by the wayside and some are up to now still counting their losses.

The fact that no independent candidate has done anything extraordinary both in parliament and local authorities, is statement enough that there is nothing spectacular about being independent candidates except adding numbers and the amount of fliers and posters that council workers have to sweep away in the cities every morning.

Zimbabweans are aware that it is difficult for independent candidates to implement anything as pace is often dictated by the party that will be in government and therefore it is better and more beneficial to vote those belonging to political parties especially in Parliament.

So to the likes of Fadzai Mahere, Linda Masarira and Vimbai Musvaburi among others, their chances are only on getting more Facebook-likes and retweets on Twitter than on getting the actual votes on the ground.

The sooner they realise that Zimbabwean elections are not about making waves on social media, parading colourful campaigns and playing to the gallery, but are about Zanu PF and MDC-T, the better it will be for them.

Some of the independent candidates that have expressed their intentions to contest the 2018 elections are not even aware of the current electoral processes that are happening to the extent that some will not even know when they are supposed to submit their nomination papers and even where they are supposed to submit them.

The majority of independent candidates will not be able to raise money required for the nominations, the signatures of nominators, election agents and even pay for adverts on television, radio and print media, among others.

Except for aspiring independent local authority candidates, those contesting for Parliament and President will not be able to visit their entire constituencies to drum up support for themselves owing to lack of resources and therefore they will be little known in their respective areas turning the contest into a MDC-T and Zanu PF affair.

It must also be known that the 2018 elections are not an ordinary election, they are special in one way or the other and have been branded as the “This is it” for the opposition to remove Zanu PF from power or to become irrelevant.

Also, following the removal of Robert Mugabe in November 2017, has given some renewed hope to some people that it’s time to get rid of Zanu PF once and for all.

For the government, this election is about seeking the much needed legitimacy that will be required to unlock credit vaults in America and Europe, among other countries.

The people of Zimbabwe are aware of the situation and know where to put their votes to enable the obtaining of the two scenarios and will not be willing to split votes and this is also the reason why there is a growing call for coalition of political parties to enable (the) consolidating of votes.

However, those independent candidates such as Evan Mawarire who are seeking their luck with local authorities have a better chance compared to those for Parliament and Presidency.

The prospects of better outing in local authorities emanates from poor performance by MDC-T councillors in various cities across the country including Harare.

So, in the 2018 elections people are voting for change or for legitimacy and everything else outside that is nothing short of a waste of time and precious money.

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THE mere fact that political parties in the country do not have clearly written policies that ensure 50-50 representation is evidence enough that the road to gender equality is very long and mostly likely unattainable in our life time.

This is despite the fact that women constitute the majority (52%), of the country’s population and also as political party members, activists and voters. Women have largely remained under the radar owing to two things, namely, themselves and the patriarchal society which has ascribed them roles that ensure they will always remain under males, at home, at work and in any other sectors including politics.

Women have never stood for each other and if anything, most women accept male leadership compared to female leadership. They have also been largely accused of having a pull-her-down syndrome.

The 50-50 representation model is meant to help champion women issues in national and local government, but according to Priscilla Mishairabwi-Mushonga, most women in Parliament do not speak about women issues and they actually speak like they are men.

So whether there is a SADC Gender Protocol or whatever protocol on gender equality, as long as women are not united in their cause and are not on the forefront championing their cause, 50-50 representation will remain an issue that is only written on banners during demos and Women’s Day commemorations. It must also be noted that men do not owe women anything, but it is women themselves who should rise up to the occasion and ask men for support in the process.

Having said that, we must however understand that the issue of male dominance over women is a very complex matter that requires a holistic approach to solve it as it has been with the world from the biblical days.

This can be evidenced by Ephesians 5:22-24 New International Version (NIV). Verse 22: Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

Verse 23: For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.

Verse 24: Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Zimbabwe being a dominantly Christian country, with women constituting the majority of church congregates, it becomes difficult for women to challenge or contest males from such a stand-point.

Religion therefore has resulted in women looking down upon themselves because they are told that they are under males in everything.

Currently, women constitute about 35 percent of legislators in the National Assembly owing to the additional 60 women that came in through the proportional representation quota and also the Zebra system in the Senate. However, according to Speaker of the National Assembly Jacob Mudenda, the number of women is likely to decrease if women do not stand up and take action especially in political parties.

Mudenda says women’s call for 50-50 representation campaign has largely been a philosophy that has not been put to action.

Women mostly in top political parties in the country have not been good role models for others.

For example, women in MDC-T and Zanu PF have never been known to challenge for the party’s presidency or even chairperson’s posts. They settle for lower ranking positions or wait for donations which are usually branded as appointments.

Also the handling of Thokozani Khupe in MDC-T and the support it got from party supporters and other neutral Zimbabweans, is a clear statement that the country is not ready to give women...
If there is anything that the Zimbabwean government is desperate for as the country heads for the crucial harmonised elections later in the year, it is the credibility of the plebiscite. This has been seen by many as the only way to legitimise the President Emmerson Mnangagwa administration, which controversially came into power through military intervention last year in what has become known as a ‘soft coup’.

In a bid to enhance the credibility of the impending polls, President Mnangagwa has invited international election observers from nearly 50 countries across the globe including the European Union and the United States which former president, Robert Mugabe, had shut out of the past polls.

He has reiterated his commitment to free, democratic and credible elections in Zimbabwe, adding he is ready to step aside in the event he loses.

Be that as it may, the leading opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) has threatened to boycott the imminent polls in the event the Mnangagwa-led government fails to implement the necessary reforms to enable a level political field.

However, history has shown that ZANU PF has never been moved by any threats or the actual election boycott by the opposition.

Instead, the ruling party has used that to its advantage to prolong its stay in government.

In 2008, when Tsvangirai pulled out of the June presidential run-off elections citing political violence perpetrated against his supporters, the polls described as ‘sham’ and ‘one-man’ elections, still went ahead and then President Mugabe was declared the ‘winner.’

Just recently, in June 2015 when the MDC-T boycotted by-elections which were triggered by the party’s recalling of more than 10 legislators, who defected to form what was then known as MDC Renewal, the government of the day was not in any way moved by that.

Elections went on as planned and ZANU PF, which never faced any strong opposition in the absence of serious contenders in the form of the MDC-T,
romped to ‘victory’ winning all the constituencies. Apparently, credibility of polls and legitimacy of the government of the day has never been an issue for the then Mugabe-led party.

However, following the change of guard along Chancellor Avenue in Harare in November last year, Mnangagwa whose ascendency to the highest office in the land has been viewed by some as a coup, seems anxious to see some semblance of credibility in the impending polls.

This credibility would help him further consolidate his power in the event he emerges victorious, something which also hangs in the balance.

Threats of boycotts by the opposition, could obviously be giving Mnangagwa sleepless nights as that has the potential of negatively impacting on the overall poll outcome, credibility and above all his legitimacy as head of state in the event of a victory.

It is also important to note that the way Mnangagwa is going to handle the boycott should it indeed take place, will be a litmus test for his leadership and democratic values and principles. Mthulisi Dube, a South African-based Zimbabwean, said while the opposition boycott could have an impact on the overall outcome of the impending polls, there would be no reason for them to participate if they feel the playing field remains uneven.

“I think they (opposition) should just boycott the election if ZANU PF refuses to implement the electoral reforms,” he said. Political analyst, Dumisani Mpfu, said should the opposition boycott the impending polls; it would be a cause for concern to the international community and not to the government of the day. “It will be business as usual for ZANU PF, but at international level, the Mnangagwa government will continue to face legitimacy problems,” said Mpfu. “ZANU-PF will proceed, with smaller parties participating in the polls, and will win overwhelmingly.”

Mpfu said with the way the opposition parties are divided, it was unlikely for them to agree on one position, such as a poll boycott. He said it was important for voters to always hold their leadership to account when it comes to polls regardless of whether they belong to the ruling party or opposition.

“Boycotts have not worked and voters need to send a clear message to political parties that they can only be in government through elections,” said Mpfu.

He said the alternative of civil war would not work in Zimbabwe. Mpfu said once the opposition boycotts the impending polls; it would be just a missed opportunity for Zimbabwe, adding he did not foresee elections being rescheduled.

“The current dispensation, which is desperate for legitimacy cannot reschedule elections. They will simply sponsor some small parties to participate and the polls will proceed as planned,” said Mpfu.

“Remember, there are now over 100 parties in Zimbabwe and most of them are not involved in the existing coalitions. In fact, when the debate to boycott becomes loud, we are likely to see these coalitions collapse.” Another Zimbabwean political analyst, based in the United Kingdom, Brilliant Sigabade Mhlanga, said any poll boycott would be a big blow to the current administration.

“Of course Mnangagwa would still suffer the same problem he already suffers now - a problem of legitimacy,” argued Mhlanga.
As per its constitutional requirement, Zimbabwe must hold its next harmonised elections within 2018. As some constitutional experts have pointed out, the elections must be held some time between July 21 and August 21 this year.

However, considering the prevailing political environment, the status of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and a host of other reform requirements, this timeframe is far too short for the holding of free, fair and credible elections.

A major issue pertaining to the obtaining political environment is the continued prevalence of an atmosphere of political fear, intimidation and manipulation. This is particularly through structures of patronage and coercion that include traditional leaders and state security apparatus.

Notwithstanding current reports on the militarisation of villages and the use of traditional leaders for purposes of political coercion, there is the outstanding issue of past episodes of violence that need to be addressed through a far-reaching national peace, reconciliation and healing process.

Without such a process, a significant number of Zimbabwean citizens, particularly those in outlying rural communities, are set to vote within an atmosphere of fear that is not conducive for free and fair elections.

This state of fear is compounded by how traditional leaders have continued to be tied to the ruling ZANU PF’s system of patronage through which their palms have been oiled with niceties such as luxurious sports utility vehicles that were recently parcelled out to them.

There is also the case of deepening militarisation in which the military is reportedly participating in the ZANU PF election campaign at village level. While reports pertaining to the militarisation of the village may be denied by the ZANU PF propaganda machine, their existence is enough to unsettle scores of voters.

Equally problematic is how ZEC, the election management body continues to be under the control of the incumbent government.

Among issues of serious concern with regard to ZEC’s capture are those to do with the handling and security of voter registration data, the printing of ballot papers and the handling of election results. Pertaining to the latter, the fate of the 2008 election results is still fresh in the minds of Zimbabweans and the world at large. And there is no guarantee that there may not be a repeat of what happened then.

As a matter of fact, the manner in which ZEC handled the results of the 2008 elections makes it a doubtful starter that must pave way for the setting up of a genuinely independent electoral commission that handles elections in ways that inspire confidence and credibility.

There is also the sad case of a continuing and even deepening capture of the media as elections draw close. Freedom of expression, the right of access to information and freedom of the media are prerequisites for voters to exercise free and informed electoral choices. While the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) is the most strategic media outlet in terms of reach, it is not disposed to report on pertinent electoral issues and personalities in an objective, equitable, fair and critical manner.

The culture at ZBC and the few private broadcasters operating in the country is largely a cosmetic one in which opposition political actors are covered within...
Will international observers enhance the credibility of Zim polls?

In what could be a shift of policy and direction, by President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s administration, Zimbabwe’s elections which have in the past been largely a preserve for the Southern African Development Community and the African Union, will this year be open to international observers from nearly 50 nations.

The southern African country’s polls have in the past been dogged by credibility challenges, creating successive governments which have had to contend with legitimacy challenges. Since the turn of the century, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), has dismissed the outcome of the country’s elections, which have been marred by political violence, accusing the ruling ZANU-PF party of electoral fraud.

Owing to credibility challenges associated with former president Robert Mugabe’s management of the polls, the European Union and the United States slapped the country with economic sanctions in early 2000s. This created animosity between Mugabe and the West, resulting in the latter being barred from observing any elections in the country.

However, since the fall of Mugabe, his successor, Mnangagwa, who has been globe-trotting since assuming power on November 24 last year, in a bid to mend Zimbabwe’s broken international relations, has extended his invitation to poll observers to all and sundry across the globe.

What however, remains to be seen is if the presence of international observers would guarantee the credibility of the elections and give birth to a legitimate democratic government, to tackle Zimbabwe’s problems, which have paralysed the country for nearly two decades now.

A Bulawayo resident, Hlozokuhle Ndiweni, said the large number of observers to monitor Zimbabwe’s polls presented an opportunity for citizens to vote in a transparent environment in the eyes of the whole world.

“I think this is a good initiative by the government as it creates an environment where voters will freely cast their votes at different polling stations without feeling intimidated by the presence of the police and other security agents,” said Ndiweni.

She said ZEC would have no option but to properly manage the polls in a fair and transparent manner under the watchful eye of the international community. But political analyst, Thomas Sithole, said not much should be expected from the international observers in as far as

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By Mandla Tshuma

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enhancing the credibility of polls is concerned.

He said ZANU-PF was being strategic in bringing in international observers.

“The game in town for the regime in Zimbabwe now is to get legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the international community and elections present that opportunity,” said Sithole.

“Britain has been doing a lot of international lobbying around this and we are most likely going to get international observers who will be in the country to rubber stamp and legitimise the election.”

He said the Mnangagwa regime was desperate to get this legitimisation more than anyone else.

“It means more to them than it does to the opposition,” added Sithole.

“They have to prove a point that they got in power through a democratic process and have the citizen's mandate. However, the regime has become a whole smarter than most stakeholders involved including observers and has taken rigging to another level where it’s not gonna be easy to detect it.”

He argued that in the eyes of the unsuspecting observer, both local and international, everything will be almost normal, free, fair and credible.

Another political analyst, Khanyile Mlotshwa, weighed in saying it is an open secret that election observers are always used to creating a semblance of credibility around elections, especially in Africa.

“However, I am not really sure really, of their effectiveness in terms of ensuring that the elections are credible, that is thinking about credibility beyond an impression that is created out there, but credibility as the actual fairness of the elections,” argued Mlotshwa.

“At the end of the elections, when observers say the elections are free and fair, one wonders if they are referring to what they actually saw, independently, or they are referring to what they have been made to see by the powerful.”

He further posited that the credibility of Zimbabwe’s election must not rest so much on observers, but on the conduct of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

“It is ZEC who must ensure that the election is credible by ensuring and protecting each and every vote that is cast,” he said.

“They (ZEC) must ensure that every vote cast is made to count, and that it should never be manipulated or be made a victim of manipulation.”

He thus argued that the eyes of the observers would not guarantee Zimbabweans a free and fair election beyond what they are made to see. Mlotshwa said it still remained unclear if the MDC-T which has in the past rejected poll outcomes would this time around accept it.

“Whether the MDC will accept the results or not, I cannot say with certainty because the candidate of the Alliance (Nelson Chamisa) accepted the coup,” said Mlotshwa.

“Maybe violence to him is not an issue at all. If he loses even in the context of extreme violence, his understanding would be that he lost a free and fair election.”

He however, added that he did not see the coalition led by Joyce Mujuru accept results where ZANU-PF romps to victory through intimidation and all manner of violence.

Historically, the international community has immensely contributed to Zimbabwe’s multi-faceted, protracted struggles. During the country’s war of liberation, scores of countries in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas, contributed to Zimbabwe’s liberation cause in material and moral terms.

The international helping hand was extended to the post-independence era when countries and international development agencies contributed to the
social development agenda of the 1980s when there was a massive expansion in the provision of health and education services.

There was also some help from the country’s former colonial power, the United Kingdom, in terms of trying to redress the country’s land ownership imbalances.

When post-independence contradictions set in, the hand of the international community was seen supporting and promoting pro-democracy forces within civil society. Civil society organisations received helpful financial support that helped them to advocate for the respect and upholding of human rights in a context in which the post-colonial state was increasingly determined to uphold authoritarianism, using repressive and suppressive mechanisms inherited from the colonial state.

Among the notable pro-democracy struggles in the post-colony include those waged by students, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). ZCTU combined with the students during the close of the 1980s and in the early to mid 1990s to fight against post-independence ills; among them ZANU PF’s one-party state agenda, corruption and unrestrained and poverty inducing neo-liberalism in the form of the Economic Adjustment Programme (ESAP).

The civic struggle shifted to core-governance issues with the NCA campaign for a democratic and people-driven constitution, which shook the ZANU PF hegemony through the NO Vote victory in the constitutional referendum of 2000.

This struggle crystallised in the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999. Considering the way it came about, the MDC, in significant and numerous ways, became a symbol of Zimbabwe’s post-independence pro-democracy struggles as waged by workers, students and other marginalised social groups. The waging of these struggles received a lot of financial support from the international community, especially western donor countries.

African countries also played a key role in the post-independence push for democratisation. The intervention by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) following the brutalisation of civic and opposition political party leaders in March 2007 was particularly significant.

Through this intervention, Zimbabwe went into the 2008 elections with a raft of reforms that delivered victory for the opposition. Following the sham 2008 presidential runoff election of June 2008, the African Union (AU) also intervened. And Mugabe was delegitimised at AU level; culminating in the Government of National Unity (GNU), formed between ZANU PF and the MDC formations. Among the significant achievements of the GNU era was the enactment of the 2013 constitution.

Though not being sufficiently democratic in terms of both content and authoring process, the 2013 constitution was a symbolic victory for the post-colonial pro-democracy struggle that was ushered by the civic movement. Fast-tracking to 2018, one would almost say that the pro-democracy civic struggle and its achievements are in danger of a complete reversal.

With the government of President Mnangagwa making the tempting noise that Zimbabwe is open for business, the country faces prospects of regression in terms of the modicum of democratic gains so far achieved by the civic movement. Fast-tracking to 2018, one would almost say that the pro-democracy civic struggle and its achievements are in danger of a complete reversal.

As pro-democracy civics confront new realities of repressive state-capitalism, the international community needs not betray the democratic principles it supported since the time of Zimbabwe’s protracted war for liberation.

For the preservation of progressive history and in the interest of a truly democratic Zimbabwe, the international community must insist on free and fair elections.

Instead of watching Zimbabwe being rushed into elections that are only free, fair and credible in propagandist ways, the international community must side with progressive civics that are pushing for the full implementation of the 2013 constitution, an unfettered independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), the freeing of the media sphere and other pro-democracy reforms.

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The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) officially concluded its initial voters’ roll inspection process on 29 May 2018. To its credit it did so with a decent amount of advertising on state television, radio and mainstream print media. In a first, it collaborated with the three major mobile phone companies (MPCs) Econet Wireless, Netone and Telecel (the 3 sisters) to establish a Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) platform for those that registered and gave their actual mobile numbers and physical addresses to ZEC to confirm that their names were on the new voter’s roll.

What made this new methodology employed by ZEC and the MPCs was that there was probably a service provider -to- customer relationship between them. And therefore an exchange of money. Probably from ZEC to the three (3) companies. This transaction was probably more effective with Econet because it’s the largest mobile phone service provider in the country. Both by way of numbers of its subscribers but also its countrywide reach and services.

Beyond this what was also transacted between ZEC and the MPCs was basic but mass data. The MPCs know your number (if you are on its network). ZEC also knows your current address or at least where you will most physically definitely vote from (and has a record of you fingerprints). The protection of that personal data is the preserve of all of the above. Almost in similar fashion to how you use mobile banking, a combination of your bank collaborating with mobile phone companies to link your bank account with your phone. With the promissory note of protecting the privacy of transactions that you undertake.

The only key difference is that ZEC is not a bank. Nor were you asked to fill in a form to allow the MPCs to be given even minimal and 'bank-like' secure access to your data.

But for many urban voters in Zimbabwe issues or explanations of how data is protected or even utilised by ZEC and other players does not surpass the evident convenience of checking their names on the voters' roll via their mobile phones while seated on their couches. This is despite that some who had the energy to go and cross check their names physically found that there were still one or two details such as spelling of names that still had to be corrected.

Perhaps the most interesting issue is how ZEC came to the decision to work with mobile phone companies in the voter’s roll inspection exercise. And what sort of tenders are being issued and the nature of contractual arrangements (payments) that are being made.

To take it further, there is also the issue of a broader debate about what license ZEC has with the bio-metric data it has collected. Even if it has not illegally shared it with unknown or known third parties. Before and particularly after the general election (we do not really know for now).

This is also in light of developments in the global north where the European Union has enacted a new law that seeks to prioritize the protection of privacy via major holders of personal data of its individual citizens. Called the 'General Data Protection Regulation' or GDPR it seeks to strengthen the right of individuals to privacy through for example shortening explanations of data protection policies of organisations that hold it as well as imposing heavier fines for breaches of the
We do not have such a law in Zimbabwe except for the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) as well as a draft bill on data protection. This is probably because there is no outcry about how privacy is protected via companies (banks, mobile phone service providers and state institutions) with access to our private data. Or also because too many questions over and about data and its use in the country may affect the profit margins of the same companies or their ability to know every other detail of our lives not only for advertising revenue but also political predictability/control. Even though for now we are not aware of its capacity to use algorithms to affect political perceptions and thereby actions or results.

The convenience provided by some of the service providers that we give our personal data to is also a big factor here. Not just because we want to be more modern and sophisticated (especially if we are in urban areas) but also because in and of itself the technology that enables the synchronisation of (mass personal) data is like a new toy we are not sure what to do with. And we tend to learn after it injures us.

Just to be clear, there would be nothing wrong with ZEC being more accountable for the decent amount of data it has on Zimbabwean voters. And where it chooses to work in tandem with private telecommunications players based on the same data, to not only be publicly accountable for such processes but also seek our consent for the same. Even if the main argument might be ‘convenience’ it does not surpass our right to the privacy of personal data. Or what ZEC or those it decides to collaborate with decide to do with it. Even after the 2018 election.

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been characterised by succession fights within ZANU-PF at the expense of the economy.

This saw a number of senior party members including former vice president Joyce Mujuru and many other heavy weights being kicked out of the revolutionary party.

Regrettably, the government’s economic blue-print, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET), never yielded any positive outcome as the economy still remains in doldrums.

Economic hardships that Zimbabweans have grappled with for years and desire for both political and economic change, made Zimbabweans become accomplices to the celebrated ‘soft coup’ staged against Mugabe in November last year.

Now with fresh elections imminent, Zimbabweans could be hoping to elect a government that would take them out of the current economic quagmire, which apparently has destroyed the future of many and caused untold suffering among innocent civilians.

However, it remains to be seen if the 2018 polls could be the answer to Zimbabwe’s political economy.

A South African-based Zimbabwean, Mthulisi Dube, who fled economic hardships back home, said he looked at an inconclusive election which could lead to the formation of another inclusive government, which he said was the only hope for the country’s economy.

“Personally I see a power sharing after elections,” Dube said.

“I can’t be naive to believe Nelson [Chamisa] will win by a big margin as I see a lot of foolishness in him. A power sharing agreement after elections might improve things but let’s not be too hopeful.”

Civic society activist and political analyst, Vusumuzi Chirwa, said the only solution for an economic turnaround is for the electorate to vote for people who will bring change.

“Voters should look for candid leaders with clearly defined and practical manifestos, and practical promises, not fake promises of creating over a million jobs given the critical level of economic destruction,” he said.

“It is not practical to formally employ one in every four Zimbabweans in the next five years as the country tries to resurface from the abyss of total economic collapse.”

An economic commentator, with the National University of Science and Technology’s Graduate School of Business, Vusumuzi Sibanda, said there was no doubt the impending polls are a turning point for Zimbabwe.

The ED government is running all over the shore in a bid to get legitimacy following the so-called ‘soft coup’, while the MDC Alliance with a youthful leader thinks this is the best time to come into power,” said Sibanda.

“All this put together, can work positively for the economy with each political party having a point to prove should it win the elections.”

Sibanda is of the idea that it does not really matter which political party wins the polls for an economic turnaround, as he believes that what is needed are sound economic policies and industrial retooling. He said the two would attract Foreign Direct Investment which for the years has been elusive in Zimbabwe.

Sibanda said it was “quite tricky” for Zimbabweans to pin their hopes on the impending polls in as far as economic turnaround is concerned. “An election outcome that will favour the economy of Zimbabwe is one born out of free and fair elections,” explained Sibanda.

“This on its own will unlock international acceptance and financial support. Every potential investor right now is holding their cards close to their chests. They are not waiting for a particular party to win but they are waiting for democracy to prevail in Zimbabwe in the form of free and fair elections.”

He said he did not see industries immediately opening and jobs becoming readily available after the polls, explaining the country has had successive polls since independence which have not translated into that.

“Let’s work on our economic policies and curb corruption,” he said.

Sibanda insisted that the hope for Zimbabwe’s economic turnaround lies in free and fair elections, followed by sound and robust economic policies.
Impediments to social, economic and political turnaround

BY CLEMENCY TAKAWIRA

At independence, Zimbabwe was a middle income country.

Industry was thriving, and our currency, was at par with the United States dollar. Julius Nyerere marveled and proclaimed, “[behold] the Jewel of Africa.” The honeymoon years of 1980-1990 brought joy to citizens as the new black government made major improvements.

It awarded grants to university students, as the literacy level became one of the highest in Africa. But this was short lived. With the drought of 1992 and burrowing, Zimbabwe went from her breadbasket status to a basket case. And by 2008, inflation had ballooned to 500 billion percent. And for 38 years, Zimbabwe is failing to restore her lost glory. Zimbabwe had been gripped with international debt since 1980. That we inherited a US $700 million debt from the Smith Regime is undisputable. And in order to repay the loans, we had to continue borrowing. Couple that with massive borrowing of the 1980s and 1990s.

The major project was the construction of Hwange Power Station. Some of the loans were dubious and were not meant to benefit the populace. The 2011 Chinese loan to build a Defence College is one such case. World Bank structural adjustment loans which reduced government spending meant the reduction of salaries leading to reduction in the quality of life for average Zimbabweans.

At present, Zimbabwe has 11, 3 billion debt which is financed by the citizens. As long as the debt is still on, we will continue borrowing to repay old loans.

Since the land reform programme, Zimbabwe is grappling with poverty. The country has for years been failing to produce enough grain for her citizens. This is partly due to drought and partly urban to rural migration. Most people are now maintaining permanent residence in towns. They have abandoned subsistence farming which meant every household met the family’s needs and sold the surplus.

About 72.3% of Zimbabweans are living below the poverty datum line which is not sustainable. We have been relying on Zambia for maize. From January to August 2017 alone, government spent $102 million on maize imports. Until agriculture is resuscitated, we will continue to live in abject poverty.

Hard times saw the rise of corruption. Public office holders and many government institutions have been accused of corruption. This is partly because of career politics were politicians are in it to enrich themselves not to serve the people.

Corruption has become, “the elephant in the room” hindering progress. A recent World Internal Security and Police Index (WISPI), ranks ZRP (Zimbabwe Republic Police), 102 out of 107 most corrupt police institutions around the world. This is exacerbated by politicians who are in it not to serve the people but to loot money.

Zimbabwe has a huge trade deficit. Because industry is performing dismally, we are relying on imports from neighboring South Africa and Zambia. Latest statistics show that, for the first 10 months of 2017, trade deficit stands at 1.56 billion.

We are importing such products as toilet paper and sanitary wear, things that can easily be manufactured locally. It doesn’t look like, our industry would be revived soon.

Another major hindrance to the country’s transformation is unemployment. Unemployment rate started to rise for the first time since independence in the 1990s. From 1991-1997, it rose from between 22-30% to 35-50%. Tertiary institutions continue to churn out 30,000 graduates yearly who are failing to be absorbed in the job market. The current statistics are around 90%. Most graduates have been reduced to vending and other informal trades.

Zimbabwe’s health sector is dilapidated. Since independence, we have failed to contain cholera. In 2008 it killed more than 6,000 lives. In January this year it broke in Chegutu killing four people. It has also been reported in Stoneridge as well as Chitungwiza’s St Mary’s suburb. Cancer continues to take many lives because of late detection. There are only two hospitals in Zimbabwe that conduct cancer screening, that is, United Bulawayo Hospitals and Parirenyatwa.

Poor service delivery has been a major flaw for most councils. The roads are dilapidated and are full of potholes. Portable water is erratic and dirty. Some Harare suburbs such as Mabvuku and Tafara have gone for over 10 years without tape water. There seems to be lack of willpower on the part of government to fix these.

As we await a new government after the harmonised elections we hope, whoever is elected, will be able to deal with the mentioned challenges first to enhance social, economic and political transformation.
Zimbabwe goes to the polls in July in an election that has ignited excitement among the young and old mostly because of the involvement of the youngest presidential candidate in the country’s history and also due to the new man behind the party that has ruled Zimbabwe since independence.

For supporters of the 40-year-old leader of the MDC Alliance, Nelson Chamisa, just the fact that he is young is enough for them to commit to voting for him. He is an engaging orator and has great rapport with supporters at rallies. He is a gifted smooth talker who mesmerises crowds hungry for change.

He dreams big and transports his crowds to a stage where they can actually visualise their leader’s dreams coming true. He has the gift of the gab and in the world his supporters reside, what he tells them does not even have to be realistic. Their minds are made up already and he has their vote. They are spellbound.

Chamisa’s main opponent is President Emmerson Mnangagwa who ousted Robert Mugabe in a military-assisted initiative. Mnangagwa has no oratory skills to speak of, but he is banking on his sheer determination to woo not just Zimbabweans, but the world at large.

Where Chamisa promises bullet trains and spaghetti roads, he talks of mega foreign investment deals and employment creation. Some young graduates who have never worked are sold and believe he will deliver. But some are simply staunch Zanu PF supporters who are excited that the party has a new leader.

Mnangagwa represents Zanu PF, a party that has presided over the country’s economic and political decline, but his message is that his party and government will now do things differently and seek to grow the economy. He has a large following that is rooting for him and they hang onto his every word.

Both Chamisa and Mnangagwa have unwavering supporters. In an election, message is important but personalities are just as important. It is almost like a love affair – one look and the supporters are smitten and by the time the leaders speak the chemistry is a done deal.

When United Kingdom’s Tony Blair took up the leadership of the Labour Party, there was a feeling of hope and excitement loaded with hope. But a lot of the renewed interest and support mostly had to do with his personality. More recently America saw Donald Trump swept to power and this was not just because of his hard-line message but also because there were supporters who fell in love with his personality - hard to believe but it is true.

Most voters get hooked by a leader’s personality first before they even digest the political message.

Zimbabwe has 118 political parties registered to participate in the elections. Mnangagwa and Chamisa represent the main players who actually have a hope of making it. There is also an unprecedented upsurge in the number of presidential candidates.

Two little known candidates Noah Manyika of Build Zimbabwe Alliance and Alliance for the People’s Agenda leader, Nkosana Moyo, have already brought out their manifestos. The two might sound...
like the kind of leaders that people should vote for, but most potential voters do not find them charismatic enough. They might be good on message but they are low on personality.

Policy issues should matter to voters but rarely do they read the manifestos when they are launched. The euphoria of promises made at campaign rallies blots out any doubts the supporters might have.

Like new age churches, political parties trade in the message of hope and this does not even have to sound reasonable. Parties that have the ability to put rose-tinted glasses on supporters usually get the votes. All, or some of the voters want, is someone to tell them that they have the key to their happiness or that they have the world locked down and they can deliver even on the most ridiculous of promises.

One presidential candidate, Arnold Mhazo promises cash, cigarettes, beer and women if he wins. Those enticed by life-changing messages will not bother with him, but history has shown that there are actually people who will vote for him because he speaks to their immediate needs.

The campaign message does not have to conform to the standards expected by those who believe parties should be more about sound policies. It just has to attract the attention of potential voters.

This might explain why Australia’s Sex Party now known as The Reason Party, won 1.55 percent of the Senate primary in Victoria in last year’s federal poll. In 2014 it won 2.6 per cent in the Upper House in the state elections.

Its leader and first Member of Parliament, Fiona Pattern, has a big personality. Some describe her as the Rockstar of politics. Her personality captured the imagination of voters. She gained support as a result of the picture she painted as a leader of a provocatively named party, but it also helped that she was on point on her message and what she stood for.

While political parties are usually the go-to-route into politics, for most people this year’s election will also see the biggest number of independent aspiring legislative and council candidates.

Fadzayi Mahere, a young lawyer seeking to represent Mt Pleasant constituency (in Harare), has caused a stir. She too has a big personality and this is complimented by a well thought out manifesto. Mahere eloquently engages residents in her constituency and speaks truth to power in a manner that has stolen the hearts of potential voters even outside her constituency.

Zimbabwean politics and elections have always been more about personalities than real bread and butter issues. From independence in 1980 (before the unity accord between Zanu PF and ZAPU), the elections were all about the main men – Robert Mugabe and the late Joshua Nkomo.

From 2000 it all became about Robert Mugabe and the late MDC-T leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

This year will be no different. Mnangagwa and Chamisa will take up the personality challenge.

Manifestos from both parties will be released as a formality and too late for the multitudes of supporters to read, digest and analyse. The plebiscite will be about the leaders behind the parties and who makes bigger and better promises.

Voters tend to think beyond personalities only after the elections when reality sets in and they realise they were sold a dummy.

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Zimbabweans this year, for the first time ever in nearly two decades, go to unique polls in which two political protagonists, former president Robert Mugabe and the late Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, who have dominated the southern African nation’s political space since the turn of the century, will be in no show.

Since the formation of the then united MDC in 1999, Mugabe who had been at the helm of the country since independence from Britain in 1980, until his military ouster in November last year, faced a serious opposition ever led by Tsvangirai.

The two first faced each other in a tightly contested 2002 presidential ballot, which was controversially won by the incumbent. The opposition party has,
however, maintained that the 2002, 2008 and 2013 polls were rigged by the Mugabe regime.

In 2008 for instance the late opposition leader, who has been described as an ‘icon of democracy’, almost wrestled power from the ruling ZANU-PF, in polls in which he led in the first round of the presidential ballot after garnering 47 percent of the votes, ahead of Mugabe, who trailed behind with 43 percent.

Following these inconclusive polls, a hung Parliament and Tsvangirai’s boycotting of the presidential run-off, citing violence targeted at his supporters, the regional body, Southern African Development Community brokered a coalition government in which the opposition leader became Prime Minister of the former British colony.

In 2013 Mugabe and Tsvangirai squared-off again in an election in which the former was declared winner by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission notwithstanding claims of massive rigging by the latter.

The two, which had become the face of Zimbabwean politics, would have been set to lock horns for the fourth time this year, had nature not taken its course.

The 94-year-old Mugabe who had begun positioning his wife Grace, to succeed him, had his political career terminated when the military intervened in what was termed operation Restore Legacy culminating in his ‘resignation’ on November 21 last year.

Tsvangirai, on the other hand who had been poised to stand in the elections as MDC Alliance presidential candidate, succumbed to cancer of the colon in a South African hospital on February 14 this year.

Now that it is apparent that the two politicians have had their time and will no longer feature in Zimbabwe’s future polls, and let alone shape the country’s politics, it remains to be seen what political direction is going to be taken by the Southern African nation.

The harmonised elections to be held later in the year are thus expected to set the tone for the future of the Zimbabwe’s politics post-Mugabe and Tsvangirai. However, political commentators have said nothing much would change in the country’s political landscape, following the exit of the two former protagonists.

Political commentator, Vusumuzi Chirwa, said the fall of Mugabe, whom he described as a tyrant, had already started paving way for some modicum of democratic change in Zimbabwe, as evidenced by over 100 political parties with the intention to contest the forthcoming polls.

“There is a general feeling that the democratic space has been open to everyone, particularly those who were afraid to either challenge or criticize the erstwhile leader,” said Chirwa.

Rejoice Ngwenya, an independent political analyst, said the departure of Mugabe could have provided the country with an opportunity to go back to democratic values and principles but Mnangagwa seems still stuck in the past era.

“It would have been easy to refresh our commitment to constitutionalism as a new order of things,” said Ngwenya.

“However, Mnangagwa is all rhetoric, because his contextualisation of democracy is still perverted by the Mugabe contagion. We should be looking ahead to total electoral transformation.”

He accused Mugabe of having been obsessed with power retention at the expense of human rights.”There is [also] nothing new about Mnangagwa,” said Ngwenya.

“His rhetoric is fallacious and perishable. He is on a trajectory of regional and national deception, so sooner or later his hypocrisy will be exposed.”

Another political analyst with Plumtree Development Trust, Thomas Sithole, argued that Zimbabwean politics will not depart from the direction it was traveling during the time of the two
former leaders.

“ZANU PF as a party has its own DNA and that remains whether Mugabe is there or not,” said Sithole. “The party isn’t democratic at all and is bent on making Zimbabwe a one-party state through subtle means.”

Sithole said he did not foresee ZANU-PF, which he said does not tolerate dissent and political plurality and diversity, changing anytime soon. He accused the ruling party of having conflated itself with almost all organs and institutions of government and the state and feeling entitled to rule Zimbabwe forever.

“It (ZANU-PF) abuses such state apparatus like the military, the police, the intelligence and many others to remain in power by hook or by crook. This is not going away for it is what the party is regardless of who is at the helm,” he further argued.

Sithole said the opposition MDC-T, was also not an exception, arguing over the years, the party has been mimicking the ruling party.

“Actually it’s been ZANUnised and can now match ZANU-PF pound for pound in some instances,” said Sithole. “Look at the violence that has become part of the party. The subversion and suspension of the constitution with regards succession over political expedience as dramatised by the manner in which [Nelson] Chamisa took over power is a classic example of how the party that claims to be a democratic alternative has become a version of the ruling party if not worse.”

He maintained that the departure of Mugabe and Tsvangirai means nothing in so far as the DNA and the modus operandi of the two parties are concerned; adding both parties were preoccupied with the politics of personalities, ethnicity and tribe which is set to be part of their culture for decades to come.

Sithole observed that the main mistakes that were committed by Mugabe and Tsvangirai, which should not be repeated by their successors, if Zimbabwean politics is to change, was to personalise their parties and make them their “personal fiefdoms.”

“MDC-T went further and adopted Tsvangirai’s name,” he said. “This was also dramatised by the behavior of Tsvangirai’s relatives who wanted to influence and detect succession because they felt the party belonged to Tsvangirai and by relationship to them too.” Sithole took a swipe at the two leaders for failing to deal with the succession issue, positing they never entertained the idea of other leaders taking over from them.

“Tsangirai) became drunk with power to the extent of seeing themselves as bigger than their parties, the typical big-man-syndrome that has afflicted many an African leaders and dictators.”

However, for Ngwenya, Tsvangirai’s error was “his inability to claim power after defeating Mugabe in 2008.” Ngwenya said: “Mugabe left a legacy of painful dictatorship while Tsvangirai legitimised democratic resistance.”

He said the problem with Zimbabwean politics has been that it ruined the economy and brought about untold sufferings. However, he said all hope should not be lost as the country goes to the 2018 polls.

“We know ZANU-PF will manipulate the institutions but progressive Zimbabweans should summon courage and zeal to vote. Apathy and lethargy are counter-productive,” he advised.
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