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INSIGHTS FROM RECENT POLLS: ZANU-PF, OPPOSITION AND THE ROAD TO 2028

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The primary aims and objectives of the Zim-agora are:

1) ***Critical Analysis****:* To provide a platform for critical analysis of Zimbabwean political economy questions, particularly in the context of elite succession contestations within the ruling ZANU-PF party and the broader securocratic state.

2) ***Public Discourse****:* To foster public discourse on topical issues such as corruption, climate change diplomacy, public policy, human rights, and democracy within the framework of transitology political discourses and narrative shaping.

3) ***Empirical and Theoretical Grounding:*** To offer an empirically, theoretically, and locally grounded window into the Zimbabwean political economy, interrogating recent movements within the security sector and their implications for stability and sustainability.

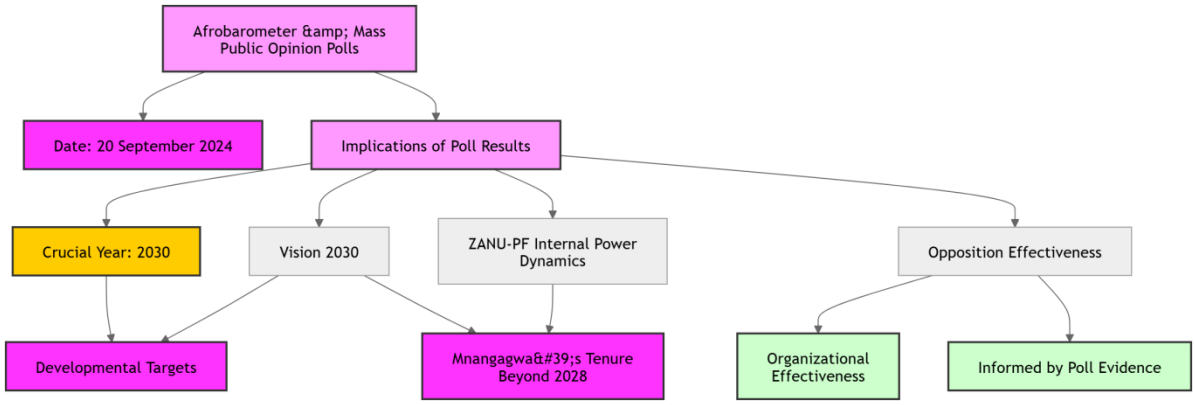
4) ***Weekly Think-Tanking Papers****:* To produce weekly think-tanking papers that provide critical analysis of current political economy questions, power configurations within the party-state-military-business complex, and the roles of opposition and civil society organizations.

5) ***Democratic Space****:* To tackle the shrinking democratic space in Zimbabwe and explore pathways to transition and improve human life from the ills of a securocratic state.

Insights from Recent Polls: ZANU-PF, Opposition and the Road to 2028

Introduction

Following the release of the most recent opinion polls by Afrobarometer and the Mass Public Opinion Institute on 20 September 2024 which surveyed Zimbabwe's political economy, it is crucial to unpack the implications of these polls ahead of the 2028 general election. This year (2024) will be a significant pose and reflection year due to the country's developmental targets set through Vision 2030, ZANU-PF's internal power dynamics regarding President Emmerson Mnangagwa's tenure beyond the constitutionally mandated two terms ending in 2028 and the state of the currently fractured opposition. The opposition's effectiveness will be determined by how it is organized and informed by evidence from these polls.



In modern nation-states, poll surveys play a critical role in diagnosing the political pulse of parties, governments, and the state. This political pulse testing has become the norm across democracies, authoritarian regimes, and hybrid regimes alike. Opinion polls are particularly important in hybrid regimes for four key strategic reasons. First, they help manage local and international public opinion by signalling the ruling elite's commitment to "democratizing," "republicanizing," and its domestic legitimacy. Secondly, opinion polls provide such regimes with insights into the effectiveness of their policies and opponent management strategies, enabling them to refine or devise new ones where necessary. Thirdly, they help the opposition measure up against the ruling party, identify their weaknesses and strengths, understand the ruling party's vulnerabilities and tailor make their opposing strategies to effectively signal their electoral threat to the incumbent. Fourthly, opinion polls serve a signalling role to citizens and interested parties from the donor community, the business sector and investors regarding the strength, readiness, and longevity prospects of political parties. For Zimbabwe, a hybrid regime reflecting features of both democracy and authoritarianism, the role of opinion polls is therefore indispensable for both the ruling elite and the opposition.[1] Ignoring these polls would be perilous, akin to navigating troubled waters without a compass.

Therefore, this week's Zim-agora examines the recent poll results by Afrobarometer and the Mass Public Opinion Institute to understand and reveal their implications for the political dynamics within the ruling party, the opposition, and the Vision 2030 goals.

Poll Results and their Implications: Literature Review

Due to various gaps in knowledge, the general understanding of how opinion polls influence political decision-making remains incomplete in Zimbabwe. Opinion polls are widely used by different actors in the political process for various reasons. Political parties commission opinion polls to analyse how to frame their campaigns; the media commission polls to speculate on the outcomes of elections or referendums; think tanks and interest groups rely on polls to propose viable policy solutions. Political science is particularly interested in the use of polls by governments and politicians to mobilize or maintain support. Here, we focus on four key roles of opinion polls in hybrid regimes and their implications for the ruling party and government, opposition, and transition stakeholders, aiming to lay a framework for understanding Afrobarometer/MPOI survey results.

First, opinion polls help hybrid regimes like Zimbabwe manage local and international public opinion by signaling the ruling elite's commitment to "democratizing," "republicanizing," or whichever lexicon is used, and its legitimacy. Hybrid regimes often strive to be viewed as democracies or republics to avoid international isolation which increases their vulnerability to coups and violent power takeovers. For instance, Diamond's study shows that hybrid regimes are particularly susceptible to democratic pressure due to their reliance on democratic forms and international validation, which increases their internal instability.[2] Schedler shows how electoral authoritarian regimes use elections to bolster their democratic legitimacy but also face increased vulnerability to coups due to internal power struggles and pressures.[3] To mitigate the fear of coups, they allow electoral contestations, albeit unfairly, to give a smokescreen of hope to internal and external parties that power can be peacefully accessed, thereby attracting benefits associated with democratic regimes. Escribà-Folch highlights the vulnerabilities of hybrid regimes in maintaining power and legitimacy, noting that perceived democratic failings can lead to increased risks of coups and internal challenges.[4] Svolik notes that as authoritarian and hybrid regimes try to manage internal conflict by attempting to appear democratic, this can sometimes backfire if democracy fails, leading to power struggles and coups.[5] Additionally, Ginsberg's study shows that opinion polls can enhance state legitimacy by aligning policy priorities with public demand, yet they may also domesticate and potentially manipulate public opinion.[6]

Secondly, opinion polls serve a signalling role to citizens and interested parties from the donor community, the business sector, and investors regarding the strength, readiness, and longevity prospects of political parties. Hobolt and Klemmemsen reveal that public opinion tends to drive the government's policy intentions due to the threat of electoral sanction, and this is more pronounced in proportional systems than in majoritarian democracies.[7] Polls indicating strong support for the opposition create necessary fears within the ruling elite about regime longevity, leading to elite disintegration and defection. This also causes a mass exodus of calculative financial, investor, and electoral supporters, as remaining in a political party that is likely to lose elections becomes futile to their interests. Conversely, the signalling power of the ruling elite through polls that show strong support helps intimidate opponents and attract crowds of supporters. These supporters see backing an opposition with little to no chances of winning as a pointless endeavour.

Thirdly, opinion polls provide hybrid regimes with insights into the effectiveness of their policies and opponent management strategies, enabling them to refine or devise new ones where necessary. Since hybrid regimes work hard to appear democratic to pacify potential coup plotters, likely violent rebellion leaders in the opposition, and the international

community, the correspondence between public preferences and public policy is critical to them. Democracy emphasizes the importance of popular control of policy-making institutions, so these regimes strive to appear committed to this value.[8] A study by Page and Shapiro found that public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion.[9]

Lastly, opinion polls help the opposition measure up against the ruling party, identify their weaknesses and strengths, and understand the ruling party's vulnerabilities. This is established by studies such as Stepan (2001), which shows that authoritarian breakdown and overthrow, sought by pro-democracy opposition, owe to the incremental process of authoritarian erosion such as elite dis-cohesion and the opposition's contribution to it. Thus, close scrutiny of the ruling party and government's dynamics, based on the interactions among core regime supporters, the coercive apparatus, passive supporters, passive opponents, and active opponents, is emphasized. This allows the opposition to build their strategy, seize opportunities revealed by the polls, and strategically deploy resources. Additionally, opinion polls help parties design their own campaign strategies and provide potential voters with a source of understanding and information that underlies their choices at the ballot box.[10] They assist political parties in formulating strategies by providing insights into voter sentiments, allowing for targeted campaign strategies,[11] and decreasing expected total campaigning expenditures by amplifying ex-ante asymmetries between candidates, thus defusing competition.[12]

With the rationale for opinion polls dissected above, our focus in the next section turns to the analysis of Afrobarometer/MPOI survey results and their implications for various policy stakeholders.

Overview of Key Poll Results

This paper revisits three critical results from the Afrobarometer/MPOI poll results which have the most critical highlights of the political pulse reading in Zimbabwe.

First, the results on current voting intentions show that, if presidential elections were held tomorrow, 41% would vote for ZANU-PF and/or its candidate, 15% for Nelson Chamisa and/or a party aligned with him, 7% for CCC and/or its candidate, 7% wouldn't vote, 29% don't know/refused to answer, and 1% for other candidates. Additionally, results on closeness to any political party showed that 37% were close to ZANU-PF, 6% to CCC, 9% to Chamisa-aligned groups, and 38% not close to any party.

Second, the Afrobarometer/MPOI poll results show that about 61% of Zimbabweans, with majorities among them being from rural areas, believe the country is moving in the wrong direction, and 63% describe the economic conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad." In contrast, 38% think the country is moving in the right direction, and 26% think economic conditions are "fairly good" or "very good."

Third, the Afrobarometer/MPOI survey on support for term limits, which serves as an indirect measure of support for President Mnangagwa's stay in power beyond his constitutionally limited terms ending in 2028, shows that a significant 79% of respondents support presidential term limits, with higher support in urban areas and among those with higher education levels.

These three findings provide critical evidence for prospective voters, political party sponsors, political parties, and political transition stakeholders. Below, we analyse these results.

ZANU PF's small Gains, Comatose Opposition and a possible Third Force

The results on current voting intentions serve to gauge the popularity of political parties and their presidential candidates. Afrobarometer/MPOI poll results indicate that if presidential elections were held tomorrow, ZANU-PF and/or its candidate, will enjoy a 26% margin of victory against Nelson Chamisa and/or a party aligned with him, whereas 7% will vote for CCC and/or its candidate, notwithstanding the 29% who said they don't know/refused to answer, and 1% for other candidates. Six key insights from the poll are:

(i) ZANU PF is likely to enjoy a booming support (ie +4% increase from previous polls) if the current comatose nature of the opposition continues till 2028;

(ii) the high percentage of respondents (38%) who do not feel close to any political party indicates a fragmented opposition landscape which could benefit ZANU-PF by dividing the opposition vote, making it easier for the ruling party to maintain power;

(iii) Nelson Chamisa was the opposition's main crowd puller; his demise is felt (ie CCC fell from 28% to 7% support);

(iv) the party-less opposition experiment is doomed to fail (ie Chamisa and his party-less structure has 15% support compared to 28% when he was in CCC);

(v) the Chamisa-less opposition experiment by Tshabangu/Ncube (with 7% from previous 28% with Chamisa) is poised to fail the way Thokozani Khupe's MDC-T, and Douglas Mwonzora's MDC-T/Alliance failed; and

(vi) the role of institutionalised party structures as a support mobilisation vehicle is emphasised.

The above insights are clearer if we take a closer look into the previous Afrobarometer survey in April-May 2023, more than a year ago which had revealed a 9% margin of victory for ZANU PF against Chamisa's CCC notwithstanding the 34% who refused to reveal how they will vote or said they "don't know." [13] The official result released by ZEC indicated a 8.6% margin of victory for President Mnangagwa, very close to the predicted 9% winning margin.[14] The question therefore is: what happened between April/May 2023 and September 2024 that caused such a shrinkage in opposition support in general and Chamisa's support in particular? We argue that the resignation of its leader Nelson Chamisa and attendant commatose nature of the opposition withdrew citizen's support from CCC (from 27% to 7%) and Chamisa's continued indecisiveness and/or lack of structured and formal political party has also cost him support from among the opposition support base. The experiment with a party-less movement is therefore very likely to misfire the way the structureless party experiment failed. The need to have Weberian ideal type rational legal authority is crucial for the opposition. The same applies to the Sengezo

Tshabangu/Welshman Ncube experiment of a Chamisa-less opposition, it is poised to fail the way Douglas Mwonzora's MDC-T failed.

However, it should be noted that the percentage increase in those ready to vote ZANU PF from 37% last year before elections to 41% (+4%) is relatively low considering its enjoyment of conditions of comatose opposition and control of statecraft. What this means is that, resources, effort and media onslaught leading to the disintegration of the main opposition CCC did not yield the anticipated Chinese or Rwandan dividend. Citizens, 59% still do not turn to ZANU PF for political support, and worse, 38% do not wish to be closely associated with it. ZANU-PF's relatively low closeness rating (37%) visa-vis its 41% support suggests stagnating traditional support bases. A poll defeat similar to that of South Africa's ANC is possible. Second, the findings show that a third force is possible in Zimbabwe as most Zimbabweans (38%) do not feel close to any party, indicating disillusionment or disengagement. A significant portion of voters (29%) are undecided or refused to answer. In this regard, a new movement different from what is available in the body politic might capitalise on this orphaned electorate pool and change the dynamics of politics in Zimbabwe.

Conversely, 38% who do not feel close to any party, might imply a looming sharp increase in voter apathy in 2028 if neither a third force does emerge nor available political parties up their strategies. This is neither good for the regime nor the opposition because in many cases where citizens reject competitive elections, they opt for violent power change which might result in either breakdown of society's development progress by a revolution led by a third force or a coup d'etat. A historical overview of recent coup d'etats in Africa shows that this kind of disillusionment with available party options coupled with citizen dissatisfaction with how the government of the day runs the country and closure of the democratic space usually gives coup plotters positive signalling that their moves are likely to get citizens' support, justifications that they are acting in defence of democracy and attendant inaction from regional and international organisations. This is how the coup that deposed former president Mugabe succeeded.

Citizen's Dissatisfaction and ZANU PF resilience

The second result regarding citizens' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the ruling elite's (mis)management of the country's economy and standard of living serves to highlight the likelihood of a punitive vote, which usually benefits the opposition when well harnessed. Empirical studies show that the economy is a key determinant of electoral outcomes; democratic voters vote to reward government for good economic performance and punish it for bad performance (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hellwig, 2010). The Afrobarometer/MPOI poll results show that about 61% of Zimbabweans, with majorities among them being from rural areas, believe the country is moving in the wrong direction, and 63% describe the economic conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad." In contrast, 38% think the country is moving in the right direction, and 26% think economic conditions are "fairly good" or "very good." This can be understood in juxtaposition to results of Afrobarometer survey in April-May 2023 which revealed that 65% saw the country as moving in the wrong direction and

described the country's economic situation as bad (69%).[15] Key implications are that despite a general dissatisfaction with how the ruling elite is running the country which has been a pattern since 2000s, this dissatisfaction is facing slim declines (ie. -2% and -6% decline from previous polls). This implies that ZANU PF is slowly closing the dissatisfaction gap, which can be used to explain its 4% support base growth.

However, the remaining 61% and 63% dissatisfaction is so much that the small gains might be overshadowed. The question that arises is: How has ZANU PF managed to win successive elections and defy the negative impact of economic mismanagement? We argue that ZANU-PF's political machinery (including dense patronage networks, capture and use of state institutions, strong, united and coordinated party structures) coupled with a weak, fragmented opposition and civil society play a crucial role in its sustained victories.

Elite Discohesion and Citizen Disillusionment

Testing the level of internal cohesion within the ruling elite on politically sensitive national questions, such as a referendum or internal succession politics, is crucial. This serves as a gauge of a possible disgruntled vote, also known as a "bhora musango vote," associated with elite disintegration, infighting, and defections. O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) posit that the extent of survival of an authoritarian regime depends on the extent of unity within its ruling elite. Thus, they argue that "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime" (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, p.19). Geddes (2005, p.6) also found that the most serious challenge to the survival of authoritarian regimes are not masses and their street protests or external intervention but high-level allies within the ruling elite. In this line of reasoning, the uncertainty of the life of the authoritarian regime begins when the incoherence of the ruling elite becomes certain. The findings (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Geddes, 2005, p.6) imply that authoritarian breakdown becomes very likely with the genesis of incoherence within the ruling elite.

The Afrobarometer/MPOI survey on support for term limits, which serves as an indirect measure of support for President Mnangagwa's stay in power beyond his constitutionally limited terms ending in 2028, shows that a significant 79% of respondents support presidential term limits, with higher support in urban areas and among those with higher education levels. The strong support for presidential term limits (79%) contrasts sharply with ZANU-PF's slogan that President Mnangagwa will still be in power in 2030. This discrepancy suggests potential internal conflicts within the party and public resistance to extending Mnangagwa's rule beyond the constitutionally mandated two terms, which end in 2028. If ZANU-PF pushes for constitutional amendments to extend Mnangagwa's term, it could face significant backlash from both the public and within its ranks. Historical context, such as the coup that removed Mugabe, shows that party structures and supporters can turn against leadership perceived as overstaying. The combination of high dissatisfaction with the country's direction and strong support for term limits could create a volatile environment. If President Mnangagwa attempts to extend his rule, it might lead to widespread unrest or even a popular coup, similar to the one that ousted Mugabe.

Conclusion

The poll results highlight the complex dynamics at play in Zimbabwe's political landscape. They underscore the need for Zimbabwe's political leaders to prioritize economic development, governance reform, and citizen engagement to address widespread dissatisfaction and achieve a more prosperous future. While ZANU-PF maintains a strong lead, significant public dissatisfaction with the economy and support for term limits present challenges to its long-term goals. The opposition, particularly Nelson Chamisa and CCC, face the task of consolidating their support and presenting a unified front. The future of Zimbabwe's political and economic landscape will depend on the ability of both the ruling party and the opposition to address the pressing concerns of the populace and work towards sustainable development.

To achieve a middle-income economy by 2030, ZANU-PF must:

1. Address economic grievances and improve living standards.
2. Foster a more inclusive, responsive governance system.
3. Encourage private sector growth and investment.

For Chamisa and the opposition forces aligned to him, they must:

1. Establish a clear, formal party structure. Forming a party or establishing a clear movement could consolidate support and challenge ZANU-PF.

2. Consolidate support and build a strong, unified opposition. Multiple opposition groups (CCC, Chamisa's alignment, etc.) may split votes, benefiting ZANU-PF.

3. Engage rural areas and address urban-rural divides. Opposition support is stronger in urban areas, indicating a need for targeted rural engagement.

For CCC, they must:

1. Re-evaluate their claim to being the leading opposition party.
2. Reflect on their low support and consider coalition-building or restructuring. A unified opposition, potentially led by Chamisa, could pose a stronger challenge.

For the Civil Society, they must:
1. Guard and maintain their autonomy to safeguard the constitution, defend it against efforts to amend it for third term bid.
2. Utilize poll results to identify and prioritise the key issues affecting citizens, and tailor advocacy and interventions accordingly.

End Notes

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