

**Media Coverage of the Voter Registration
and Inspection Exercise
for the 2008 elections:
June 14th - August 28th 2007**

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INTRODUCTION

The media, as the Fourth Estate, play a critical role in any democracy and no less so during elections, an integral part of the democratic process.

It is mainly through the media that the electorate learns about important information relating to electoral processes, such as voter registration, the inspection of the voters' roll and where to vote.

This report seeks to assess how the Zimbabwean print and electronic media covered the mobile voter registration exercise in preparation for the 2008 consolidated parliamentary, presidential and local government elections.

The paper covers the period from 14 June 2007 (when the Registrar-General, Tobaiwa Mudede announced the date for the start of the exercise) to 28th August 2007.

The paper aims to answer the following broad questions:

- 1) Did the media adequately inform the electorate about the start of the exercise, its duration, and documentation required?
- 2) Did the media publicise the dates and places of the mobile registration teams?
- 3) Did the media seek regular updates from the Registrar-General's office?
- 4) Did the media conduct an audit of the exercise to assess transparency?

Sadly for the Zimbabwean electorate, the public and private media paid little or no attention to the exercise and even completely ignored glaring irregularities in the process.

Only the civil society election performance watchdog organisation, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) provided informative regular weekly updates on the exercise and exposed many of these irregularities, such as the fact that the Registrar-General's office in Bulawayo told a ZESN observer who wanted to transfer from Harare Central constituency that **"the office was not registering voters"**, even though the law provides for continuous voter registration.

In fact, Justice Minister, Patrick Chinamasa, confirmed this fact and said the mobile registration exercise had been conducted **"for the purpose of (re)drawing constituency boundaries."** (ZTV, 22/08, 8pm). The broadcaster did not question the minister on this statement, particularly in view of the changes proposed in the number of constituencies, and none of the independent media followed this up either.

ZESN deployed observers at many registration centres set up around the country who provided valuable information on the progress of the exercise and analysis of its execution.

However, the media failed to take advantage of this unique service and so only a few citizens who had access to the ZESN reports acquired a good knowledge of the process. The national public broadcaster, ZBC has bureau chiefs all over the country and therefore could also have provided regular updates and analysis of the process. It did not do so.

While all media have some responsibility to cover important electoral processes adequately, the public media (whose mandate is to provide adequate, fair, balanced and unbiased information for public consumption) has a primary responsibility to their audiences to fulfill this duty, particularly relating to electoral issues and therefore the voter registration exercise.

However, this should not exonerate the private media, because the electoral process is not only a fundamental component of democracy, it is also in the national interest – and particularly so when the public media fail to provide this important information.

The private media even failed to question the Registrar-General's office on the state of the voters' roll, which is generally recognized as having been in a **“shambolic”** state for previous polls, especially the 2005 parliamentary election and the two national elections preceding it.

This was despite the fact that the Registrar-General had admitted his office was **“unprepared”** to issue identification cards, in particular to individuals attaining voting age. (*Daily Mirror*, February 22, 2007).

The media should have at least followed up on this to determine whether the Office had the resources to conduct the mobile registration exercise effectively at the time of its inception, including the inspection of the rolls.

Announcing the Start of the Voter Registration Exercise

The Registrar-General, Tobaiwa Mudede, announced the dates of the exercise on June 14, 2007 at a news conference in Harare.

All ZBC stations carried the announcement but made no attempt to provide any useful information about which areas the registration exercise would be visiting or what would be needed to register. They merely summarized Mudede's address at the news conference.

For example, Spot FM (14/06, 8pm) announced, **“The Registrar-General's office has launched a nationwide mobile registration exercise, which kicks off on Monday next week.”**

In contrast, Studio 7 (15/06) did seek independent analysis by quoting ZESN's national director, Rindai Chipfunde-Vava, who observed that the **“process was flawed because it is starting late and was not well-publicised.”**

The print media largely ignored the event, except for *The Herald* (15/06), which announced that, **“Preparations for next year's joint presidential and parliamentary elections are gathering momentum with mobile registration of eligible new voters, including those who have changed constituencies since the last poll and inspection of the voters' roll beginning next week.”**

The report gave details of the requirements for one to register as a voter: national ID card, a waiting pass with a picture of the individual, or a valid passport.

It also stated that drivers' licences would not be accepted.

The rest of the private print media displayed acute fatigue, as they did not carry any follow-ups to the announcement even though they carried generic advertisements inserted by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) urging people to go and register.

The Zimbabwean (June 21-27) only carried a response to news of the exercise from the opposition MDC; **“...the...MDC has dismissed the voter registration process started by the Registrar-General, describing it as a violation of democratic principles...”** but did not explain the reasons for this condemnation.

Assessment of the Voter Registration Exercise

The media, especially the privately owned newspapers and the two main radio stations broadcasting into Zimbabwe (SW Radio Africa and Studio 7), largely ignored the process, even well after it had started.

None of the media gave a comprehensive overview of the voter registration exercise, nor did they explain the important part an accurate voters' roll plays in any "free and fair" election, particularly as it determines who votes and who does not.

ZESN and *The Zimbabwean* were the only sources of consistent updates on the exercise.

The Zimbabwean (July 5-11) published a schedule of mobile registration teams in Harare North and East constituencies and carried a report in which the MDC's Renson Gasela recounted his observations at Maboleni Secondary School in Lower Gweru in June when the mobile team was there.

At this centre the process was very slow, some people claimed they had been at the center the previous day but they **"could not be served."**

People said the team did not have film for the pictures that go with the national identity cards, a fact confirmed by the official in charge there.

This serious drawback to the voter registration exercise was ignored by all other media. However, SW Radio Africa (17/08) did quote a ZESN official expressing similar sentiments, **"Zimbabwe is awash with reports that hundreds of thousands were denied the opportunity to register to vote in the mobile registration exercise."**

In sharp contrast, the public media left it to government and ZANU PF officials to provide superficial information about the exercise in the context of announcements or rallies and even then, some of these were repeated with no attempt to critically analyse the process itself.

For example, calls by ZANU PF officials in Manicaland for **"youths...to inspect the voters' roll so they can vote in the 2008 poll..."** was first broadcast on ZTV (19/06, 6pm) and then repeated in the subsequent two bulletins.

In fact, ZTV carried five stories dealing with the voter registration exercise in some way (excluding the announcement), but this number rose to 15 because of repeats. All the same, none of the stories contained any analysis.

It was only the ZESN update of the week ending July 20 that revealed that **"most people were unaware of the exercise"** four weeks after its launch.

SW Radio Africa (19/07) also expressed concern over the lack of publicity for the exercise, but it did not question the authorities over the issue.

None of the media conducted any public survey to determine whether citizens were aware of the exercise and how many had registered since it began.

ZESN's informative reports were conspicuous by their absence in the public media.

With eight days to go before the conclusion of the registration process, ZTV and Spot FM (09/08, 8pm) repeated calls by ZEC's spokesperson, Otloile Silaigwana, for people to **"take advantage of the voter registration and inspection exercise, currently underway countrywide and to register as voters in preparation for the harmonized elections due next year."**

The spokesperson explained that mobile registration was being concluded on August 17 but that voter registration was an on-going process and that the public could still register

at the Registrar-General's offices around the country. No effort has ever been made by the authorities or the media to explain where these are. Once again, the reporter did not take stock of the exercise. Neither did any other media.

Only a ZESN report (August 10) exposed serious irregularities in Hatcliffe, where ***"people were using letters from...the Ernest Kadungure Housing Cooperative as proofs of residence"*** even though they did not live in that constituency. None of the media reported this.

They also failed to question the requirements being demanded as proof of residence. For example, they did not seek clarification from either the Registrar-General or the ZEC whether an affidavit would be sufficient for lodgers, nor did they ask what would happen to youths aged 18 and over still living with their parents.

To its credit *The Financial Gazette* of August 23 quoted the MDC's Tendai Biti, alleging, ***"in many rural districts chiefs and headmen have flatly refused to give supporting letters to suspected supporters of the opposition party to enable them to register"*** although the paper did not corroborate these allegations.

Similarly, *The Standard* (22/07) carried ZESN's supplement citing irregularities in the process but failed to follow this up with its own investigation into the veracity of these claims.

Save for the few exceptions (notably, *The Zimbabwean*) the media generally failed to give regular updates on the exercise or to inform their audiences of its importance. There was also precious little evidence that any of the media made any effort to extract useful information from the authorities

The Zimbabwean was the only publication that dedicated a weekly column to the exercise in which the MDC legislator for Harare North at the time (Trudy Stevenson) exposed glaring irregularities.

For example in its edition of July 12 Stevenson reported that Harare North constituency had five centres for people to register in 20 days - and shared one team with Harare East, Mabvuku, Harare Central and Chitungwiza - whereas Zvimba district was provided with 95 centres and was given 60 days for the public to register and three teams. Marondera district had 72 centres and three teams (to cater for about 250,000 voters) compared with Harare, which had 48 centres to cater for 1, 5 million voters. (*The Zimbabwean*, July 12-18).

(See Table 1 below).

However, the paper simply ran Stevenson's column without initiating its own investigation into these irregularities. For example, there was no effort to question the Registrar-General or the ZEC, nor did it seek comment from independent experts or politicians.

The Standard (08/08 - 14/08) carried the same article by Stevenson.

Like *The Zimbabwean*, the paper did not quiz the officials on the anomalies.

The local media were generally so disinterested in the voter registration exercise that some of them did not even give an overview of the exercise when it was concluded. Only *The Chronicle*, *The Herald* (both 20/08) and *The Financial Gazette* (23/08 – 29/08) announced that 80,000 new voters had been registered.

Table 2 below illustrates the extent to which the media ignored the voter registration and inspection exercise in the period under review.

During the same period, ZESN issued six detailed updates, including its final report.

Table 1: Comparison of allocation of resources constituency-by-constituency
(source: The Zimbabwean, 12-18 July 2007, column by Trudy Stevenson)

Constituency	No. of centres	No. of teams	Period of registration (days)	No. of voters
Harare North	5	1	20	Not stated
Zvimba	95	3	60	Not stated
Marondera	72	3	60	(about) 250,000
Harare	48	Not stated	Not stated	1,500,000

Table 2: Number of stories the media devoted to the voter registration and inspection exercise (14th June to 28th August 2007)

Electronic media

Station	Number of stories (excluding repeats)	Number of repeats	Number of stories (including repeats)
ZTV	5	10	15
Spot FM	15	3	18
Radio Zimbabwe	7	4	11
SW Radio Africa	3	0	N/A
Studio 7	5	0	N/A

Total number of stories in the public electronic media (excluding repeats) is 27

Total number of stories in the private electronic media is 8

Total number of stories in the electronic media is 35

Print Media

Publication	Number of stories
The Herald	12
The Chronicle	7
The Sunday Mail	0
The Zimbabwe Independent	0 *
The Standard	5**
The Financial Gazette	1
The Zimbabwean	10

Total number of stories in the public print media is 19

Total number of stories in the private print media is 16

Total number of stories in the print media is 35

Notes: *Although the *Zimbabwe Independent* did not carry a single story on the voter registration and inspection exercise, it had two ZESN advertisements, one in June and the other one in July.

The third ZESN advertisement urging people to go and register was carried on September 7*

**The Standard did not cover the exercise *per se* but relied on opinion pieces (two were the publication's editorials, one ZESN update, one ZEC statement, one column by Trudy Stevenson) **

NOTE: The mobile voter registration and inspection exercise was extended in September. ZTV (06/09,8pm) announced this ZEC decision.

The Herald (07/09) carried the ZEC press statement to this effect.

The media did not analyse the process even then.

CONCLUSION

Media coverage of the voter registration and inspection exercise for the 2008 national elections was dismal and inexcusable.

Both sections of the media largely ignored the exercise despite concerns raised by opposition parties in previous elections, particularly the 2005 parliamentary polls.

All media, except *The Zimbabwean*, which carried weekly updates on the exercise; failed to give audiences any meaningful account of the exercise, thus the public was left ignorant about this very important aspect of the electoral process.

Ironically, none of the media made use of the ZESN reports as pointers to which investigative stories to pursue, they merely carried the updates.

All media failed to highlight issues concerning the voter registration and inspection exercise with the importance and prominence it deserved. The media devoted a mere 70 stories to the exercise in the period under study.

ZTV allocated only 5 stories to the exercise out of a total of 1 959 monitored during the period under review. This translates to a mere 0.25% of the stories for a crucial aspect of any election.

As a result of this fatigue no media was able to gauge the transparency of the whole exercise.

None of the media reviewed the ZESN final report on the voter registration and inspection exercise, which could have offered a useful insight to the electorate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) The media should play a more proactive role in providing critical information on the voter registration and inspection exercise even before it starts, for example, when it is commencing, what documentation is required and locations of the mobile teams. The centres should be highly publicised in both the print and electronic media.
- b) Both the public and private media should get regular updates from the Registrar General
- c) All media should make an effort to visit registration centres in order to get first hand information on the progress or problems in the exercise so they can carry out a well-informed audit of the exercise. Interaction with civil society groups involved in elections such as ZESN would also help in alerting the media to irregularities in the process.
- d) The broadcast media should have regular programmes in the format of “*Face the Nation*” where the public has the chance to ask questions and seek clarifications on election-related issues, not just the voter registration and inspection process. The program could then include different political parties and civic groups such as ZESN for informative debates to benefit the public.

Ends//