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ARTICLE

The June 10 2015 by-elections: A Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) urban resurgence or a Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) win from the terraces?
Blessing Simura

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Full Length Research Paper

The June 10 2015 by-elections: A Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) urban resurgence or a Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) win from the terraces?

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After a Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) victory in the 2013 general elections, the Movement for Democratic Change led by Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC-T) retained dominance in Zimbabwe's two major cities, Harare and Bulawayo. The intra-party turmoil in both ZANU PF and the MDC-T that followed the elections resulted in both parties expelling former members. As per Zimbabwean electoral laws, by-elections were declared in constituencies where the expelled member won the parliamentary seat on a party ticket. The major by-elections of 10 June 2015 resulted from the expulsion of 14 members from MDC-T and 2 members from ZANU PF whose parliamentary seats were liable for contest. The elections were boycotted by MDC formations, led by MDC-T, while ZANU PF saw the by-elections as room to regain dominance in Harare and Bulawayo. This article argues that while the MDC-T boycotted, the elections became a referendum to determine which party had dominance in the two major cities. It argues that the MDC-T's boycott was in actual fact active participation from outside given its campaigns against the elections and that the outcome of the elections which was claimed by MDC-T as a victory showed that ZANU PF had not regained the required threshold to claim that it had regained its urban support. The article combines both qualitative and quantitative data in analysing the elections outcomes and making conclusions. Text analysis, especially from the pronouncements made by senior party members or speakers in their capacities as speaking on behalf of the party, acquired mostly from newspapers, was used. Statistics from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission or other credible and known election and advocacy civic organisations were used for the basic analysis of the elections outcomes. However, the thrust of the research is not meant to analyse the whole legal or other political contexts of elections in Zimbabwe. The paper is limited to analysing which party truly won the 10 June 2015 by-elections between ZANU PF which led in campaigning for the elections and the MDC-T and in extensions its two formations who led in campaigning for a boycott in light of the theory of democracy and legitimacy.

Key words: ZANU PF, MDC-T, Zimbabwe, 10 June 2015 By-elections.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe was born on 18 April 1980 after a protracted liberation struggle. Previously the country was a British

colony and later in 1965, Ian Smith, then the Prime Minister, issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence

(UDI) in which he sought to create an independent state from Britain run by the minority whites. The liberation struggle was fought in order to redress colonial imbalances, specifically the land issue (Simura, 2009) and the democratic rights of universal suffrage (Makaye and Dube, 2014, 230). After a long struggle, the warring sides negotiated under the mediation of Britain and came up with the Lancaster House Agreement and the Lancaster House Constitution (LHC) in 1979. The LHC paved way for the holding of nationwide elections that were won by ZANU led by Robert Mugabe. Since then and after the merging together of ZANU and ZAPU to form ZANU PF after the Matabeleland disturbances, popularly known as *Gukurahundi*¹, the political climate remained peaceful and calm.

After the creation of ZANU PF, Zimbabwe like other African countries, attempted to transform into a one-party state (Sithole and Makumbe, 1997, 122). This move was resisted by one the closest allies to the ZANU PF and national President, Edgar Tekere, who left ZANU PF and formed Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) in 1989 (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011, 15). Even after the formation of ZUM, the political climate remained calm and ZANU PF dominated the political landscape with only isolated cases of politically motivated violence. ZUM failed to dislodge ZANU PF from its political dominance nor did it create a political situation in which the legitimacy of ZANU PF would be questioned.

The political climate changed in September 1999 when the workers movement led by Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) that had mobilised stay aways and job actions created MDC (Laasko, 2004: 10-12). MDC became the first opposition political party to challenge the hegemony of ZANU PF. It successfully teamed up with civic society organisations and the white commercial farmers to campaign for the NO Vote against the ZANU PF government sponsored draft constitution in a February 2000 referendum which saw the Draft Constitution being defeated by 54.7% NO and 45.3% YES (*BBC News*, 2000).

The defeat of the draft constitution was a wakeup call to ZANU PF that its political hegemony in Zimbabwe had ended. In its first contest in national assembly elections in the same year, MDC won 52 out of the 120 contested seats. Such a political reality of the end of its hegemony could have sent ZANU PF in a panic mode and had to resort to other means of winning the elections, hence ushering in an era of protracted political violence (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011, 23-24). The net effect of the entry of MDC as an opposition political party was the loss by ZANU PF of the urban seats, specifically Harare and

Bulawayo.

The peak of electoral violence was reached in the Presidential runoff of 2008 after Robert Mugabe had been defeated by now MDC-T leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, by 43.2 to 47.9% (ZESN, 2008, 72) but failed to score the mandatory 50% plus one vote to assume the national presidency. Tsvangirai pulled out of the runoff race citing gross violence against his supporters which he alleged to be state sponsored. The international community condemned the runoff result which was a de-facto one-horse race and political and economic pressure mounted on ZANU PF to enter into a political agreement with the MDC formations (MDC-T led by Morgan Tsvangirai and another MDC splinter party led by Professor Welshman Ncube). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012: 2) states that the 2008 elections produced a political logjam. This logjam coupled with a runaway hyperinflation saw ZANU PF accepting to go into a Unity Government with the MDC formations.

The GNU was tasked with the stabilisation of the economy and the institution of collective and democratic reforms that would be used as instruments for a credible and conclusive general election (Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries: 2013). While there was a lot of political bickering the GNU managed to stabilise the economy as well as a return to economic growth (Saungweme, undated, 32) and the adoption of a new constitution in May 2013. It was due to these successes that the constitutional court responded to the application by Jealous Mawarire to compel the president to announce the date of elections (Mawarire et al., 2013).

The subsequent result of the case was the holding of the elections on 31 July, 2013 which saw ZANU PF winning more than two thirds majority in the parliament and Mugabe retaining the presidency. Both parties campaigned heavily against political violence and ZANU PF adopted the slogan "Peace begins with you, peace begins with me, peace begins with all of us". This campaign for peace was premised on the need by ZANU PF to win with legitimacy. ZANU PF had learnt the hard way by getting into a unity government with MDC formations after contested presidential runoff of 2008 that was marred by violence (Mvingi, 2008, 77-78).

While ZANU PF won by an emphatic majority, it still failed to make inroads in the urban constituencies of Harare and Bulawayo. This meant that while it had the national majority and mandate, such legitimacy was only from the rural vote which had been its traditional stronghold. The party always struggled to regain the urban vote, especially Harare because it is the seat of government. The 2014 intra-parties skirmishes that followed after the 2013 harmonised elections and the subsequent expelling of members by ZANU PF and MDC T created the need for by elections in 16 constituencies to which 13 were from the Harare and Bulawayo seats. The president, in line with his constitutional duties, declared 10 June 2015 as the date for the by-elections.

The 10 June 2015 by-elections in the 16 constituencies

¹ *Gukurahundi* is a Shona word that refers to the first rains that clean the chuff from the mountain and rock tops. In short it is the storm that cleans the chuff and it was the code name of the military operations in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions from 1983 to 1987 when the Unity Accord was signed between ZANU and ZAPU to form ZANU PF.

were an important election for all major and minor political parties in Zimbabwe.² MDC-T contributed by recalling 21 legislators from which 14 seats were eligible for contest while the remainder would be filled by party nominees as per the 2013 Zimbabwe Constitution. ZANU PF expelled two members whose seats became vacant after the party informed the speaker of parliament. In all the by-elections had 16 seats for the grabs which are shown in Table 2.

The by-elections were important to both the ruling and opposition political parties. For ZANU PF the elections were a *plebiscite* to measure its urban popularity after having defeated the opposition overwhelmingly in the 2013 general elections. One can argue that ZANU PF sought to increase its urban seats in the legislature and prove that the urban electorate was warming up to its policies and increase its legitimacy in urban areas, especially given that the running of the urban council, without the implementation of the decentralization provisions of the constitution through Provincial Councils is heavily influenced by ZANU PF through the Ministers of State for Provincial Affairs, who are *de-facto* governors and the Minister of Local Government. MDC-T boycotted the elections. However, the elections were equally important in showing how many would support it (MDC-T and its formations) through boycotting the elections. The campaign for boycotting the elections which was pursued by the MDC formations was meant to de-legitimise ZANU PF as a party that is running the elections using rules that makes it a player and a referee at the same time and also to make it a non-legitimate holder of urban seats by winning with the least or minority votes.

Other minority parties like National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) led by Lovemore Madhuku, Mavambo/Kusile/Dawn (MKD) of Simba Makoni, Dumiso Dabengwa led Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU)³ and the Joice Mujuru allegedly aligned independent candidates (Mugabe, 2015) ignored the MDC formations boycott call and participated in the elections. It can be argued that the minority parties and some independent candidates saw the by-elections as a barometer to test their popularity in the urban areas and a means to introduce themselves to the electorate ahead of the 2018 general elections. It is because of these reasons that most of the minority parties fielded candidates in the urban constituencies and literally ignored the rural constituencies.

This paper deliberately analyses the urban constituencies of the 10 June by-elections because of the following reasons:

1. Rural constituencies have always been ZANU PF

² The terms major and minor political parties are used here to refer to the dominance of the political party as measured by the number of the seats the party holds in the House of Assembly. This dominance is also influenced by the party's history and life.

³ See footnote 3

strongholds.

2. The holding of the elections on a working day meant that it was the working electorate which was affected by the holding of the elections on a mid-week. Rural constituencies are not necessarily affected by the dates being held on working days or weekends and holidays.

3. The issue of unemployment and the ZANU PF promises of two million jobs is more of a discursive topic in the urban areas than in the rural areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of holding election to choose political leaders is entrenched in the theory of liberal democracy. The theory of liberal democracy can be traced back to antiquity Greek City states political culture. The tradition then, was that vital city-state decisions were taken to debate and vote by the freemen of the state (Roberts, 2004: 320). In contemporary times, the notion of liberal democracy has its roots in transformations in the British political culture from an absolute monarchy to a limited monarch and a democratic system and French revolution. Under these mentioned systems, the general population fought and claimed the right to choose their leaders periodically under a system of universal suffrage (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000). This article is based on the theories of democracy and legitimacy. The two theories are related in the sense that legitimacy is a function of democracy and democracy accords legitimacy to political systems (Purrag, 2014; Moehler, 2005, 2).

Central to the theory of democracy is regular periodic elections where the ordinary people freely choose their leader. An election is "an organized event at which somebody is chosen by vote for ... a public office" (Heal Zimbabwe Trust, 2015: 1). On their own, elections are meaningless given that they are subject to manipulation. Elections, therefore, should be guided by rules and regulations that guarantee a level playing field between the political players, according to the voters' free will and creating an environment that does not make the voting process laborious. Added to that, the elections should be conducted by bodies that are constituted to be independent and not in any influential control from either of the competitors (Purrag, 2004).

The Zimbabwean State has always upheld the practice of conducting regular elections since the country attained independence in 1980 (Mapuva and Muyengwa-Mapuva, 2014, 15). As noted by Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (2008), "the liberation struggle was a protracted search for the right to majority enfranchisement, a basic citizen democratic right that is exercised through periodic elections." The ZANU PF government never sought to tamper with periodic elections as it was one of the central reasons for the liberation struggle and also a legitimating factor in their rule, both internally and externally. The ZANU PF led government always held period elections

since 1980.

The theory of legitimacy sets up general issues that give a leader the right to lead based on moral and legal ground supporting his/her powers to lead. Jackson and Bradford (2010: 1-2) forward that there is no single definition of legitimacy, but a key feature of a number of definitions is that it confers the right to command and be obeyed. The two scholars point out that, "In order to develop, operate and reproduce themselves effectively, social and political arrangements and institutions must have some form of legitimacy." In national politics, legitimacy gives a government the legal and moral authority to govern and enforce power and authority with the use of minimum force. Legitimacy gives the government the authority to create political institutions, create and command defence forces and create and command a police force.

In the absence of legitimacy, a government or state either collapses or is forced to rule by force. Instances of contested legitimacy in Africa include the post Al-Sisi led Coup Government in Egypt that deposed the first democratically elected Egyptian president, Muhammad Morsi in July 2013 (Batchelor, 2014, 118) as well as the Pierre Nkurunziza led government of Burundi in 2015 (International Crisis Group, 2015, 1). Other governments that have struggled with legitimacy are the Somali government and the post Gaddafi Government of Libya.

However, in Zimbabwe, while the holding of the election to acquire legitimacy was done, the elections, specifically those conducted after the birth of the MDC and the defeat of the government sponsored draft constitution of 2000 which was heavily decampaigned by the MDC and its allied civic organisations, the legitimacy of the ZANU PF government was questioned by the internal opposition, majority of the urban population and the Western countries (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012: 1) argues, "Over the years, ZANU PF has approached elections as mere rituals rather than as the main source of the party's political legitimacy and mandate to run the country." The questioned legitimacy of the elections and their results came from the violence that ensued before, during and after the elections between 2000 and 2008 (Bratton and Masunungure, 2011). While both parties (ZANU PF and MDC) rejected being the sponsors of violence, the international community supported the MDC allegations that ZANU PF was sponsoring violence owing to its control of state coercive machinery and quoting President Robert Mugabe's statement that ZANU PF had degrees in violence (Fleming, 2014).

This was rectified after a protracted mediation by

South Africa firstly led by the then President, Thabo Mbeki and his subsequent successors, Kgalema Motlante and Jacob Zuma. The mediation led to the creation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) under a Global Political Agreement (GPA) that led to the crafting and adoption of a new constitution and the amendments to the Electoral Act. The government ran from 2009 to 2013 when peaceful elections were held under a conducive and enabling environment (Electoral Commission Forum of SADC Countries Election Observer Mission, 2013: 9) which guaranteed the ZANU PF party after its victory, an electoral legitimacy to form a government and run the country legitimately.

MDC formations' position on the by-election

After having contributed the lion's share of the contested seats, the MDC formations led by the MD-T boycotted the elections arguing that the playfield was tipped in favour of ZANU PF (*Newsday*, 23 April 2015). Among the resolutions the MDC-T passed during its 2014, 4th National Congress in Harare was that the party would not take part in any election, "including by-elections" until the ZANU PF government implemented 'electoral reforms' (MDC-T a, undated). After the proclamation of 10 June 2015 as the by-election dates by President Mugabe, MDC-T National Standing Committee (NSC) met on 24 March 2015 and upheld the congress resolution to boycott any elections in the country until the government implemented electoral reforms it demanded (MDC-T b: undated). MDC-T President, Morgan Tsvangirai led his party on a national whirlwind tour with a bias to Harare and Bulawayo, dubbed the "No-Reforms No-Elections" campaigns. While the leadership argued that its rallies reiterated the position of the party to its supporters and explained the reasons for the boycott the main message in the speeches was urging voters to boycott the elections and turn the process into a sham (*Newsday*, 23 April 2015). The elections was, therefore equally important to the MDC-T and the other two MDC formations (one led by Welshman Ncube and the other by Tendai Biti, both former Secretaries General in the Tsvangirai led MDC), as they became a barometer to measure the electorate's response to the campaigns and calls. A positive response to the elections boycott would translate to continued popularity of the major opposition formations.

ZANU PF's position on the by-elections

The elections came at a time when ZANU PF had purged

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a number of senior members including the former Vice President, Joice Mujuru, for allegedly plotting to unconstitutionally topple President Robert Mugabe (*AFP*, 2014: 5; *Africa Research Bulletin*, 2014: 8). The purges brought about speculations among the general populace and some opposition parties as having weakened ZANU PF (Gagara, 2015). The matter was compounded by rumours of the creation of a splinter ZANU PF under the name of ZANU PF (People First) by expelled members from ZANU PF before and after the December 2014 congress (Mambo, 2015; Mugabe, 2015), which has mostly been speculation in the media as the party has not been registered or launched.

ZANU PF took the elections seriously as it sought to measure its support in urban areas amid the opposition's calls for demonstration for the two million jobs promised by ZANU PF in the 2013 general elections. The economic meltdown that engulfed the state due to company downsizing led to an influx of vendors in the central business district (CBD) of Harare and other urban areas in the country. On the eve of the election, ZANU PF through the then Minister of Local Government, public Works and National Housing, Ignatius Chombo, called for the relocation of the vendors from CBD to designated places and bring sanity in the Harare Central Business District (*ZBC News*, 1 June 2015). MDC-T argued that in place of relocating the vendors, the government should work on providing more than two million jobs it promised during elections (*Daily News*: 3 June 2015). Prior to the vendors' relocation talks, MDC-T had tried to rally urban people to demonstrate against ZANU PF against what it called unfulfilled 2013 election promises. To ZANU PF, the election was, metaphorically speaking, a referendum on its rule since the 2013 general election.

ZANU PF deployed the best of its ammunition in the elections. While President Robert Mugabe did not tour the constituencies as he toured the provinces in the 2013 elections, his two deputies took his role. Vice Presidents, Emmerson Mnangagwa and Pelekhuzela Mphoko were very active as they travelled across the country to all the constituencies that were holding by-elections to bolster support for ZANU PF candidates. ZANU PF also deployed massive resources and a number of joint campaign rallies which were led by the National Commissar, Saviour Kasukuwere, were held.

The rallies by ZANU PF were meant to counter MDC-T's no-reform no-election campaign. The elections sought to rally the people to the elections and prove that the MDC-T had become irrelevant in national elections due to its (MDC-T) internal fights and break-up.

Elections outcomes: A Summary

It was apparent that ZANU PF would gain more seats than the two it had brought on the table and that MDC-T

would lose some seats from the 14 it contributed given the disintegration which MDC-T had gone through while smarting from a heavy defeat in the 2013 general elections. The outstanding questions were how many and which ones. Electoral margins were also important for both ZANU PF and the MDC formations given the energy that the parties had expended in the campaigns both for the elections (in the case of ZANU PF) and against the elections (in the case of the MDC-T). As was expected, ZANU PF won the elections, and as was not expected, it swept all the seats contested.

However, the elections showed some interesting insights as shown by Tables 1 and 2.

Election victory: Whose victory?

The primary question that this paper seeks to put forward is whose victory is the 10 June by-election victory. ZANU PF, by the virtue of sweeping all the contested seats, claimed victory and a comeback in urban areas. ZANU PF, Deputy Director of Information, Psychology Maziwisa stated that ZANU PF's win in the urban areas meant that the party had reclaimed "lost ground in urban areas and becoming once again the party of choice in Zimbabwe" (<http://www.herald.co.zw/we-have-liberated-highfield-maziwisa/>). In countering the victory claims by ZANU PF some people argued that it was MDC formations, specifically the MDC-T which won the elections in spite of having not taken part.

An analysis of the statistics given in the two tables shows that while ZANU PF won the elections in Harare and Bulawayo, which are predominantly MDC-T strongholds, there was high voter apathy averaging a turnout of 13.47 of registered voters. On average more than 80 percent of the registered voters did not exercise their right to vote. Due to low turn-out, it will be strange for ZANU PF to claim that it has regained its urban strength.

In most of the constituencies in Harare and Bulawayo, ZANU PF got lesser votes than it got in 2013. With the exception of Lobengula where there was a slight increase in voters who cast their ballot in support of ZANU PF from 1848 in 2013 to 1977 in the 2015 June by-elections. ZANU PF failed to mobilize some of the voters who voted for it when it lost in the 2013 elections. Its success in the by-elections was, therefore a minority success. The election was, at best a wake-up call to ZANU PF that a comeback in Harare and Bulawayo in 2018 and beyond would call for more than just politicking. There is need for meaningful reforms and fulfilment of promises as well as real economic turnaround given that the urban electorate represents a swing electorate who reacts to instant changes.

On the other hand, MDC-T claimed that the election was a sham and a success to its "No-Reforms No-

Table 1. 2013 general elections.

Constituency	ZANU PF	MDC-T	Other parties
Harare East	8190	9538	814
Dzivarasekwa	5402	6591	1304
Kuwadzana	4345	8564	1060
Kambuzuma	4165	7944	870
Highfields West	2639	6825	911
Glen View South	2583	8301	978
Luveve	2874	5586	3495
Pelandaba-Mpopoma	2122	6024	1915
Makokoba	3539	7099	1871
Lobengula	1848	5579	1383
Pumula	2877	6100	2037

Source: ZBC News (30 July 2013).

Table 2. 2015 by-elections.

Constituency	ZANU PF	Other parties/candidates	Total vote cast	Registered voters	% Turnout
Harare East	4 605	899	5 619	36062	15.58
Dzivarasekwa	3 116	832	4081	24920	16
Kuwadzana	3 480	729	4290	24822	17
Kambuzuma	2 712	753	3587	24284	15
Highfields West	2 254	598	2917	23928	12.54
Glen View South	1 396	1202	2656	25975	10
Luveve	1 765	1466	3283	28439	11
Pelandaba-Mpopoma	2 050	969	3123	26740	12
Makokoba	3183	1038	4286	28844	14
Lobengula	1 977	877	2906	25727	11
Pumula	2 477	1253	3791	26786	14
Mbizo	4 269	2576	6957	26353	26.4
Dangamvura/Chikanga	6 376	2455	9030	40900	22
Headlands	11 104	1014	12318	31650	39
Hurungwe West	5 961	4 239	10412	27519	38
Tsholotsho North	11 695	129	11975	30339	39

Source: Election Resource Centre (ERC), (2015).

Campaign” policy. As noted in this paper, an average of more than 80 percent of the electorate did not vote in the Harare and Bulawayo vacant seats. This high voter apathy which on average translated to just around 11 percent of the registered voters participating in the elections in Harare and Bulawayo is celebrated by the main opposition as its supporters who took heed of their calls to boycott the by-elections (MDC-T a, 2015).

The MDC-T in a statement on the outcome of the by-elections stated that, “The MDC has been vindicated by the very low turnout in the 16 by-elections where Zimbabweans heeded the party’s call to snub the sham

polls until the implementation of far-reaching electoral reforms.” It went on to describe the ZANU PF victory as a “pyrrhic victory” (MDC-T a, 2015). The MDC-T concluded that the ZANU PF victory was a landslide victory of the minority and that the majority who stayed away were the real winners of the elections (MDC-T a, 2015). According to the MDC-T the low turnout on the 10 June 2015 by-elections was a snub by MDC-T supporters. The boycott was a move not to legitimize what they regarded as an illegitimate process by the ruling party.

In support of the MDC-T’s position, Kunambura (2015) opined that, “An unprecedented low turnout of voters in

Table 3. Results of selected previous urban by-elections since 2000.

Constituency and date	ZANU PF	MDC	Other parties
Bindura: 27-28/07/01	15 864	9 456	----
Kuwadzana: 29-30/03/03	5002	12 548	94
Highfields: 29-30/03/03	4 844	8 759	387
Harare Central: 30-31/08/03	1 304	2 707	----
Kadoma Central: 29-30/11/03	9 282	6 038	----
Zengeza: 27-28/03/04	8 447	6 706	133

Source: The NGO Network Alliance Project, at www.archive.kubatana.net.

Wednesday's 16 parliamentary by-elections, particularly in urban areas, reduced the polls to a sham". Messages from the private media, which is critical of ZANU PF and the government aired the same sentiments. The messages echoed a declaration of an MDC-T victory against ZANU PF on popularity in Harare and Bulawayo.

However, it will be simple politicking to accept that every eligible voter who did not take part in the by-elections heeded the boycott calls by MDC-T. There are other reasons which negatively affected the voters' turnout. It can be argued that one of the impediments for the electorate to take part in the elections was the fact that the by-elections were undertaken on Wednesday (10 June 2015), which was a working day in the country.

Generally, elections, including by-elections have been undertaken on weekends. In cases where the elections have been undertaken on a working day, the president proclaimed a public holiday to allow the citizens to practice their cardinal democratic right to choose their representatives in the legislative assembly. One can generalise that given the job pressure the country is going through, any rational working citizen would choose to attend work than attend an election. A closer look at the results proves that the urban voters' turnout was affected by the voting date falling on a working day. Rural constituencies that were among the contested seats recorded an average turnout of 38.66 percent against the urban average of 15.12 percent. All the rural stations saw at least 38 percent of the registered voters taking part in the elections. This was more than twice the turnout in urban areas.

While this argument may be countered on the basis that there is high unemployment rate in the country, hence the assertion of a working day impacting on the voting habit could be an exaggeration, it must be noted that a substantial number of the people are informally employed whilst others survive on vending. Those who are into vending tap from those who work in the industries and offices in town, hence, this paper argues that even those who are 'self-bosses' could not sacrifice a day they could attract their customers who are found during work days to go and vote.

ZANU PF has defended the low turnout arguing that

generally by-elections are traditionally associated with voters' apathy (*The Herald*, 13 June 2015). While enthusiasm among the electorate for a general election and a by-election is different, the low turn-out during the 10 June 2015 by-elections was unprecedented. Table 3 shows some of the urban voters' attitude on by-elections:

The table shows that there has always been an average high turn-out in by-elections in Zimbabwe in the post 2000 era where there has been a strong challenge to ZANU PF dominance in the country, politically. From the tabulated figures no party won a by-election with less than 8 000 votes. This is in sharp contrast with the 2015 by-election results in the urban areas in which the lowest winning candidate won by 1 396 in Glen View South, a figure that is less than 20 percent of the lowest of Zengeza in the 2004 by-election.

From this analysis, the ZANU PF argument by such candidates like Psychology Mazivisa, that there is generally low enthusiasm and turn outs in by-elections to the levels witnessed in 2015 is unfounded (*The Herald*, 13 June 2015). The turn-out can be described as a kind of a boycott by the urban vote due to either the fact that the MDC formations, who constitute the major opposition, boycotted or the fact that the elections were held on a working day, which meant that voters chose to go to work than exercise their democratic right.

Conclusion

The 10 June 2015 by-elections in 16 constituencies which fell vacant after the recall from parliament of legislators by MDC-T and ZANU PF in Zimbabwe created conditions for the major parties to test their popularity in urban constituencies. ZANU PF took the elections seriously from a positive side. The party heavily campaigned in the run up to the elections as they saw an opportunity to re-establish themselves in the urban areas which dominated the by-elections. This was proven by the amount of resources the party employed during the campaign period, which saw the two vice presidents taking turns to campaign in different constituencies and candidates distributing food to lure voters.

The MDC formations, led by the MDC-T, took the elections seriously but on the negative side. The MDC-T leadership also held nationwide campaigns. However, the campaigns were meant to canvass people to boycott the elections and render the process a sham. The campaigns were dubbed the “No Reform No Election” campaigns. This was reached in an MDC-T NEC meeting which endorsed the MDC-T’s national congress resolution that it would not take part in any elections until elections reforms it claimed had been met by the government. To the MDC-T, a high voter apathy would directly translate into a victory and a sign that their leader, Morgan Tsvangirai still commanded support even though the party had gone under life threatening challenges and another split that saw the party’s secretary general Tendai Biti leading a group of stalwarts into creating the MDC Renewal Team.

Elections results showed an unprecedented voters’ apathy in urban areas, specifically Harare and Bulawayo. The average urban turnout of 15.12 percent was received by MDC-T as a victory from outside. That ZANU PF celebrated an urban comeback was seen as a non-event given that it had won with a very low turnout, in some cases below votes it received in the 2013 general elections. However, to ZANU PF, the victory was an important comeback which signified its return to the two major cities. In other words, the victory signified the waning support of MDC-T and Tsvangirai as its leader. According to ZANU PF low turnouts are common in by-elections. There was also another reason of the day falling on a working day. This could have also affected the voters’ turnout as most people could have chosen to respond to issues of survival given the current economic hardships bedeviling the country.

In sum, it must be accepted that it will not be easy to come up with a conclusive answer on the major reason why there was such a low turnout in a by-election that received so much attention from the media to the players. Had the day fallen on a weekend or a holiday, it could have been easier to make conclusions. However, ZANU PF can bank on having won the seats to consolidate their support and regain the seat in the 2018 general elections. ZANU PF can bank on the power of the incumbent to come up with policies and regulations that can help it retain the seats and reduce MDC-T’s urban dominance in Harare and Bulawayo from which it registered its maiden wins in 2000 and remained strong even after being thumped by ZANU PF in the 2013 general elections.

Conflict of interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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