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CCJPZ 26 MARCH 2022 POST BY-ELECTION STATEMENT

Introduction

Peace be with you!

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) as a social arm of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), appreciates the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), for accrediting 208 **Catholic Observers**, to observe the March 26, 2022 by-elections. The by-election day was peaceful and the Church commends and congratulates the nation for ensuring a peaceful environment during the voting process. The following is a summary of major observations done by CCJPZ on the by-elections process:

1. Election Administration

- We commend ZEC for decentralising accreditation of Election Observers to provinces.
- We also commend and applaud ZEC, for convening briefing meetings with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and the Media fraternity prior to the by-elections. The meetings equipped observers on communicating and reporting skills in the event of any electoral process complain raised. We hope this continues in all future elections.
- Generally, all polling stations opened and closed on time.
- Voting time was extended at polling stations that opened after the prescribed time.
- Polling officials were impartial and professional, particularly the Police who were maintaining peace and order.
- Covid-19 protocols were being adhered to in all polling stations.
- CCJPZ commends ZEC for establishing many polling stations to reduce long queues.
- ZEC provided mobile ablutions and first-aid personnel, which is quite commendable.
- The counting of ballots, after close of polls, followed the laid down procedures.
- The announcement of results was done in line with the law.

CCJPZ would want to comment on the following issues which we observed in the by-elections.

2. Voter Apathy

At a time when political parties, CSOs, print media and social media, did quite a commendable task of encouraging citizens to register to vote, the turnout in these By-Elections was dreadful. The numbers of total registered voters and the number of people who actually voted showed a great discrepancy that should worry not only the election body but all stakeholders. For instance, in Highfield East Constituency, Chengu, out of the 757 registered voters, only 240 people voted while in St Mary's Constituency ward eight Zengeza polling station B, out of 531 registered voters, only 149 people voted. At TM AC Polling station Dangamvura/Chikanga Constituency voters roll had 701 registered voters and only 166 casted their votes. Mutasa south polling station Early Learning A and B, registered 675 voters and 375 voted. At Gokwe Central for example, Mbumbusi Business Centre Tent polling station in

ward 19, a total of 400 people were registered voters, however on the polling day only 187 voted translating to 46.8% voter turnout; similarly in the same constituency at Bomba Business Centre Tent polling station ward 15, had 535 registered voters while on the polling day only 260 voted which was 48.5% voters turnout. In ward 4 at Mapfungautsi Primary School a total of 714 were registered voters while 258 people voted, which translated to 36% voters' turnout. All these facts point to the need for ZEC and approved CSOs, to intensify voter education focusing on encouraging citizens to participate in elections. These can make use of the available various means such as social media, radio adverts and radio shows as well as through distribution of pamphlets, posters and fliers and erection of bill boards at public places as a way of disseminating information on the importance of voting.

3. CSOs participation in electoral processes

The Church acknowledges the participation of other Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and CSOs in the just ended by-elections observation exercise. CSOs played a critical role prior, during and after the by-elections. The crucial roles by CSOs includes conducting voter education, observation of the electoral processes, mobilising citizens to participate in elections and advocacy initiatives to promote credible elections. However, CCJZ encourages CSOs, to increase their visibility at polling stations,

4. Evidence of lack of voter education/information

CCJPZ observations showed that a significant number of voters were turned away either because they wanted to vote in the wrong ward or that they produced inappropriate identity documents. In addition to these, their names were not appearing on the voters' roll. This was common in the Harare Metropolitan because of constituency boundaries' overlaps. For instance in Epworth a total of almost 200 voters were turned away and redirected to check their names in other polling stations. At Mukurumbira primary school in Mufakose polling stations A and B, as at 18:10pm, a total of 280 prospective voters were turned away by the presiding officer citing that their names had been moved due to the delimitation exercise. The presiding officer advised the voters to check their names in other wards. In this regard, CCJPZ, wishes ZEC to have notified and informed the electorate in time to changes caused during the delimitation exercise.

5. Assisted voters

CCJPZ commends professionalism and impartiality of ZEC officials and police who helped people requesting assistance in voting, particularly persons with disabilities (blind) and the elderly.

6. Credibility and Vote-rigging Claims

Credibility is the quality of being trustworthy. The credibility of ZEC has been damaged by many claims and issues raised formally and informally. Unfortunately, credibility is a subjective perception rather than an objective reality. There is need for ZEC to confront the deepening crisis of its credibility and claims of its lack of impartiality and capacity and the will to ensure credible, free and fair elections. The unequal coverage of political parties by the state media as acknowledged by ZEC continues to be a serious cause for concern.

7. Voters' Roll

A credible voter's roll is key to a good electoral process. The recent drama surrounding the voters roll does not help us to achieve a credible electoral process. ZEC and all stakeholders have an important role to play for the nation to achieve a credible voters' roll.

8. Disinterest in and “disrespect” for elections

Some voters raised the following questions:

“If we are told to vote for a certain political party, and if threats are made against independent political choices, why do we continue having elections? Why can’t we use resources for elections for other purposes such as investment in water, electricity, roads and other services until we are committed to genuine electoral processes and democracy?”

“I am becoming tired of voting...and even if I vote, is anything going to change?”

Others justified their participation as follows:

“I have voted so that when humanitarian aid comes, the traditional leader will also consider me”

“I have voted, not because I like the candidate and his political party, but to register myself for rice, cooking oil, blankets and residential stands promised by one of the contesting candidates”

“I have voted to protect my informal market and informal house”

“I have voted so that I will show the local political party committee my inked finger to avoid being targeted and insulted after the elections”

“I have voted because I was driven by the village head”

“I have voted to avoid a second Gukurahundi that will be started if we do not vote for one of the contesting candidates”

“I have voted to register to the political party’s local committee so that I will be given what others will be given.” In Harare, for example, voters were promised title deeds on informal residential stands and formalization of their informal markets.

9. Youth participation

Youth participation in the just ended by-elections, was very low in most constituencies. The reason for this low turnout among the youth, is something that ZEC, CSOs and FBOs have to research and come up with an answer to this. If however, it is a result of lost hope among the youth, there is need for institutions and all stakeholders, to help the youth by involving them in what affects and pertains to their lives, especially the electoral process.

10. Lighting

There was poor lighting in some polling stations which had no electricity. A number of these were cited by observers, for instance, in Mkoba 3 polling station B, St Mary’s ward 8, Kuwadzana East open space ward 37 and Mukurumbira Primary School in Mufakose. ZEC Officials resorted to the use of candles and mobile phones for lighting. Given the importance of such by-elections, ZEC could have had provided each polling station with both solar and battery powered torches, having known that, counting of the cast ballots begins when it is night time.

11. Recommendations:

CCJPZ after observing the 26 March 2022, By-Elections, recommends the following;

- ZEC should ensure there is power back up at polling stations, to ensure polling officials to charge their gadgets and hence provide real time information to ZEC.
- There have been concerns around the conflicting statements issued by ZEC on the voters roll, which the Church feels, must be carefully handled as this may cause citizens to lose confidence in the Election Management Body. We therefore urge ZEC, to respond to and take the necessary steps and recommendations to address and resolve professionally as a matter of urgency, the voters' role issue.
- Political parties working with ZEC, need to train party agents on their role at polling stations, for these agencies to be aware of what conduct is expected of them during election times.
- ZEC needs to ensure that there are more polling stations easily accessible for persons with disabilities.
- ZEC should also consider providing braille ballot papers for the visually impaired voters.
- There is need for continuous collaboration between ZEC and CSOs to intensify voter education, with more emphasis on youths and other first time voters.
- We recommend honest and respectful dialogue between ZEC and political players in the electoral processes in order to enhance the credibility of ZEC.
- ZEC should ensure that state media give equal coverage and access to all political parties without bias or favor.

12. Conclusion

CCJPZ wishes to congratulate ZEC for conducting the just ended By-Elections in a timely and peaceful environment. The electorate turned up and responded to the call to exercise their voting right, however not as expected in comparison to the number of those who had registered to vote. There is serious need to have an intensive voter education amongst the youth because very few of them casted their vote. Due to this, ZEC, CSOs and FBOs should try to come up with a voter education programme targeting the youth. There is also need to have all political parties to be given fair coverages of election activities like campaigning, by the public media. Denial for this coverage is a direct infringement on the right of the people to information which in turn helps them to make informed decisions for or against a particular candidate to be elected. In fact, these same people subscribe for broadcasting services for both educational and entertainment purposes. All in all, an informed nation, makes informed decisions even votes wisely. Unless that is achieved, the words of the Prophets will come true that, *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge"* (Hosea 4: 6-7). As a Church, we therefore call for all stakeholders, to faithfully execute their responsibilities to positively help ZEC to continue improving for the better, the way elections should be held in this digital world. The responsibility of conducting credible elections is hinged upon the credibility of ZEC, hence it is not only important for ZEC not just to be neutral, and professional but also to be seen as such by all stakeholders.