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Elections in the dead of night

Zimbabweans have re-elected President Mnangagwa, missing what might have been the opposition's last chance in times of shrinking democratic spaces

President Emmerson D. Mnangagwa (nicknamed 'ED', ZANU-PF) proclaimed his re-election was obtained 'peacefully, transparently and fairly in broad daylight', but Zimbabweans voting at three in the night might disagree.

The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) announced his victory with 52.6 per cent of the votes. This leaves his opponent, CCC leader Nelson Chamisa, with 44 per cent. And yet, the results are not indisputable. For the first time in history, the regional body SADC (Southern African Development Community) condemned Zimbabwe's failure to meet constitutional, regional and international standards of free and fair elections. Chief Observer Mumba even emphasised that 'a flawed process cannot result in a legitimate election result'. The EU and the AU Election Observation Missions (EOMs) joined this critique. They noted unfairly drawn constituencies, bans on opposition rallies, unknown final voters roll and polling stations, controlled voting in rural areas and urban voter suppression. Still, the voter turnout was high. Thousands of (in particular young) voters waited, sometimes lining up for hours in front of polling stations throughout the night to 'protect their vote'.

As often in the past, the official results did not fulfil the opposition's hope to gain power through elections. The next days will decide how the opposition reacts. For CCC, going to court might not be the main strategy this time. Proving their win through compiled local results for the presidential elections, taking to the streets and asking SADC for assistance is more likely. The goal would then be to mobilise enough support amongst Zimbabweans so that regional and international observers would react. Yesterday, a SADC-mediation mission by the Panel of Elders (PoE) led by former Tanzanian President Kikwete has arrived. A first time since the disputed elections of 2008. In the past, security forces met demonstrations with arrests, violence and shootings. The government deployed riot police on Monday — this is a dangerous

gamble for the opposition. Will people be willing to take to the streets? Is the opposition prepared to risk arrests? The behaviour of the military will be of utmost importance. Several polling stations of the security forces recorded wins for the opposition.

Now or never?

This election might have been the last chance for the opposition will get a while, as the democratic space in the country is shrinking. After the 'military-assisted transition' of 2017 to oust long-term President Robert Mugabe, today, Zimbabwe is in a more difficult situation than before.

After initial hopes that the new government would open the country to democratic reforms, the shootings of protesters in August 2018 and January 2019 had already shown the path for the coming years. The administration used harsh Covid-19 restrictions to ban any kind of assemblies. A regulatory law for NGOs ('PVO Bill'; not yet signed) as well as the 'Patriot Act' – which made it unlawful for citizens to speak to foreigners about anything that would be considered contrary to Zimbabwe's interests – drastically closed the space for civil society. This risky climate certainly contributed to an all-time low of female candidates for this election.

Economically, the situation has deteriorated in many regions away from Harare's fancy Northern neighbourhoods. In 2022, Zimbabwe had the highest inflation in the world. Again. In early 2023, electricity was only available a few hours a day. Hospitals are falling apart and are bleeding out of staff emigrating to the UK. The local currency almost collapsed in June 2023 until the government stabilised it at a low level with some short-term measures. On the black market, trade is now conducted at $1 to 6000 Zimbabwean dollars. A teacher or police officer goes home with a $20-25 salary equivalent per month.

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After having lost their historic 'Movement for Democratic Change' in the courts, the opposition formed a new party called CCC (Citizens Coalition for Change) at the beginning of 2021. Consequently, they lost their headquarters, finances and MPs. Its young leader Nelson Chamisa (45) with his charismatic rhetoric and scandal-free past appears to be somewhat of an unusual piece on Zimbabwe's political chessboard. He has put the opposition on a new path with a rural outreach campaign, a generational renewal through a

Macron-inspired citizen-driven nomination process and an expanded network on the African continent.

It is even more remarkable in this dire situation that the CCC was able to continue holding a popular election campaign. Despite its disappointment, analysists say that the party should actually be encouraged by these results. Chamisa's strategy has proven successful despite internal and external critics. Holding the ground with 44 per cent in the presidential elections, notwithstanding many observed electoral irregularities, and preventing a parliamentary 2/3 Majority for ZANU-PF is impressive. Due to the latter, a change of the constitutional two-term-limit is difficult to achieve for the ruling party. Moreover, CCC also managed a generational shift, entered rural areas, kept its urban strongholds and will profit from state-financed party funding.

Electoral aftermath for ZANU-PF

For the ruling party ZANU-PF, problems might actually start after the elections. Having won in 2018 with a narrow 50.8 per cent, Mnangagwa vowed to silence critics in his party by winning big this time around. Despite all observed electoral shortcomings, with 52 per cent, he was not able to entirely reach this goal. According to observers, the party was upset about having been bypassed by parallel organisations during the campaign. A warning shot was given by factions of the party when several of the President's candidates lost the internal nomination process for Parliament. Other allies such as Finance Minister Ncube have lost their parliamentary election. As 'ED' announced that he would not run for a third mandate, analysts believe the struggle for his succession is likely to commence as early as next year.

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After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical analysis of the continent changed in Brussels. Some diplomats felt that the moment was ripe for a policy of more dialogue with the Zimbabwean government – based on their interpretation of Josep Borrell's Africa speech. However, as every country has its specific considerations, experts highlight that a deeper analysis and a broader understanding of actors in Zimbabwe might be needed. As part of the 'debt arrears clearance dialogue', the EU identified free and fair elections as a key milestone for further re-engagement with Zimbabwe. Yet, according to participants of the

dialogue, Zimbabwe's government has so far not delivered on promised reform results, especially in the fields of governance. Based on the remarks of EU Chief Observer Fabio Castaldo and the preliminary EOM report, it is within reasonable doubt that this election reached this milestone. Staying true to its self-drawn red line and democratic values will be an important part of the discussion for Brussels' post-election strategy. Failure to do so could further undermine the loss of trust towards the EU felt by parts of Zimbabwe's civil society since its re-engagement efforts started in 2022.

The future of Zimbabwe's democracy seems to be in the dark. Following its close allies Belarus and Russia, Zimbabwe's government might just show its population that NGOs and a strong opposition are no longer needed. Having obtained only 52 per cent of the vote, ZANU-PF might not be comfortable for 2028. Zimbabwe could face another five years of limited space for civil society actors, this time in a volatile climate of internal successor battles.



Thilo Schöne

Thilo Schöne heads the offices of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Zimbabwe and Botswana. Previously, he managed FES-projects in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria.