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## **ERC & ZESN Statement on Phase 1 of Voter Registration (1 - 28 February 2022)**

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### **I. Overview**

As part of their commitment to support democratic development and promote credible, transparent, and accountable electoral processes in Zimbabwe, the Election Resource Centre (ERC) and Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) observed the first phase of the registration blitz and shall observe the second phase of the BVR blitz on an independent and nonpartisan basis for all Zimbabweans. The joint observation effort serves to provide citizens and key stakeholders with accurate, independent, timely, and credible information on the BVR blitz process. ERC and ZESN's further objective is to ensure the BVR blitz is transparent, inclusive, and accountable as well as follows regional and international best practices.

In this effort, ERC and ZESN planned to observe the originally scheduled Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) blitz slated to begin in December 2021. However, in the weeks preceding the commencement of the blitz, the ZEC announced that it was postponing the blitz until February 2022 in order to allow citizens additional time to acquire national identity cards (IDs). The Registrar General planned to carry out a national ID card registration blitz for January and February 2022. Unfortunately, there was little mobilisation of citizens for the same during this time period and the Registrar General also rescheduled blitz to issue ID cards from 1 April 2022 to coincide with the commencement of the second phase of the ZEC voter registration blitz. Despite the IDs blitz not having been rolled out, ZEC went ahead to roll out the first phase of the BVR blitz throughout February, from 1 to 28, which will be followed by a second phase scheduled from 11 to 30 April 2022.

During Phase 1 of the BVR blitz ERC and ZESN experienced challenges securing accreditation to observe voter registration and in a limited number of cases duly accredited observers were not initially permitted access to registration centres and in others registration officials refused to provide duly accredited observers with information on the process.

Overall, reports from ERC and ZESN observers from all 210 constituencies show that registration of voters took place across the entire country. There were a limited number of challenges experienced, such as some centres not opening as announced, observers being denied access to registration centres, or issues with BVR kits properly functioning, but these were not widespread. Observers also reported low levels of voter education and awareness raising in a number of provinces. Further, observers reported challenges within the broader political environment surrounding voter registration, such as traditional leaders and civil servants taking part in partisan activities and reports of violence and intimidation.

ERC and ZESN call upon the ZEC to release detailed statistics on the Phase 1 of the voter registration blitz, that includes the number of individuals registered per day per registration centre broken down by gender and including the number of persons with disabilities. This information should be readily available; such information is routinely provided by credible election management bodies (EMBs); and doing so is in line with the best principles of open election data (see <https://openelectiondata.net/en/>). Without this information, Zimbabweans cannot determine for themselves if Phase 1 of the voter registration blitz has met their expectations or whether additional opportunities are needed to ensure all eligible Zimbabweans have a meaningful opportunity to newly register or update their registration information.

*Based on the conduct of Phase 1, ERC and ZESN make the following recommendations for Phase 2:*

Provide an accurate list of registration centres and dates well in advance of Phase 2 so voters, political parties, civic organisations and observers can effectively participate in the process

Beyond these recommendations, voter education is also urgently needed to make clear to Zimbabweans that they do NOT have until 30 April 2022 the end of Phase 2 of the Blitz, to register to vote or to update their registration information. Rather, voters can only register locally during the limited number of days registration centres are open in their ward. While the ZEC has not yet made the list of Phase 2 registration centres public, this likely means that voters for whom registration centres were open in their ward during Phase 1 have now missed out on any opportunity to register locally. Rather, unless additional opportunities are made available at the ward level, their only recourse is to travel to the nearest District or Provincial ZEC voter registration centre in order to register. As the ZEC itself has acknowledged. Few Zimbabweans have taken advantage of this opportunity due to the burden it imposes on the individual to register and exercise his/her fundamental right to vote.

The following sections of the report provides additional information on ERC and ZESN's observation effort, including methodology, observer data from the first phase of the BVR blitz, and detailed recommendations for relevant key stakeholders.

## **II. ERC/ZESN Methodology**

In order to gather factual and verifiable information on the conduct of the 2022 BVR blitz, ERC and ZESN deployed 210 volunteers, one volunteer observer per constituency. All the observers were accredited by the ZEC. The observers were recruited from local communities following a strict criterion, and adhering to gender balance and other demographic considerations. Additionally, all volunteer observers signed a code of conduct and a pledge of neutrality acknowledging their non-partisanship and neutrality while observing.

ERC and ZESN implemented two complimentary observational efforts; the registration centre observation and the general political environment. On the registration centre observation, each of the observers was expected to visit a total of three selected registration centres in their constituencies on three different days, following the ZEC itinerary of the BVR blitz. The observers arrived before 8 am on the observational day where they observed the setup and

opening processes, the registration process as well as closing processes. At the end of phase 1, ERC and ZESN observers observed at a total of 581 registration centres.

For the general political environment observation, the observers reported once a week for the duration of Phase 1 of the BVR blitz. The reports included information about ZEC preparations towards the BVR blitz, voter education activities, the conduct of the traditional and religious leaders, as well as general political environment and conduct of party activities. ERC and ZESN observers reported a total of 590 reports during Phase 1 of the BVR blitz.

For both observation efforts, ERC and ZESN observers sent information to a central database where information was then analysed and verified. In addition to reporting on two methodologies, the observers were also expected to report in near real time on any incidents that could threaten the integrity of the voter registration process such as issues of violence, harassment and intimidation, among others.

### **III. Voter Registration Centre Observation**

As was noted in an earlier statement ERC and ZESN had planned to observe the first day of the blitz however due to delayed accreditation observers were unable to deploy as planned. The voter registration observation reports covered a total of 581 ZEC registration centres on the 5th of February, 16th and 28th of February 2022, which covers the beginning, middle and end of the process in order to look at the process over time. The observers used a structured checklist including critical incidents forms to report in near real time incidents that were not consistent with the process and environment within which voter registration must take place. In addition, the checklist provided for the observers to report on the entire process of registration from setting up, opening, registration and closing of the centre.

#### **A. Observer Access to Registration Centres and Key Information**

Public confidence in any electoral process is critical to the integrity of the election. Non-partisan and independent citizen observers contribute to building confidence and accountability of a process through objective and timely observation. For observers to make objective reports they need to have access to the process, through accreditation by the election commission, and provision of information.

Prior to the observation, ERC and ZESN observers were all accredited by the ZEC to observe the electoral process. However, there were a limited number of cases where duly accredited observers were unreasonably denied access to registration centres. These incidents occurred at Bubi Secondary School, Mwenezi West (Masvingo Province), Langeni Primary School, Beitbridge (Matabeleland South) and at Chishoshe Primary School in Chegutu East (Mashonaland West) required intervention by ERC and ZESN as detailed in the critical incident section.

Similarly, there were a number of instances where ERC and ZESN observers were denied key information by the registration officials. This included observers not being provided daily statistics of registration details such as total registrants, amendments as well as those refused to be registered. The observers were instead referred to ZEC district offices with registration officials claiming they were not authorised to give out that information.

## **B. Opening of Registration Centres**

Ahead of the Phase 1 of the voter registration blitz, the ZEC announced a schedule of voter registration centres, noting the specific locations and dates where voter registration would take place. The ZEC also detailed that registration centres should be open from 8:00am - 5:00pm. Maintaining consistent opening and closing times and locations based on published itineraries better ensures that citizens have an opportunity to newly register or update their registration information.

Over the course of its observation, ERC and ZESN found that 567 of the 581 registration centres observed opened on the date that was publicised. A number of registration centres did not open due to weather or reported logistical challenges. However, in some instances the location did not open with no prior notification of changes in the local itinerary or no other reasons were given. Of the registration centres that did open, more than half (321) of registration centres opened by 8 am, and the majority (565) opening before 9am. Some of the reasons for late opening included lack of chairs and tables, late arrival of ZEC officials, and breakdown of communication on opening time between venue officials and the ZEC registration officials.

## **C. Presence of Other Stakeholders at the Registration Centres**

### *Political Parties*

Political parties are key stakeholders in any electoral process and hence their participation is fundamental in increasing accountability. During the ZEC voter registration blitz, party representatives were afforded the opportunity to monitor the voter registration process which is important as it increases the transparency and accountability of the process. Generally, political party presence during the registration process was lacking. ZANU PF had representatives at only 35 of 581 registration centres observed and open, CCC had representatives in 29 centres, MDC-T (MDC-A) had representatives in 25 centres and at 20 registration centres there were representatives for other parties (not ZANU PF, CCC, or MDC-T (MDC-A)).

### *Civil Society Organisations and Faith-Based Organisations*

Civil society was more actively present and observed at registration centres, with 90 registration centres having representatives for civil society organisations or faith based organisations (not ERC or ZESN) present.

### *Security Personnel*

Security officers are considered essential personnel at registration centres in order to provide security to the registration staff and their equipment as well as the potential registrants by maintaining law and order, if necessary. ERC and ZESN observers reported that at the majority of centres observed, there were uniformed security personnel stationed. However there were 46 registration centres where no security personnel were observed.

## **D. Voter Registration Process**

*The Biometric Voter Registration Kits (BVR) availability and functioning*

In all of the centres observed, there was a biometric voter registration kit available at setup, and there were registration application forms (affidavits and VR9 forms). In only one registration centre, the registration officer appeared not to know how to operate the BVR kit while at 23 centres observed, the registration kits broke down or failed to function properly at some point during the registration process. Some of the issues with the kits breakdown were; freezing of the kits, restarting unnecessarily, failing to print, and running out of backup power while the electricity was off.

#### **E. Closing of Registration Centres**

As noted, registration centres were scheduled to open at 8:00am and close at 5:00pm on the days they were operational. The majority of centres observed stayed open until at least 5:00pm, however, several (50) registration centres closed earlier, before 5.00pm.

In general most registration centres where observers were present ensured the safe packing of sensitive voter registration materials. There were some (34) instances where observers reported materials were not safely stored.

#### **F. Inclusivity of the Process**

Participation of the special interest groups in the voter registration process is very important to the overall integrity of the exercises. ERC and ZESN observed the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities during Phase 1 of the blitz across areas of accessibility and representation.

##### *ZEC Officials*

The registration centres had an average of 4 ZEC registration officials with 2 of them being women. In less than half of registration centres observed, the ZEC officer in charge of the registration centre was a woman.

##### *Women participation*

Women's participation was categorised into participation as registration officials and as political parties' representatives. For those limited registration centres that had party representatives present, women were party representatives in various instances. For ZANU PF 17 had women representatives, for centres with a representative for CCC, 12 had women as representatives, for centres with MDC-T (MDC-A) representatives, 11 had women, while for centres with representatives for other parties, 9 had women.

##### *Participation of PWDs*

Voter registration centres must be accessible to all citizens including registrants with disability to ensure they have an equal opportunity to register with limited to no hurdles. In 63 centres observed, potential registrants were required to go up the stairs or uphill to access the registration centres. This was challenging especially for the potential registrants with mobility problems that required wheelchairs.

##### *Priority Registration*

In 494 registration centres observed, persons with disabilities, elderly, pregnant women and nursing mothers were allowed to go to the front of the queue to register without waiting in the queue.

#### **G. Compliance with COVID-19 Protocols**

At 559 registration centres observed, handwashing and sanitising facilities were provided; the ZEC officials used COVID-19 protective wear such as masks at 562 of the centres; and social distancing of at least one metre was maintained at 550 centres during setup.

At 518 centres observed, social distancing was maintained at all time during the registration process while in 557 registration centres no one was turned away and not allowed to register due to COVID-19 mitigation measures.

### **IV. Weekly Political Environment Observation**

ERC and ZESN observers were trained to observe the political environment prevailing in the constituencies of deployment. During Phase 1 of the BVR blitz observers looked at different issues that affected the voter registration process, preparations for the by-elections, media conduct, role played by stakeholders such as political parties, traditional leaders and civic society among others. Between 3 February and 28 February 2022, a total of three weekly reports from the 210 constituencies were compiled making a total of 590 reports.

#### **A. Preparations Towards Voter Registration Activities**

##### ***ZEC Preparations***

During the voter registration blitz the ZEC was expected to conduct a number of preparatory activities geared towards the process. The processes included giving out information on the process, popularising the itinerary, moving of the registration materials, among other.

Most observers reported that they attended or heard about preparations for voter education in their constituencies. In some regions of the country, the ZEC preparations were constrained by heavy and incessant rains resulting in muddy and sticky roads that delayed the arrival of voter registration teams to the various destinations. In addition, ZEC registration itineraries which had been developed by ZEC headquarters were also changed without notification at district and provincial offices levels. This led to inconveniences for some potential registrants.

#### **B. Civic and Voter Education**

Civic and voter education are important components of the voter registration process that ensures citizens are informed about procedures, required documentation or materials as well as the timing of the activity. In addition, voter education provides information on why citizen participation is important in the electoral and democratic processes. The observers reported on the conduct of voter education by the ZEC, CSOs/FBOs, and local media. Most of the observer reports, 489, indicated that the observer had attended or heard of voter education or information relating to voter registration conducted by ZEC. There were concerns raised on the methodology especially at the onset of the blitz voter registration where ZEC voter educators conducted door-door activities thereby taking longer to cover areas and also with some households having working classes and absentees at home which meant the voter education drive was not effective in reaching the intended audience.

### ***Other Stakeholders Voter Education***

In addition to voter education/information by the ZEC, 387 observer reports indicated the observers attended or heard of voter education/information by the local media while 301 reports indicated that the observers attended or witnessed voter education activities by local CSOs.

### ***Target for Voter education***

During the observation period, the observers also reported on the conduct of the voter education including the inclusion of the special interest groups. Credible electoral processes should be inclusive to all and especially to special interest groups. 268 observer reports indicated that the voter education was targeted towards the participation of women in the voter registration, 347 reports indicated that it was targeted towards the youth and 234 reports indicating it was targeted towards persons with disabilities.

## **C. Political Parties and Traditional Leaders and Civil Servants**

Political parties are key stakeholders in the electoral processes. ERC and ZESN observers reported that the parties were involved in the mobilisation of potential registrants to go out and observe. 236 observer reports indicated that ZANU PF were mobilising people to go out and vote, 216 indicated activities by CCC and 99 indicated activities by MDC-T (MDC-A).

According to section 281 of the Constitution traditional leaders should not engage in partisan politics. However, 123 observer reports indicated instances where traditional leaders (chiefs and village heads) or religious leaders used their influence to campaign for political parties and candidates especially in the areas that will be conducted by elections on 26 March 2022.

Similarly, the Constitution of Zimbabwe, section 200 (3) stipulates that “No member of the Civil Service may, in the exercise of their functions— (a) act in a partisan manner; (b) further the interests of any political party or cause..” ERC and ZESN observers reported a number of instances of having heard of or witnessed instances where non-elected government officials, such as civil servants, used their influence to support a particular party or candidate while four percent (4%) reported on the presence of these non-elected officials in political party events.

### ***Other Political incidents***

During the Phase 1 of the BVR blitz, the environment was characterised by high political tensions with reports of instances of violence, destruction of property and other disturbances. Many of these issues were centralised in the constituencies that will be holding by-elections on 26 March. Some incidents were widely known including when a LEAD Zimbabwe campaign rally was disrupted at Domborembizi in Epworth on 26 February 2022 and a formal report was launched with the Zimbabwe Republic Police.

Similarly observers reported inter party (CCC, MDC-A and ZANU PF) pulling down and tearing of campaign posters in Epworth, Harare Central, Mufakose and Highfield East constituencies. Observers also reported that an independent councillor in Chitungwiza Municipality had his posters pulled. In Kwekwe observers noted the same practice along CCC and ZANU PF party lines while in Bulawayo province with national assembly and local authorities no reports were received on the same issue.

Where political parties conducted activities, observers' reports indicated that in 224 activities by ZANU PF, 130 activities by CCC and 147 activities by MDC-T had police providing security.

Across the reporting period observers noted 112 cases where food and other handouts were given out as inducement to support political parties or candidates. The top 3 most cases were recorded in Harare with 25 cases, Manicaland and Masvingo with 15 each with the least cases reported in Mashonaland Central with 3 cases, Mashonaland West and Matabeleland with 6 cases each.

Use of government vehicles and buses under the franchise of ZUPCO was recorded by observers in Epworth, Norton, Marondera Central and surrounding constituencies as well as Mwenezi East in Masvingo province where ZANU PF has held campaign rallies during the reporting period. In Marondera Central for instance in excess of 25 ZUPCO buses were used to ferry supporters while in Kwekwe up to more than 30 buses were used according to reports.

This is commendable in ensuring that press freedom is respected and upheld so as to allow for multiple sources of information to citizens and stakeholders on the political and electoral processes. There were reports on attacks on media houses or journalists during the reporting period.

The electoral and political contest must be punctuated by high levels of tolerance and respect for diverging views as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Political parties are reminded to restrain their supporters so as to prevent the escalation of tensions within communities ahead of key electoral processes. Of concern is the use of language which is inflammatory, defamatory, vulgar or insulting which observers reported. Harare recorded 2 cases, Manicaland and Midlands 4 cases each, Matabeleland South and Mashonaland Central 1 case each.

All political parties and candidates should always ensure that the campaign processes are inclusive and desist from any gendered remarks. During the reporting period, there were 12 reports where parties or candidates used gender stereotypes or sexist languages during their activities.

#### **D. Compliance with COVID-19 Protocols**

Over half of the observer reports, 454, reported that ZEC and various stakeholders observed all COVID-19 protocols during voter education activities as well as the voter registration itself. The protocols include wearing of face masks, hand sanitising and social distancing among other preventive measures. In addition, information dissemination on COVID-19 was mainstreamed during the various activities.

Reports indicate that no political parties were denied or prevented from conducting activities on the pretext of COVID-19 or having breached the protocols or for any other reason in Bulawayo. While reports were received from Mabvuku-Tafara, Mufakose, Southerton, Marondera Central all had meetings not sanctioned on the pretext of COVID-19 measures.

## V. Critical Incidents

Critical incidents are activities and events with negative consequences for the electoral and political processes. They vary from disruption, failure to comply with set out procedures, destruction of property and even death among others. During the observation of the voter registration process, ERC and ZESN received critical incidents reports from observers in all provinces however the following as detailed are of significance to the voter registration blitz and campaigns for the by-elections;

### *Politically motivated violence - 2 incidents*

- On 19 February, in Kwekwe Central Constituency (Midlands Province) an observer reported that a man donning a yellow t-shirt was attacked by one man sustaining injuries. The victim was badly injured and admitted in hospital for 5 days. No police action was reported.
- On 27 February, an observer in Mbizo Constituency (Midlands Province) reported that during a CCC rally at Mbizo 4 Shopping Centre, a group of youths believed to be ZANU PF attacked the CCC supporters killing one of them on the spot using a spear while one more succumbed the following day after being beaten with ropes, and 11 more were left nursing injuries. Reports were filed with the police and 17 suspects were arrested on the day.

### *Destruction of Political Party Materials or Properties - 2 incidents*

- On 18 February, an observer in Mbizo Constituency (Midlands Province) reported that ZANU PF supporters went around town defacing CCC campaign posters.
- On 24 February, an observer in Kwekwe Central Constituency (Midlands Province) reported that ZANU PF supporters destroyed the CCC campaign posters in town.

### *Denied permission to observe (3 incidents)*

- On 04 February, an observer at Bubi Primary School in Mwenezi West constituency (Masvingo Province) was denied permission to observe by the registration officials, who insisted that the observer needed to 'register' first with the District Election Officer. The observer was later allowed to observe after ZESN follow-up with the ZEC headquarters who confirmed that electoral officials making such requests were acting outside the procedures that were set out for them.
- On 16 February, an observer at Langeni Primary School in Beitbridge East Constituency (Matabeleland Province) was denied permission to observe by the registration officer who sent him to Beitbridge ZEC offices for verification. After visiting the local ZEC office, he was allowed to observe later in the day.
- On 5 February, an Observer at Chishoshe Primary School in Chegutu East (Mashonaland West), was only permitted to observe the voter registration proceedings after they had visited the ZEC Chegutu District Offices to 'announce their presence' in the district.

### *Harassment or intimidation - 1 incident*

- On 16 February, an observer at Budiriro 5 Current Shops in Budiriro Constituency (Harare Province) reported an incident where a CCC commissioner who was within the vicinity of the registration centre, was reportedly harassed by ZANU PF youths.

#### *Denial of Permission for a Political Party Event - 1 incident*

- On 26 February, an observer in Gokwe Sengwa (Midlands Province) reported that people who wanted to attend the CCC party rally found roads closed by police to the venue. The supporters left the buses and vehicles and walked to the venue. Later the police dispersed them using tear gas.

#### *Armed Supporters - 1 incident*

- On 27 February, an observer in Mbizo Constituency (Midlands Province) reported of ZANU PF youths that were armed with weapons at a rally.

#### *Use of Government Resources for Political Reasons - 2 incidents*

- On 22 February, an observer in Chipinge Central (Manicaland Province) reported that ZANU PF used Gaza Government Primary School to host a meeting.
- On 26 February, an observer in Mbizo Constituency (Midlands Province) reported the use of ZUPCO branded vehicles to ferry people from Gokwe Kana and Mberengwa to a rally hosted by the Head of State as he campaigned for the upcoming by elections.

## **VI. Interim Recommendations**

### ***Zimbabwe Electoral Commission***

- ZEC should provide an accurate list of registration centres and dates well in advance of Phase 2 so voters, political parties, civic organisations and observers can effectively participate in the process.
- ZEC must improve on information sharing (registration statistics) at the point of registration especially with accredited observers as this helps increase accountability as well as facilitate local groups to know when to compliment the mobilisation efforts.
- Changes to the published itineraries for the BVR kits should be communicated widely to allow potential registrants to know when and where the BVR teams will be at Centres near them.
- Comprehensive voter education and awareness must precede future voter registration drives to increase turn out for registration and participation in elections
- ZEC must ensure that all registration centres are fully accessible to individuals with disabilities or mobility challenges. The presence of stairs presents an undo obstacle for this population when attempting to access registration centres. Similarly, ZEC should ensure that they consistently and uniformly track voters' disability type when possible. This will allow the ZEC and other key stakeholders to better accommodate voters in various election related activities.
- ZEC should seriously consider engaging an independent firm of auditors to audit the voters' roll, as a confidence building measure following the controversy surrounding the current voters' roll.

### ***Political Parties***

- Political parties should deploy agents in all voter registration centres in order to strengthen oversight on the process.
- Political parties must increase voter education and awareness to their members so that the uptake of the voter registration process improves.

### ***Police***

- The Police should discharge their law enforcement duties in a professional and non-partisan manner to ensure equal enjoyment of the constitutionally guaranteed civil and political rights.

### ***Traditional leaders***

- Traditional leaders must remain non-partisan and be guided by the Constitution of Zimbabwe Chapter 15 and the Traditional Leaders Act to ensure compliance with the legal framework.

### ***Registrar General***

- The Government should ensure that citizens who are eligible to register have access to the requisite documentation which they need to successfully register, such as national identification documents.

### **Civil Societies and Faith Based Organisations**

- Increase collaborations in civic and voter education targeted at voter registration.

**End//**

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