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## Fair, accurate and balanced reporting critical in the 26 March By-elections

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As Zimbabwe heads towards by-elections on the 26th of March for 26 National Assembly and 122 local authority seats, the media is required to be fair, balanced and equitable in its reporting on political parties and candidates. A professional media that ensures fair access and treatment of all political players in an election supports citizen's enjoyment of the rights to information and expression, as well as ensuring a more credible election. Media Monitors therefore urges the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) through its Media Monitoring Committee as set out in Section 160K of the Electoral Act to ensure that local media adheres to the letter and spirit of the law in coverage of elections.

Provisions on the media in the Electoral Act require ZEC with the assistance of the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC) and the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) to "*monitor the Zimbabwean news media during any election period to ensure that political parties, candidates, broadcasters, print media publishers and journalists observe the provisions of this part*". (Sections 160 E – 160 H of the Electoral Act). This part of the Act makes provision for fair and balanced access to the broadcasting media by all political parties and candidates; fair political advertising, as well as the general conduct of the media in an election that ensures that:

- All political parties and candidates are treated equitably
- Election reports are factually accurate, complete and fair
- A clear distinction is made in the news between factual reporting on the election and editorial comment on it
- Inaccuracies are rectified without delay and with due prominence
- Political parties and candidates are afforded the right of reply
- News media do not promote political parties and candidates that encourage violence or hatred.
- News media avoid language that encourages prejudice or hatred, incites violence and may lead to public contempt against any person or political player

In the upcoming by-elections, Media Monitors encourages local media to be cognizant of gender and other demographic dynamics in the country so as to report on issues in a more

representative, inclusive and sensitive manner. In the 2018 general election, only 11% of the recorded sources of news were women and youths made up just 4%.

Media Monitors calls upon ZEC to ensure that the media adheres to provisions set out in the Electoral Act to ensure the media is effectively playing its role to provide fair and equitable coverage to political actors during election. Media Monitors further calls on the Commission to use the schedules presented to it by ZBC to give regular updates on whether its stations are adhering to the set parameters. The media monitoring committee should in addition devise a system to receive and process complaints as and when they are made against the media and political actors in a timely manner.

Media Monitors will be monitoring the local media's coverage of the by-elections in line with section 160 K (3) which states that; *"This section shall not be construed as preventing anyone other than the Zimbabwe Media Commission from monitoring news media and reporting on their conduct during an election period"*. This process will be conducted to help offer technical support to the local media to enhance their capacity to report on elections in the public interest.

Ends//.