



ASSESSMENT OF THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF POLLING

July 29 - 31

1.0 Introduction

Media Monitors monitored the mainstream media from July 29-31 to assess the nature of the media's coverage of the cooling period and the polling date. The analysis focused on three issues:

1. Fair and balanced coverage of political players
2. The media's role in informing the public on electoral processes, and
3. Professional and ethical conduct by the media.

1.1 Context

The monitoring period covered the following issues:

- Violations of the election code of conduct by two presidential candidates during the period of silence (29 July).
- Citizens went to the polls on the 30th of July.
- Announcement of election results began on the 31st of July

2.0 Coverage of political parties and actors

2.1 Fair and balanced coverage of political players

During the monitoring period, most of the media's attention was dedicated to ZANU PF and MDC Alliance as observed throughout the electoral period. The two parties made up 91% of the media's coverage with MDC Alliance receiving 56% of the coverage and ZANU PF accounting for 35%. The remaining 9% of the coverage was distributed amongst 19 political parties and independent candidates.

2.2 Tone of coverage for political parties

In the government controlled media, most of the political parties received coverage that was neutral. The MDC Alliance received 97% of the negative coverage on the state-controlled media and ZANU PF accounted for 90% of the positive coverage.

In the privately owned media, neutral sentiment dominated for most of the political parties save for the MDC Alliance and ZANU PF. ZANU PF received 94% of the negative coverage whereas MDC Alliance accounted for 80% of the positive coverage. Most of the party representatives covered were mentioned in line with the voting process.

2.3 Gender representation in the news

Women's voices remain marginalised in the news media during the polling period. Women political actors made up 5% of the voices recorded while men were covered in 95%. The ZBC stations gave proportionally more coverage to women politicians. They featured women in 11% of their coverage. Even though women's voices were under represented the media took note of their marginalisation in the political arena.

*Daily News on Sunday*¹ asked whether Zimbabwe was ready for a woman President? . Women’s rights advocacy group, Women In Politics Support Unit (WIPSU) noted that, “just 15% of the more than the 1600 candidates fighting for Parliament, council and the presidency are women”. It also added, “women demanded a seat at the high table”. Independent candidate, Jessie Majome stated that, “I want to be optimistic but I don’t see us getting a woman into office in this particular election, but it is encouraging to note that we have at least seasoned women candidates running for office this year”. *The Sunday Mail* also unpacked how the quota system works. It revealed that this election will be last time women will benefit from the gender quota system. It reported that, “it should be noted that the 60 seats reserved for women is temporary as it is set to expire in 2022”².

2.4 Youth representation in the news

During the monitoring period youth political actors were silent in the media. Their perspectives were not covered in the news platforms that were monitored. Politicians older than 60 and the 35-44 age group dominated news coverage.

3.0 Media’s duty to inform

In the run up to the elections, ZEC reported that it had finalized its preparations for the polls. The commission reassured the electorate that it was prepared for D-day. It announced that, 6,150,950 ballots were printed for the presidential and national assembly elections respectively and 5,036,250 for local authority elections. Even though there are 5,681,604 registered voters on the consolidated final voters roll, ZEC printed extra ballot papers, which it said represents an 8% contingency. “According to ZEC the total number of ballots printed for the council elections is less than for presidential and national assembly because in 46 wards, candidates were returned unopposed and no elections will be held”³. *The Sunday Mail*⁴ reported 131,000 polling officers deployed to over 10,000 polling stations countrywide.

Generally, the media reported that the voting process had progressed peacefully with a very high turnout recorded across the country. The media took a proactive stance in reporting the polling process. The private press had live blogs on their websites, which gave a blow-by-blow account of the process in different polls across the country. ZTV gave periodic updates on the voting process and held interviews with candidates, polling officers and the electorate to understand what was going on. ZEC Chairperson, Justice Priscilla Chigumba reported that, “At 6pm most polling stations had recorded a voter turnout averaging 75 percent. It is our view that the high voter turnout is indicative of sound voter education and publicity conducted on a receptive electorate. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission ensured that the electorate has been afforded the opportunity to exercise its constitutional right to elect its leaders.”⁵ ZTV also made a special main news edition that

¹ Daily News (29/7) Is Zim ready for woman president?

² The Sunday Mail (29/7) Understanding proportional representation

³ Daily News (29/7) 6,1 million ballots printed for knife edge presidential poll

⁴ The Sunday Mail (29/7) ZEC reveals ballot paper stats

⁵ The Herald (31/7) Historic Turnout

gave polling updates from across the country that gave the impression that everything was progressing smoothly.

The private press highlighted some of the electoral irregularities that occurred the day before and on polling day. *Daily News* reported that Chipinge central national assembly candidate, Livingstone Dhlumo had taken ZEC to court after noticing that his passport sized photo was not displayed on the ballot. The paper later reported that ZEC had rectified the issue. The paper⁶ reported that, “ZEC has corrected a defective ballot paper for Chipinge Central that did not display one of the candidates’ passport size photos”.

There was a report that a polling station in Glen View North constituency in Harare was missing when polling opened. *Daily News* reported that the Election Resource Centre had noted that, “The polling station that was meant to be situated at Glen View 1 shopping centre could not be located”⁷.

NewsDay cited electoral irregularities noted by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) and the Election Situation Room (ESR) who were monitoring the Election Day proceedings. The two groups observed the following irregularities:

- Inadequate voting material
- Inadequate voter education which resulted in delays in the voting process
- Intimidation and harassment towards the election
- Village heads acting as election agents
- Observers and party agents denied entry into polling stations in areas such as Silobela, Mutare North, Mutare West and Chakari in Mashonaland west

⁶ Daily News (30/7) ZEC rectifies Chipinge Central ballot paper defect

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⁷ Daily News (31/7) Missing polling station in Glen View

Failure to respect the polling code of conduct

Two of the presidential candidates failed to respect the cooling down period during the 24-hours before the electoral period. The two candidates, Emmerson Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa held press conferences on Sunday 29 March in violation of paragraph seven of the Fourth schedule of the electoral Act, which states that:

No political party or candidate may, from midnight twenty-four hours before polling day in any election or referendum until polling stations are closed on that day—

- (a) Convene or hold a public gathering of any kind;
- (b) Publish, or cause or permit the publication, of any advertisement or statement promoting or opposing a particular party or candidate;

Even though the two candidates appear to be in violation of the above clause, it was reported that ZEC had reported Nelson Chamisa to the police. ZEC also reported in a press conference broadcast live on ZTV (30 June) that it had reported two candidates to the police for the above violation; it however declined to indicate who the second candidate was. The privately owned media urged the commission not to selectively apply the law. *Daily News* noted that, “no one could have faulted ZEC for applying the law. It only became an issue after the commission ignored the fact that President Emmerson Mnangagwa had also addressed the nation a few hours after Chamisa’s media briefing”⁸.

4.0 Conduct of the media

4.1 Lack of neutrality in election reports

On the date of polling, Media Monitors noted that the media had indicated their biases with regards to presidential candidates as indicated by their editorial commentaries. In the government controlled press, *The Herald*⁹ was more direct in its message as it notified its readers who not to vote for. The paper used an analogy to discredit MDC Alliance candidate, Nelson Chamisa by aligning him with former President, Robert Mugabe. The daily noted that, “*Chamisa, leader of the MDC Alliance does not represent the new as he claims. He represents the old, specifically Mugabe, as we knew him in his later years. The spent force the nation unanimously retired last November*”.

While *The Herald*, appeared to discredit, Chamisa, *NewsDay* seemed unimpressed by Emmerson Mnangagwa achievements in the past eight months he was in office. The paper states, “*Mnangagwa at his inauguration in November last year said he wanted to fight corruption. Little has come of this*”. It went on to encourage youths and “*the poor majority who have suffered under*

⁸ Daily News (31/7) ZEC mustn't apply the law selectively

⁹ *The Herald* (30/7) Know who you are voting for; Page 1

successive ZANU PF regimes over 38 years” to ensure their voice is heard in these elections.

Apart from editorial commentaries the media also carried reports and letters to the editors that highlighted their biases. Some of the headlines that appeared in the media included:

NewsDay (30/7)

- *End of road for ZANU PF*
- *Time for voters to express their anger*
- *Meet Zimbabwe’s youngest presidential aspirant*

Daily News (30/7)

- *Tsvangirai Vindicated*
- *Mugabe’s ghost hangs over polls ...as he rubbishes ED, lauds Chamisa*
- *Lets watch ZANU PF closely*

The Herald (30/7)

- *ED walks Peaceful election promise*
- *Chamisa in pickle over Mugabe ties*
- *ZEC reports MDC Alliance to police*
- *President set for resounding victory*
- *Open letter to Nelson Chamisa*
- *#BobIsInIt: Wamba gets kiss of death*
- *Why the Mythical Chamisa Victory will not happen*
- *MDC Alliance will lose the elections*
- *For ED its not over until its over*

Chronicle (30/7)

- *Vote for Mugabe via Chamisa says ED*
- *Eddie Cross Bets on ED*
- *Election survey predicts ED win*
- *ZANU PF, ED set for resounding Victory*

5.0 Conclusion

It should be noted in the final run up to elections the media’s focus continued to be centred on the activities of the two main political parties MDC Alliance and ZANU PF. The two parties occupied 91% of the media’s coverage of political parties. The media also openly declared their biases in their reports, as they seemed to endorse their preferred candidates. The other candidates were not given a chance to win the election. During the polling date the media were proactive in their coverage as they gave periodic updates of the voting progress which helped inform the electorate about what was taking place. The electoral commission was given a platform on the national broadcaster to inform the public about voting progress.