



MASVINGO CENTER
FOR RESEARCH
ADVOCACY AND
DEVELOPMENT

Indigenous minority groups' participation in elections and electoral processes in Zimbabwe.



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1.0 Introduction

This paper focus on the participation of indigenous minority groups in elections and various electoral processes in post-independent Zimbabwe. The minority ethnic groups included herein are the Shangaan and the Venda. The Shangaan are the majority ethnic group scattered across four constituencies namely Chiredzi North, Chiredzi East, Chiredzi West and Chiredzi South of the Chiredzi district. Other Shangaan people are sparsely populated in Mwenezi West and Mwenezi East constituencies of Mwenezi district. Lastly, Venda ethnic group is concentrated in Beitbridge district located in Matabeleland South province.

This paper focused on these two minority groups scrutinizing their participation in electoral processes in Zimbabwe. The main aim is to interrogate how they exercise their rights in voting considering their minority status in the broader shrinking democratic space in Zimbabwe.

Figure 1 below shows the map of Chiredzi and Mwenezi on Masvingo province constituency map.

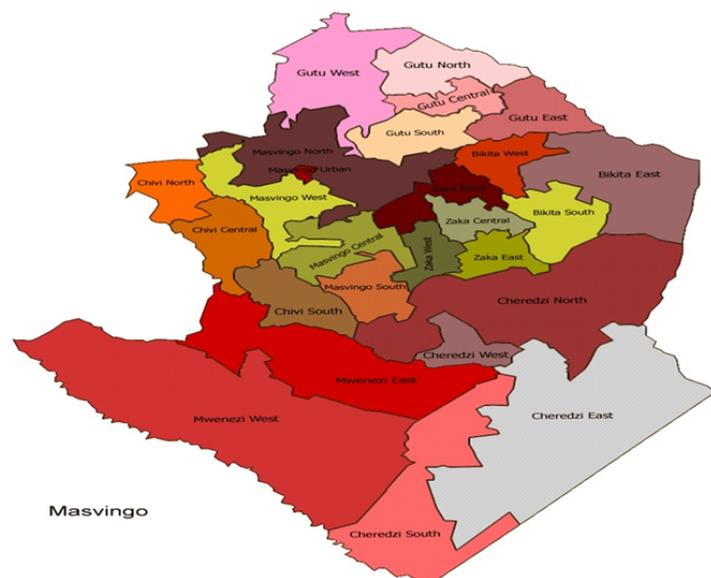


Figure 1 –Masvingo province constituency map: Source: Google map



2.0 Understanding the indigenous/minority ethnic groups

Indigenous people are the first inhabitants or native social groups who have lived in particular geographical spaces over long period of time. They are referred to by various names such as, the Natives, the First people and the autochthonous people among others.¹The United Nations' defines them as, '.....of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived.'²According to the IUCN, indigenous people are those who still practice their historical and unique traditions presented through well decorated tangible artefacts - dressing, musical instruments, jewellery and craft – and intangible cultural artefacts – language, dances, music and rituals.

According to the UN, the indigenous people in modern days are considered as minority ethnic groups in national contexts.³Their minority status emerged after being disoriented and dominated through physical conquest, settlement and occupation by bigger social groups.

3.0 Normative profiles of the Shangaan and the Venda

The Shangaan and the Venda are amongst the few indigenous minority groups found in Zimbabwe.⁴Statistics showed that the Venda and Shangaan in conjunction with other minority groups constitute less than 10% of the Zimbabwean population.⁵The country is dominated by the Shona speaking people who constitute 75% of the Zimbabwean population – the Shona speaking people appears in three tribal clusters namely Zezuru, Karanga and Manyika. Like other indigenous minority groups elsewhere, their participation in politics is not autonomous and in most cases they experience induced or directed participation.

(i) The Venda

The Venda people are a minority group found on the southern parts of Zimbabwe whilst the majority reside in South Africa.⁶History tells that they originated from the Mapungubwe kingdom which was established by their ancestors in the 19th century.⁷Furthermore, the Venda people belong to the Bantu language cluster which is common South Eastern Africa. Their primary language is Venda and their religion is in the domain of African Traditional Religion (ATR). The Venda's ethnoreligion is their way of life which embraces close connection with their ethnic identity, cultural heritage and practice.

Interestingly, the Venda people have a very high esteem on their women.⁸Ideally, the system of valuing women is quiet unusual when compared to other ethnic groups spread across Africa. In real practice, the Vendas encourage their women to occupy influential and senior positions in the society. In both the domestic and public spheres, aunties (known as Vhomakadzi) are very powerful in conflict resolution and management.⁹In domestic spheres, they guarantee peace and serenity amongst family members – between and amongst siblings, in-laws and in marriages.

1 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/#>

2 https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf

3 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/#>

4 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/zimbabwe-population/>

5 <http://strategyleader.org/profiles/shangaan.html>

6 <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/meet-the-venda-sacred-people-in-a-sacred-place>

7 <https://www.peoplegroups.org/Explore/groupdetails.aspx?peid=15684>

8 <https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/meet-the-venda-sacred-people-in-a-sacred-place>

9 <https://www.herald.co.zw/powerful-role-of-the-aunt-among-vhavenda/>



Furthermore, they are the custodians of divine processes such as ritual performing and communication with the ancestors.

(a) Political economy

The Venda people domicile in the rural parts of Beitbridge town in Matabeleland South province. The district is bordered with Mozambique to the east, Botswana west and South Africa to the south. Ecologically, this district lies in region V, characterised by arid conditions and untenable topographic traits. Excessive temperature and low rainfall patterns makes it very difficult for rained farming. As a result, the Venda people are vulnerable to severe food insecurities. Alternatively, they rely much on animal husbandry – cattle are the common livestock produced. Others work in commercial farms in the district which produce oranges. The other dominant livelihood strategy amongst the Vendas is crossing to South either as petty traders or wage labor seekers. Their political economy is more South African than Zimbabwean.

(i) The Shangaan

The Shangaan people (also referred to as Tsonga) are a minority group largely concentrated in Chiredzi district whilst others are scattered in some parts of Mwenezi district in Masvingo province.¹⁰ Broadly, the Shangaan people are also found in the Limpopo province of South Africa and Mozambique. Their main language is Xichangana or Shangaan which is directly related to Zulu and Ndebele. This language has five dialects which are as follows are, Hlanganu (Ihlanganu), Dzonga (Xidzonga), N'walangu (Xin'walungu), Bila (Xibila) and Hlengwe (Xihlengwe)

(a) The Shangaan's political economy in Chiredzi and Mwenezi

Chiredzi	Mwenezi
<p>Chiredzi District is one of the seven administrative districts in Masvingo province and it's found in the south eastern part of Zimbabwe which boards Mozambique and South Africa. It is also found amongst the least developed areas in Zimbabwe.</p> <p>This area receives less than 650mm of rain per annum hence making it more vulnerable to droughts. As a result, the Shangaan relies much on mixed farming of small grains and livestock production. Apart from farming, the youth and the able boded in Chiredzi relies much on working in commercial sugarcane plantations whilst majority migrate to South Africa for greener pastures.</p>	<p>Mwenezi is one of the seven administrative districts in Masvingo province. People living there are a mixture of Karanga and Shangaan. It is amongst the least developed districts in Zimbabwe. Different parts of Mwenezi district are found agro-ecological region 4 and 5 respectively.</p> <p>Like Chiredzi, this district is prone to severe droughts especially on rainfed smallholder farming. They also depend on livestock production inclusive of cattle and goats. Other livelihood strategies include working in sugarcane plantations and migrating to South Africa for better life chances.</p>

¹⁰<http://www.bbrdc.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2017/01/Beitbridge-Rural-District-Council-strategic-plan-final-2016-2020.pdf>

¹¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiredzi_District



4.0 Legislatives whither indigenous minority groups' democratic political participation

The American Centre for Peace and Diplomacy (ACPD) (2006) conceptualized participation as the inclusive – individuals and communities – process of making decisions in all ongoing political processes.¹² This means that, all people, regardless of differences in ethnicity, age, gender, religion etc, should be accorded the same platform and capacity to meaningfully contribute in all political decisions without discrimination and prejudice. Calls for equality on political participation amongst individual and minority groups are all noted in both domestic, regional and international legal instruments.

In Zimbabwe the rights to political participation are granted by constitution, Electoral Act (EA) and Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).¹³ The constitutional chapter below and its subsequent sections in the Zimbabwean Constitution stipulates the following inclusive rights of individuals and minority groups in participating in electoral processes in Zimbabwe.¹⁴

Constitution –Chapter 4	
Section 56	Equality and non-discrimination – the section calls for all Zimbabwean citizens to treat each other as equal citizens and should participate and enjoy rights without discriminating.
Section 61	Freedom of expression and freedom of media – all the citizens should be granted the right to freedom of expression, be it in politics or democratic circles without infringement. Furthermore, all the citizens regardless of the differences should have equal access to the media, be it radios, televisions among others. These rights should be accorded in political expression and any other rights based circles.
Section 67	Political rights – the constitution points out that all Zimbabwean citizens should be given right to express themselves politically that is including voting, participating in referendums, decision making among other critical political considerations.

¹² Chikerema, A. F. 2013. Citizen Participation and Local Democracy in Zimbabwean Local Government System IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 13, Issue 2, PP 87-90.

¹³ <https://www.zec.org.zw>

¹⁴ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Zimbabwe_2013.pdf

¹⁵ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>



SDGs and provisions for inclusive participation¹⁵

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	
Goal 10	Reduced inequalities – this is critical in creating the environment of equals. Mostly, for this turns and purposes, minority and ethnic groups should be granted the equal opportunities in participating politics just like all other majority of dominant groups in all the countries. Minority groups, for example like Shangaan and Venda in Zimbabwe should contribute to the decision making in politics and other rights which they deserve.
Goal 16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions – Zimbabwe should be a peaceful country, respecting the rights of the minority, by giving them peace, giving them justice eg, avoiding unplanned displacements for the minority groups paving way for development projects like the impending incidents amongst the Shangaan. Also, there should be strong institutions to track, manage and maintain their rights. For instance, ZEC, ZESN and other CSOs like MACRAD should be empowered to act and stand in for the marginalized minority groups in political participation.
Goal 17	Partnership for the Goals – the call for equality is paramount, all nations, institutions, communities and ethnic social groups should work together in enhancing or for the achievement of all the goals which give the excluded minority ethnic groups the equal political standing like others.

International provisions of rights of minority and disadvantaged groups

International instrument	Explanation
African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR),	The Charter spells that, all human beings, regardless of status, age creed, religion and gender alike, should be treated as equal to all other people. Also, even their participation in politics should be given a sublime consideration. ¹⁶
United Nations International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	It accords that all citizens in member countries should be accorded civil and political rights. Interestingly, it considers vulnerable and minority groups as key members of a particular country and their political participation is key in inclusive democratic development. ¹⁷



<p>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).</p>	<p>UDHR is the bedrock of all rights accorded to human beings in diverse aspects of life. Likewise, in politics, it encourages the duty bearers to provide a non-discriminatory approach in ensuring fulfilment of citizens' rights – including political rights of the minority groups.¹⁸</p>
<p>Human Development Index (HDI)</p>	<p>The HDI do not consider development in terms of economy alone. Instead, it values human development through fulfilment of rights, prospects and ambitions as the bases for qualitative human development. Therefore, minority groups' fulfilment of political ambitions and practise is the sine qua non for their total human development.</p>

5.0 Historical trends of Shangaan and Venda inclusion and participation in politics

In the past decades after independence of 1980, the Shangaan and Venda people like other ethnic minority and majority groups in Zimbabwe have been participating in elections – particularly voting in national elections.²⁰ In spite of those privileges and rights, there are a lot of flaws associated with their independent freedom of expression and voting.

²¹The consistency in their election results over the years have raised questions on whether they are subjected to fair democratic access to political information and freedom of choice. Critics have labelled their consistent voting for ZANU PF candidates as induced or directed voting.²² The government has been taking advantage of their minority status, vulnerability to poverty and residing in precarious agro-ecological zones as the strategy of limiting their knowledge horizon on their decision making during elections.

Through MACRAD's research and engagement, it discovered wide ranging deprivation which retards their conscious participation and decision making elections.²³ The following factors were noted as impediments:

¹⁶ <https://www.achpr.org>

¹⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>

¹⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

¹⁹ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>

²⁰ <https://minorityrights.org/country/zimbabwe/>

²¹ <http://kubatana.net/2019/11/01/zimbabwe-election-support-network-zesn-report-on-chiredzi-rural-district-council-ward-12-by-election/>

²² https://www.zesn.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Chiredzi-Ward-12-By-election_Report.pdf

²³ <http://kubatana.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MACRAD-Forced-displacements-amongst-The-Indigenous-Shaghaan-People-in-Chiredzi-District.pdf>



(i) Language as a form of exclusion

Despite the Zimbabwean constitution recognizing 16 official languages in Zimbabwe, there is limited use of minority languages by officials during elections.²⁴As a result, the Shangaan and Venda people have been neglected in various electoral processes due to language. Commonly used languages are Shona, Ndebele and English. Indeed, on national television, radios and newspapers all other minority languages were/are never given the platform.²⁵ Yet, these languages are of paramount importance, for instance in voter education programs, registration, campaigning, human rights awareness campaigns among other critical issues.

Furthermore, pamphlets and flyers designed and used by government departments and those of active rights based and political institutions such as ZESN, ZEC and other CSOs do not consider translating their messages to cater for the minority. As a result, they vote with ignorance or bias depending on whoever came and campaign to them – mostly ZANU PF. Practically, these three areas (Chiredzi, Mwenezi and Beitbridge) were automatically made a protectorate of ZANU PF and the government.

Remote and marginal areas

Most parts where the Shangaan people reside in Chiredzi and Mwenezi and Venda people in Matabeleland South are remote and not well connected road networks, airwaves and basic amenities. The following are amenities they lack and how they negatively impact on their access to information which could enhance their informed political participation.

(i) Limited access to information communication conduits

There are profound challenges in getting Zimbabwean radio and television waves in some parts of Chiredzi south covering areas like Boli Muhlangueni, Chilonga etc.²⁶The disconnection from national broadcasting deprive them accessing information which is vital in enhancing their political horizon critical their participation just like other Zimbabwean citizens. In cases where airwaves are reached, only the main line languages (Shona, Ndebele and English) are used in news and campaigns. As a result, this has created serious communication barriers and breakdown. For the case of Masvingo, the province have two main local radio stations namely Hevoi FM and Great Zimbabwe University campus radio. The catchment areas for these radios is limited since they do not reach all the parts in Masvingo province.

Furthermore, most programs on these two stations are done in Shona and English hence worsening the communication breakdown. For Great Zimbabwe University radio, their focus is more on education and campus life hence failing to add some critical programs like political rights and participation all the people in Masvingo province.

²⁴ <https://www.zesn.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Policy-Brief-Enhancing-Citizen-Participation-in-Electoral-Processes-through-Voter-Education.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.discoverafrica.com/faq/what-languages-are-spoken-in-zimbabwe/>

²⁶ <https://lowveldpost.co.zw/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi>



On another note, the Venda in Beitbridge relies much on radios, television and even print media from South Africa hence making them pseudo Zimbabweans.²⁷ The Shangaan in Mwenzezi also rely on information from South Africa which they have turned to be their haven.²⁸ For those in Chiredzi South, they depend much more on airwave communications from neighbouring Mozambique and South Africa. The impact of these reaction strategies are dreadful on their meaningful inclusion in the Zimbabwean politics and their future in making fruitful decisions electoral processes.

The absence of other alternative information and communication conduits induce them to be blinkered in political communications before, during and even after elections. For instance, they lack alternative communication conduits like twitter handles, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook. Access to these alternative communication conduits offers more information on their political rights and voter education – including registration for virgin voters and youth.

(i) Limited neutral youth/women oriented platforms.

There are limited neutral platforms amongst the Indigenous people where specific targeted groups i.e young women/youths from diverse social-economic and political groupings engage local leaders for the common good of their community or village. The indigenous communities lack trainings and mentoring needs of young women/youths separately. Young women/youths face double discrimination based on age and gender, and require a specific focus on their needs. One option to consider for example, are separate skill-training workshops that will help young women learn to overcome barriers in a safe space. In addition, the adverse life conditions of indigenous peoples in general have left the vast majority of indigenous women politically disenfranchised, more insecure economically, physically more vulnerable and emotionally more strained, which poses further challenges to their economic and social development.

(ii) No road networks and basic amenities

Disconnection from other places makes them to continuously lag behind development. Developmental deprivation subject them to lack functional institutions such as schools and information centres which could help in improving their political ideas, rights, knowledge and ideas.²⁹ For instance, lack of education makes them less interested in listening to programs political programs – especially the youth and the elderly to illiteracy and ignorance. Ideally, lack of active information centres also makes them to live in ignorance without demanding for social accountability and transparency from the authorities they have voted into governance. As a result of ignorance, political participation in elections becomes a mandatory act but seriously lacking the needed conscious mind on the decisions.

Lastly, some long distances from the polling stations may hinder participation of elderly people. As a result, they end up accepting the outcome of those that participated despite going against their conscience.



Chilonga township



Chilonga Primary School

²⁷ <https://www.internations.org/zimbabwe-expats/south-africans>

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mwenzezi_District

²⁹ <http://www.tellzim.com/2020/04/1000-chiredzi-families-face.html>



6.0 Induced or directed participation in voting

Available evidence have proved that, despite resounding voting statistics amongst the Shangaan and Venda in favour of ZANU PF, there are high possibilities of induced participation.³⁰The following factors were noted as drivers of directed voting:

(i) Reliance on government and opinion leaders

The Shangaan and Venda's reliance on government – via line ministries like Social welfare makes them to recognise the government as the only option available in elections and voting. Furthermore, their trust on opinion leaders in their local circles gives no room for individual thinking – givers of voting directives. For example, the opinions of spirit mediums and Vhomakadzi amongst the Venda are respected and followed without doubt or despair.³¹In this line, the government through manipulative politics have been/are still using them in influencing opinions. In most cases, the opinion leaders are used in campaigns which closes avenues for individuals' democratic thinking and voting behaviour. Amongst the Shangaan, the paramount chiefs are respected by their people and in turn, they are valued as custodians of government hence making them to incline the masses towards a one directional political opinion. The predictable outcome of the voting directives amongst the Shangaan and Venda have since in the past years produced straightforward outcomes in favour of ZANU PF.

(ii) Political economy

Livelihoods amongst the Shangaan and the Venda are based on subsistence smallholder agriculture, working in commercial farms and migration to neighbouring countries particularly South Africa. Their dependence on the land which is given, controlled and managed by the government –via ZANU PF - gives them no room for accommodating alternative political view from outside. Recent events which pointed the government's intention to displace the Shangaan people in Chilonga making them to live in fear as they are indebted to the government. Even in voting, their decisions in 2023 are projected not to be against the government due to fear of further victimisation.

Conclusion

Despite the constitutional provisions for free participation of ethnic groups in Zimbabwean politics, the Shangaan and Vendas have a different experience. Voting have been ongoing for many decades but there is a closed democratic space for them to be liberal in their political participation. The induced or directed voting trends have been/are influenced by wide ranging causes owing to government pragmatic politics, geographical disconnection, poverty, underdevelopment and their minority status. However, there are possibilities of inclusion if serious measures are taken by civil society and government's good will in according individuals and minority groups to independently and democratically participate in politics.

³⁰ <https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/ZW/STS%20Graphs%20Analysis%20Chiredzi.doc/view>

³¹ <https://www.peoplegroups.org/Explore/groupdetails.aspx?peid=15684>



Recommendations

1. Creation of information centres – there is need for the creation of information centres or kiosks which could help the Venda and Shangaan people to know more on the current state of affairs in the country, voter registration and their political rights among others which may help them to offer meaningful participation.
2. Availability of Human rights clinics – they save the function of informing them their rights in the broad range of political participation. The rights will come against the backdrop of fighting or reporting threats, intimidation and violence on opposition supporters or those going against group-think induced political decisions.
3. Conscientising them through their traditional rituals –the CSOs, CBOs and human rights activists should utilise ritual gatherings – eg among the Shangaan – using Khomba, Hoko and Chisale ritual gatherings for voter education and political rights amongst the youth. Amongst the Venda, taking advantages of Domba rituals (which trains girls into wives) and the Tshikona (male dances) and Tshigombela (females dances) gatherings as opportunities for educating the youth and majority on voter registration and other related ensuing electoral rights and processes.
4. Expanding technology based communication to the remote areas – the civic society in collaboration with government and other concerned stakeholders should make sure that these areas are accessible in terms of networking – telephones, radios and televisions. The Venda and Shangaan's access to Econet, Netone and Telecel makes them to receive pro-Zimbabwean information rather than South African mobile networks such as MTN and Vodacom. The foreign networks do not in one way promote voter education of Zimbabwe.
5. Language – all the concerned stakeholders in politics and voting should consider embracing the minority ethnic groups' languages in communicating with them on all the electoral processes. Even the operating radios should consider Venda and Shangaan in electoral programs to avoid leaving them behind.





6. CSOs and CBOs should also consider extending their operations in the remote areas inhabited by the minority Shangaan and Venda. Expanding to these areas may enhance their participation in all the forthcoming electoral processes in Zimbabwe just like all other citizens. Lately, majority of CSOs and CBOs are congested in towns and growth points hence neglecting those in remote and vulnerable geographical locations.
7. Develop and strengthen opportunities for young women/youth to learn their rights and responsibilities. And increased neutral platforms centered on either young women/youths in the community.



About MACRAD

Masvingo Centre for Research Advocacy and Development (MACRAD) Trust is an independent Zimbabwean Community Based Civil Society institution committed to the development of socio-economic rights and agrarian systems that enhance equitable land rights and sustainable land uses throughout Zimbabwe. MACRAD interacts with various organizations and communities to assist them in developing capacity for policy formulation and research. It also facilitates policy dialogue among communities, governments, academics, civil society and others on land and agrarian development, especially the land rights of marginalized social groups. Masvingo Center for Research Advocacy and Community Development (MACRAD) is driven by a desire to contribute towards improved rural livelihoods that should lead to greater capacities for the rural poor to determine their own destinies and contribute towards national development. MACRAD has worked with citizens in resettlements areas around Masvingo Province on civic and voter education to ensure their voices are heard. We support victims and survivors of diverse forms of conflict, violence, displacement and disenfranchisement. MACRAD's approach entails encouraging continuous policy debates and refinement of policy. This is achieved through generation and provision of research based information, platforms for dialogue, creating and nurturing a policy community in Zimbabwe. The ambition of Masvingo Center for Research Advocacy and Community Development (MACRAD) is to provide leadership in socio-economic justice and land-agrarian policy processes, to become a Centre of Excellence and remain an independent and credible center for knowledge on social and economic justice. We support victims and survivors of diverse forms of conflict, violence, displacement and disenfranchisement.



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