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Intra-party democracy a prerequisite for democratic culture

A report by the Election Resource Centre

Introduction

Zimbabwe's political parties internal processes have triggered widespread disillusionment about the role of internal party democracy in advancing and building a mature democracy in Zimbabwe. The situation is less celebratory and uncertain because the electoral processes that underline internal party elections across all political parties, is fraught with reports of manipulation, imposition of candidates and all sort of electoral malpractices. These inordinate practices reinforce the pattern of weak institutions for democracy in Zimbabwe, and should be reigned in, fast!

Background

The on-going ZANU PF provincial elections have again brought to the fore the issue of internal party democracy in Zimbabwe. ZANU PF currently is holding provincial elections, set to elect new provincial structures and the said elections have been marred by allegations of management inconsistencies and vote rigging.

The allegations surfaced when aspiring candidate for the provincial Chairperson's post for Manicaland, Monica Mutsvangwa pulled out of the race citing malpractices that have hindered a free and fair contest. She was quoted in the local media as saying;

"I realized that it was important to withdraw my candidature so that all grey areas in the conduct of the elections are addressed. My team picked up irregularities in almost all the places where voting was taking place, people were being intimidated not to vote for me and the voter's registration was not in order. The main problem is that the outgoing Chairman, Mvundura is superintending an election in which he is also a candidate and this gives him an unfair advantage over me. Returning officers were impartial. In all districts which I had an upper hand, they were starved of ballot papers."

Reports of electoral malpractice have also been raised in the Midlands province, with the losing candidate for the Chairperson's post, Larry Mavhima, taking up his case with the party's commissariat department to protest "unfair" practices. He has also alleged "bussing" of voters.

Suffice to say, the Movement for Democratic Change led by Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC-T) was also beset by the same challenges as the party prepared for its last elective congress in 2011. The elections to choose provincial leadership structures in the MDC-T prior its congress were divisive, and marred by allegations of vote rigging.

In fact, the rifts that emerged from these provincial elections have never been repaired. Allegations of vote rigging within the MDC-Ts provincial elections were so severe in Manicaland, Masvingo and Bulawayo; with chances high the cracks emanating from these elections could have affected the party in inculcating a sense of unity ahead of the July 31st elections. There could have been, alongside other factors, of a mismanaged and discredited poll, been its Achilles hills.

The Concept of intra-party democracy

It is poignant to point out that one of the major signposts for internal party democracy is the conduct of primary and any form of internal elections within political parties. The conduct of credible and fair primary elections within the realms of political parties sets the bar and precedence for an engrained national democratic culture. This is especially so, because primary elections are an indicator of the status of internal party democracy and internal party democracy is a precursor to the broader national democratic architecture.

Failure to adopt internal party democratic practices means that the goal of a broader democratic culture will remain elusive and a pipe-dream.

If anything, the complaints by Monica Mutsvangwa over irregularities in Manicaland during the provincial elections mirror what other political parties and civil society organisations have said about the electoral system in Zimbabwe. There is therefore a strong likelihood and correlation between nature of internal party processes and what unfolds on the national stage.

For instance, institutions charged with the management of elections have long been accused of partisanship, and that they work to give and maintain advantage to one political party. Opposition political parties have always likened national elections in Zimbabwe to a football match in which one team sets the rules of the game and appoints itself as the referee of the match. Monica Mutsvangwa raised the same allegations in the ZANU PF's provincial elections, that one of the candidates, in this case Mvundura, was 'superintending an election in which he is also a candidate'. She alludes to intimidation of her supporters – accusations of violence and intimidation during elections have always been a permanent feature in the Zimbabwean national elections.

Defining Intra-party democracy

No universal definition exists of the concept of intra-party democracy, although many scholars agree on some basic principles of electivity, accountability, transparency, inclusivity, participation, and representation. Intra-party democracy is a very broad term describing a wide range of methods for including party members in intra-party deliberations and decision making. Some advocates for intra-party democracy argue, on a pragmatic level, that parties using internally

democratic procedures are likely to select more capable and appealing leaders, to have more responsive leaders, and, as a result, to enjoy greater electoral success¹ (Mimpen, 2007).

Realistic practitioners recognize that intra-party democracy is not a panacea to democratization challenges as they argue that some procedures are better suited to certain circumstances than to others. Moreover, some procedures seem even to entail distinct costs and there are stable democracies with parties that lack guarantees or regular processes of internal party democracy. Nevertheless, the ideal of intra-party democracy has gained increasing attention in recent years because of its apparent potential to promote a “virtuous circle” linking ordinary citizens to government, benefiting the parties that adopt it, and more generally contributing to the stability and legitimacy of the democracies in which these political parties compete for power.

Mimpen lists two essential instrumental elements of intra-party democracy, the first which is a group of internal democratization instruments and involves the organization of free, fair and regular elections of internal positions as well as candidates for representative bodies. The second group involves a different group of instruments that entail the equal and open participation of all members and member groups in such a way that interests are more or less equally represented.

In this case, platforms like policy conferences present the best opportunity for group members to equally participate. Membership participation in political parties occurs through processes such as policy formulation, leadership and candidate selection as well as their role in party organs at all levels of the party structure² (Wanjohi 2005). Mimpen posits that both these groups of instruments are important in creating an open and deliberative political party in which people can participate in elections equally but may also engage in participation or be represented in other ways.

Advantages and Pitfalls of internal party democracy

It is acknowledged that internal party democracy, vividly captured through the conduct of internal elections and participation, has its pitfalls and advantages. Too much internal party democratization can be argued to ‘overly dilute the power of a party’s inner leadership and makes it difficult for the party to keep its electoral promises’ (Scarrow, 2005)³.

Furthermore, internal democratic procedures may raise possibilities for party splits and crises, possibly harming democratic stability. The 2005 MDC split could be argued to have been a result of intended internal democratic procedures which backfired.

Open candidate selection methods may in some instances actually increase the power of small elites⁴ (Pennings et al., 2001). This is especially so as elites in control of the candidate selection

¹ Mimpen J. (n.d.) Intra-Party Democracy and its Discontents: Democratisation in a volatile political landscape

² Wanjohi, N.G. (2005) State of Political Parties in Kenya and Transition to Democracy in *Democratic Transition in East Africa*, Dar Es Salaam, REDET

³ Scarrow, S. (2005) Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Implementing Intra-Party Democracy. Washington: NDI

⁴ Pennings P. And R.Y. Hazan (2001) Democratising Candidate Selection in Party Politics 7

apparatus can manipulate the process to theirs and associates' advantage, and determine the outcome of the processes.

Manipulation of the process is usually manifested through candidate imposition by the over-dominating elites. The imposition of candidates is worsened by the culture of clientelism that has penetrated internal party politics. This assertion can explain concerns and complains against the ZANU PF and MDC-T's party leadership organisations, the politburo and standing committee respectively, for making key decisions of candidate selection, in some instances violating the laid down procedures and undermining the wishes of the party membership. An example is the widely reported imposition of Priscilla Misihairambwi in Matebeleland South which reportedly has led to the resignation of senior members of the party.

It is also widely acknowledged that intra-party democracy enhances a necessary viable democratic culture within the party as well as society at large⁵ (NIMD, 2004). Furthermore, democratic procedures may have positive effects on the representation of ideas of the electorate and may strengthen the organization by attracting new members and creating space for fresh ideas. It can also be argued that democratic internal procedures will provide necessary vertical linkages between different deliberating spheres, as well as horizontal linkage between competing issues⁶ (Teorell, 1999)

⁵NIMD, (2004): A framework for Democratic Party Building, The Hague

⁶ Teorell, J. (1999) 'A deliberative Defence of Intra-Party Democracy in Party Politics, Vol 5, No.3, 363-382, SAGE, London Thousand Oaks, New Delhi

Comparative Table of political parties' primary elections (2013)

	Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
ZANU PF	<p>Open System</p> <p>Open to all card carrying members of the party in the constituencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased the levels of participation for the party membership • All things being equal, popular candidates were most likely to prevail. • Gauged the state of activeness and inactiveness of party supporters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although avoiding the problem of voters having to openly state their party affiliation, the open primary system risked being used by supporters of other parties to try to ensure that the candidate with least possibilities of winning the general election would win the primary. Open primary elections are rare. • Can be manipulated by party leadership. • Conflict of interest was difficult to avoid because in many instances, the leadership administering the elections were also candidates. • It presented serious logistical challenges that could undermine the credibility of the elections. For instance, the ZPF elections took longer than expected (the one day). The party used card board boxes as ballot boxes and had no proper voter's roll and no proper ballot papers.
MDC-T	<p>Closed System (two-thirds confirmation)</p> <p>Closed (or membership elections) are open to membership within specific eligible structures of the political party and does not involve every card carrying member of the party.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saved administration resources on the part of the political party. • Allowed the party to dictate and control the process, and manage major fallouts. • Logistically manageable, which is why the party completed its primary elections without major logistical challenges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This system allowed vote buying by both the aspiring and incumbent candidates as in some instances the confirmation exercise involved few members within the eligible structures of the party. • Excluded the broader membership and the electorate because they were only open to certain party structures. • Allowed leadership to influence and manipulate the outcome • Enhanced the chances of candidate imposition. • Conflict of Interest as district and provincial structures ran the elections, yet they may had vested interests and at times were candidates too.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The system increased chances of discontent and hence the likelihood of splits e.g. the formation of Independent Candidates Coalition (ICC) from by disgruntled MDC-T losing candidates. • Absence of an authentic voters' roll
MDC	Closed (Consensus)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saved resources on the part of incumbent popular candidates. • Allowed the party to dictate and control the process, and manage major fallouts • Logistically manageable, which is why the party completed its primary elections without major logistical challenges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Left the process open to manipulation by the leadership • Increased the chances of imposition of candidates.

Voter's asserting their authority

By and large, the internal primary elections that were conducted by the three major political parties in the run-up to the elections illustrated the tendency to manipulate and influence processes by the party leadership. There are a number of cases to validate this assertion. The Bikita West case of Munyaradzi Kereke pitting the incumbent Elias Musakwa, the Dangamvura – Chikanga contest between Arnold Tsunga and Giles Mutsekwa are a good examples where parties showed dissent when it came to candidate selection. However, the MDC-T seemed to have emerged out of the processes more bruised and battered from internal party dissent emanating from alleged mismanagement of primary elections compared to their ZANU PF counterparts.

If anything, the voter in Zimbabwe is exhibiting signs of evolution, evolving from blind and loyal support, to political party brands, to individual and competent brands. The late Vice-President of Zimbabwe, Simon Vengesai Muzenda was once quoted saying, *'even if ZANU PF puts a donkey as a candidate, you should vote for it'*, meaning that voters are expected to be loyal to the party regardless of who represents them. This may no longer be the case. Statistics show that almost 50 incumbents across the political divide who sought re-election into parliament lost their right to represent their parties during the 2013 primary elections.

Suggested Way forward

In conclusion, Zimbabwe's political parties' method of selection of candidates and election of its leaders is not transparent, and in fact has all the hallmarks of autocratic machinations that are rooted in the very antithesis of a democracy. The processes are largely self-serving and designed to aid power retention. These selection methods promote nepotism, sycophancy, promotion of mediocrity, suppression of diverse point of view, unilateralism, idolization and veneration of leaders beyond what is considered respectable and reasonable. It is for this reason that their internal processes should not escape scrutiny.

When political parties deny their members active participation in the affairs of their party, they act as a barrier that ultimately disconnect citizens with the government. Incidentally, their failure to inculcate democratic internal procedures creates a sustained national culture of democratic deficit characterised by electoral malpractices and vices.

One of the key weaknesses of Zimbabwe's political parties is that they do not necessarily follow internal party democracy. There is therefore a need to legislate and enforce through an external watchdog like the Zimbabwe Election Commission (ZEC), tenets of internal party democracy because chances of the parties enforcing it voluntarily are slim. Of course, this is only possible if ZEC itself assumes credibility across all political stakeholders in Zimbabwe.

Internal party processes in Zimbabwe should be subjected to some form of external superintendence to limit the consequences of morbid and authoritarian internal party dynamics.

The task of monitoring internal party elections requires substantial demands on the capacity of the EMB. Staffan Darnolf⁷ points out that the EMB will need to be held in high regard by all electoral stakeholders and it must be able to offer the same kind of services to all political parties in order not to get involved in internal politics of the parties and jeopardise its overall mandate.

There is precedence albeit situations of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) being legally mandated to administer internal party elections are rare. Apart from the US, Magnus Öhman gives the example of Ghana as a case where the national EMB has taken on this role since the 2000 elections, offering to conduct the internal elections for parliamentary candidates on a voluntary basis⁸.

Another example is Kenya, according to Simon Osborn⁹ the Kenyan Electoral Commission was given the mandate to conduct internal party elections as part of the Inter Party Parliamentary Group reforms of 1997, although the amendment came too late to be implemented prior to the 1997 elections. In 2002 the issue was revisited but the EMB was cautious to get involved as they felt the political parties did not have the capacity to conduct elections to the extent required by the EMB.

There will always be question marks on the involvement of an EMB in internal party elections, especially in circumstances where that body is deemed not credible. EMB involvement might affect negatively on the integrity and independence of the political parties themselves as the EMB, as a state institution, might exert undue influence on them.

External agents such as Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) have been used by parties in countries such as South Africa and the UK according to Simon Osborn, a trajectory which Zimbabwe's political parties can adopt in an effort to enhance the credibility of their internal party processes and elections. //Ends

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⁷ Staffan Darnolf. (2011) Assessing Electoral Fraud in New Democracies: A new Strategic Approach, Ph.D, IFES White Paper

⁸ Ohman, Magnus, 2004. The heart and soul of the party: Candidate selection in Ghana and Africa. Ph.D Thesis. Uppsala University, Sweden

⁹ Osborne, Simon (2007) EMB responsibility to oversee and administer internal party elections, ACE Network