Chatting the future as we approach 2023 elections: Possible Socio-economic and political Scenarios

Introduction

This research focuses on various political and economic scenarios in the run-up to the elections in 2023. It is based on current and previous realities (multiple) that have infused Zimbabwe's political and economic arenas in the 'post-colonial era.' While 2023 may appear to be a long way off, Zimbabwe is actively planning for the 2023 elections. Based on events since 2017, which have seen the military's active role in the political and economic affairs of Zimbabwe and ZANU PF deepen, the prospects for accomplishing the first true democratic transition in the 'post-colonial' period appear bleak. The results are likely to be unmistakable even in the run-up to the 2023 election - history repeating itself, unless otherwise. Given the unpredictability of Zimbabwe's political realities, the phrase unless otherwise is employed in this reading. It is hence reasonable to warn that such outcomes, as well as the scenarios mentioned here, can change dramatically over time.

Scenario One: History repeating itself – The worst scenario yet most likely scenario

As Zimbabwe heads to the 2023 election, perhaps the worst scenario will be history repeating itself. It is difficult to overlook the period into the 2008 run-off phase after the March 2008 Harmonized election results given that the Citizen for Coalition Change (CCC) secured 19 of the 28 contested parliamentary seats and 75 seats in 122 municipalities in the delayed March 26 2022 by-election which were conducted +/- 12 months before the 2023 election. The response of ZANU PF to such results in the worst scenario would be a repetition of history. Karl Marx once contended that: 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'. Based on this, indeed, Zimbabwe's political culture is largely a product of four main influences: the pre-colonial, the colonial, the armed liberation struggle, and ZANU-PF rule over the past 42 years (Mair and Sithole, 2002; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2003). A violence connotation is attached to these four streams. Zimbabwe's pre-colonial history revolved around violence and pre-colonial state fights; the colonial era was infused with authoritarian rule which relied on violence and lethal violence permeated the armed liberation struggle. The history of ZANU PF particularly in the Mugabe era revolved around the use of violence to accomplish certain objectives which was intense during election time and targeting opposition members.

In the worst scenario; history repeating itself, politically motivated violence targeting members of the CCC in the run up to the 2023 election can be the order of the day. It is critical to be cognizant of the fact that elections have always been more than just a contest of power in Zimbabwe; they have actually been a war by other means. Events that have transpired in Zimbabwe, including cases of politically motivated violence leading to the March 26 by-elections reveal that the country is still politically acculturated to the belief that any opposition to the ruling party has to be perceived as

an enemy of the state. This has led to the binary characterization of enemies and patriots which is likely to trigger violence – enemies can only be dealt with in the language that they understand.

The electoral violence will be levied by ZANU PF political actors to purposefully influence the process and outcome of the 2023 elections, and it will involve coercive acts against humans, property, and infrastructure. Despite the fact that electoral violence covers a range of different manifestations and outcomes, the coercive component will be central in the worst scenario in Zimbabwe. A historiographical overview of Zimbabwean elections suggests that harassment and intimidation are more common than lethal violence.

The delay in the by-election provided important electoral data and a hint of what can be expected in next year's presidential poll. Based on the 26 March 2022 outcome and bearing in mind the historical culture of recorded state sponsored violence in Zimbabwe; in this scenario, the goal of the pre-election violence may generally include political exclusion. This could manifest in a fivefold manner *viz.*

i. Exclusion from candidacy (via attacks on candidates);
ii. Exclusion from campaigning (via attacks on or obstruction of campaign events)
iii. Exclusion from the provision of electoral information (via attacks on media outlets, election observers, and NGOs involved in voter education)
iv. Exclusion from electoral participation and free electoral choice (via the intimidation, coercion, and/or the displacement of voters)
v. Exclusion of non-state actors such as civil society organisations in the electoral processes

Points I, II & III ought to be viewed with two vital factors i.e. the Covid-19 related restrictions and the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill which are some of the tools that can be used to consolidate ZANU PF's power and influence towards the 2023 election. In the worst scenario and in the event of the reportage of slight surges of Covid-19 related cases, the government will blow a panic alarm whistle which arguably will have ulterior political motives to interrupt or obstruct campaign events of the opposition, the CCC in particular. If the government could delay the holding of by-elections by almost two years, only to have them some 12 months from the 2023 general election due to the Covid-19 pandemic, chances are Covid-19 could be used as a blanket cover to restrict or obstruct campaigns for CCC.

The justifications for obstruction of campaign events related to Covid-19 will also be based on the gimmick of sanctions – 'we know our situation and the state of the health sector which have been occasioned by sanctions and this calls for preventative measures.' Covid-19 can be equated as an accident that ZANU PF was waiting for. It has and will be used to consolidate its position and influence of political events; and even outcomes in Zimbabwe. The country's police will interrupt opposition gatherings or refuse permission for them. On the other hand, the ruling party's gatherings can go on unhindered.

Regarding the PVO, if implemented, it is the view of the researcher that the Zimbabwean government may have legal instruments to manage and eventually muzzle specific civil society organizations. Baron de Montesquieu in the 'The Spirit of the Laws once noted that "there is no greater tyranny than that which is perpetrated under the shield of the law and in the name of justice." If passed, the PVO will be a huge blow to democracy as the new law will give the

government broad rights to intervene in the governance and activities of civil society organizations. Three factors are worth noting on the PVO. First, PVOs would require government approval for every "significant change" in their organizations, such as changes in internal administration or funding. Secondly, the government would be able to label any PVO as "high risk" or "susceptible" to terrorist abuse. This would give them the ability to withdraw their registration or even replace their leadership. Thirdly, the new measure would impose strong penalties, including jail, for administrative offenses relating to PVO registration. This will negatively impact on civil society roles in the country as it heads to the 2023 election.

Lastly, the worst and unimaginable would be a power tussle within the ZANU PF party. It can be worrisome and a cause for concern for Zimbabwe as it may regurgitate the military invention script. Zimbabwe's current political, economic and social settings are ripe for a military intervention. Military interventions have a notoriety of repeating themselves which will be a huge blow to democracy in the run-up to the 2023 election. Democracy has never been given a chance in the aftermath of a military intervention and a military intervention often leads to another military intervention. Less attention will be given to the economy of the country in the few months that are left before the 2023 election. The focus will be on political power related contestations. Rhetoric and future economic plans will be part of the election campaign of political parties particularly, ZANU PF and the CCC but in terms of economic outputs, nothing is likely to positively change.

Scenario Two: (moderate scenario – likely)

The ZANU-PF regime has not taken the people's quest for democracy and human rights kindly. The moderate scenario will result in a few cases of exclusion from candidacy; less cases of campaigning exclusion, the exclusion from the provision of electoral information and incidences of exclusion from electoral participation and free electoral choice (via the intimidation, coercion, and/or the displacement of voters). In this scenario, exclusion of non-state actors such as civil society organisations in the electoral processes is also likely to occur. The Police force will likely interrupt in some opposition gatherings and refuse them permission to engage in campaigns. On the other hand, the ruling party's gatherings will often go on unhindered. In this scenario, some sections of ZANU PF will view the opposition as an essential audit and critique of Zimbabwe's political system.

Scenario three: The 'wish becomes reality' scenario (Highly unlikely)

The Best yet highly unlikely scenario is the wish becomes reality scenario which can result in fundamental changes in electoral processing in Zimbabwe. In the aftermath of the 26 March by-elections victory at a news conference on Monday, March 28, the CCC leader Nelson Chamisa noted that:

> …we have won a landslide, but that does not move away from the fact that the elections in this country need fundamental reforms, around the voters roll, the credibility of the voters roll, around the issues of making sure results are managed in a better way, polling stations are not subjected to the violence, intimidation that we have seen…[1]

In this regard and with 12 or months left, that would be a complete change of the infrastructure and personnel of ZEC as Zimbabwe is heading towards the 2023 election. If something does not give in terms of disbanding ZEC, nothing much is likely to change in Zimbabwe's electoral processes. The binary characterization of enemies and partisans as noted in the foregoing have been a threat to democracy impacting negatively not only on opponents of the ruling party (enemies) but other non-state actor organizations such as civil society organisations and even activists. The best scenario would be linkages between progressive CSOs, intellectuals, lawyers and artists, and the innovative use of social media in the possibility of various obstructions so that civic awareness messages can still manage to reach a broad audience (Global Development Institute, October 26, 2021) as was in the case of Zambia.

The best scenario would be mass voter registration, particularly of new and young voters – which must not be viewed as a protest against the incumbent. Evidence from recent surveys suggest that Zimbabweans have become more politically disengaged since the 2018 elections. An example is one done in June by the independent pan-African network Afrobarometer. Instead, Zimbabweans have been turning their focus on economic survival in the deteriorating economy. The utilization of social media, the role of political parties and civil society groups in the run towards the 2023 election could prove important to lessen voter apathy in the country.

Conclusion

As Zimbabwe heads to the 2023 election, the chances of history repeating itself are high. The political environment has remained a cause for concern with the hand of the military manifesting in state management of the country. In the run to the 2023 election, it is important for different stakeholders to contribute towards lessening voter apathy in Zimbabwe. Bringing back the Zimbabwean case on the agenda of the sub-regional body (SADC) and even the African Union could be important in the run up to the 2023 election to avoid the worst scenario which is highly - history repeating itself.

[1] Zimbabwean opposition party wins majority in by-elections, available on https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/28/zimbabwean-opposition-party-wins-majority-in-by-elections/ (17 April, 2022)

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