

# Zimbabwe's 2013 Elections: Opportunity Lost

*David Bruce Wharton*

United States Ambassador to the Republic of Zimbabwe

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**A**s dawn broke across Zimbabwe on Election Day, July 31, 2013, all appeared to be in order. Poll workers were setting up voting booths and arranging ballots and other election material. Local and regional observers and political party agents were on hand. Voters were queuing up in the crisp southern African winter air.

At 7:00 a.m., most polls opened and the 12-hour period of voting for President, National Assembly, and local government began. Throughout the day, voting proceeded smoothly and peacefully. Election officers kept the process and lines of voters moving, and most polling places had no voters still waiting at closing time. Election officers and observers began the counting process, and kept at it until the results were recorded and posted, sometimes as late as 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. the next morning. Though regional and local observers noted anomalies such as large numbers of people turned away from voting stations in urban areas, the counting centers began their work and everyone agreed that the voting process was peaceful.

Three days later, results were announced: Robert Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party were awarded a landslide victory with 61 percent of the presidential vote and more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Many Zimbabweans were stunned. The leading opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) led by Morgan Tsvangirai, declared that the elections were a "huge farce." Even ZANU-PF supporters seemed surprised at the scale of the victory. A muted calm settled over Zimbabwe.

The region's main observation efforts, the South African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), released preliminary reports about the election. Both stated that voting had been conducted peacefully and freely, but noted many concerns with the processes leading up to Election Day. Neither initial report characterized the elections as 'fair' or 'credible.' Zimbabwean civil society observers offered statistical comparisons of voting patterns that called into question the polls' credibility as an expression of the will of the Zimbabwean people.

The US view of the elections is that there were enough serious shortcomings in the process leading up to the peaceful Election Day that we do not believe the results credibly reflected the will of the people of Zimbabwe. Elections are a process, not an event that takes place on a single day. The weeks before polling are critical: voter registration can determine outcome; access to media shapes public opinion; and the printing and safeguarding

of ballots is crucial. While voting day was peaceful, processes leading up to it did not meet international standards. This was a lost opportunity for Zimbabwe. It is not the future I hoped for when I presented my credentials to President Mugabe in November 2012. I had hoped, and worked hard to advocate for a peaceful, credible and transparent election process that would allow the United States and Zimbabwe to resume a more normal, more productive bilateral relationship.

Our official relationship with Zimbabwe has been difficult for more than a decade because of political decisions Zimbabwe's leaders made in 2000. Under economic pressure because of bad economic decisions and worried about elections, a small number of Zimbabwean political leaders chose to ignore law and courts in order to increase their personal wealth and power. They permitted politically affiliated gangs to beat opposition political leaders and their supporters, extort money from businesses and common citizens, restrict freedom of expression, and bring Zimbabwe's once strong agricultural sector to its knees. In varying degrees, this behavior continued through 2008, culminating in a wave of political violence that generated more than 200 dead and tens of thousands of people displaced. In response and with the intention of bringing pressure to bear on those we held responsible for these actions, the US government placed travel and business restrictions on about 120 people and their businesses. For the same reasons, the US Congress also imposed restrictions on US support for debt relief or new loans for Zimbabwe from the International Financial Institutions.

These targeted sanctions were an irritant to those on whom they were imposed, but they are sanctions on individuals undermining Zimbabwe, not on the nation itself. As intended, we have been careful to limit to the greatest extent possible the effect on either the Zimbabwe economy or the lives of the majority of the nation's 13 million citizens. The United States has continued its humanitarian and development support to the people of Zimbabwe, feeding as much as half the population in the mid-2000s, and providing health care support that helped to halve the nation's HIV/AIDS infection rate. Zimbabwe's economic decline and collapse into hyperinflation in 2008 were the result of the government's own policy and economic decisions. The clearest indicator of this is the dramatic rebound of Zimbabwe's economy after 2008, after the coalition agreement placed the finance ministry under new leadership, in the absence of any change to US targeted sanctions. Sovereign policy decisions control Zimbabwe's economy, not US restrictions on 120 people and their businesses.

After more than four years of political stability and economic progress made under a SADC-brokered multi-party "coalition government," Zimbabweans approved a new constitution in a March 2013 referendum. The peaceful process offered hope that Zimbabwe had grown out of the political violence and manipulation of previous elections and that the stage was set for peaceful, credible and transparent elections.

The United States stepped up efforts to make clear that these elections offered an opportunity for Zimbabwe to create conditions for economic and social development and to return to its place as a fully respected member of the community of democratic nations. Ambassador Andrew Young traveled to Harare in April to meet with President Mugabe

and other senior members of his ZANU-PF party, bearing a letter from Secretary of State John Kerry laying out the US commitment to respecting the outcome of a peaceful and credible election. Reverend Jesse Jackson, on a private visit to Zimbabwe, also met with President Mugabe and underscored the importance of a peaceful and credible election. Moreover, three visits from senior State Department officials in March and April of 2013 for meetings with government, civil society and the media made clear the US desire to improve the relationship and specified what Zimbabwean actions would allow us to strengthen diplomatic ties.

In regular policy discussions with Washington, and in close coordination with other major donors to Zimbabwe, we agreed on the importance of clear criteria for assessing the electoral process. We looked at several models, but agreed that the SADC's guidelines on elections—to which Zimbabwe is a signatory—were the most appropriate. We made clear in interviews, speeches and remarks that we accepted the SADC guidelines.

In May, however, we began to see signs that all was not well with the electoral process. A ten-day voter registration exercise was rushed, poorly advertised, and inadequate. A sudden decision by a hastily assembled Constitutional Court in late May ruled that elections must be held by July 31. President Mugabe followed quickly to confirm the court's decision. Our evaluation, as well as that of SADC and other friends of Zimbabwe, was that it would be difficult—perhaps impossible—to complete the preparations necessary for a credible election and required under Zimbabwe's Electoral Act in the short time remaining before July 31. SADC even convened a special summit on Zimbabwe and recommended that the coalition government ask the court for additional time to prepare for elections.

Given the history of Zimbabwe's elections in 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008, all marred by political violence and doubts about credibility and transparency, Zimbabwe's rush to elections was troubling. I began to send a series of letters to Zimbabwean government and parastatal officials to make clear US concerns and to point out where we thought the process was falling short of SADC guidelines on elections. Chief among those were the voter registration exercise, the condition of the voters' roll, partisan statements and behavior of police and military leadership, and the highly partisan tenor of state-owned media coverage of election campaigns. Some of the letters were leaked to the state-owned media and I was called in to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and warned that further letters of this sort would be viewed as interference in Zimbabwe's internal affairs. Out of respect for Zimbabwe's norms, I stopped the letter writing, but continued to meet with government officials and to speak publicly and give interviews to express US concerns about serious problems in the electoral process.

We did everything we could to communicate with political leaders in Zimbabwe, to highlight the opportunity the 2013 election offered for progress, and to make clear that our benchmarks for a peaceful, credible and transparent process were no different than those prescribed by Zimbabwean law and regional guidelines. We committed publicly to “rolling back our sanctions” in response to a credible election, and went out of our way to define what we meant by that.

Sadly, because of the clear contraventions of Zimbabwe's Electoral Act and the SADC guidelines on elections, the will of Zimbabwe's people has been obscured. We will never know what results a credible and transparent process might have delivered.

What we do know is that:

- ◆ The voter registration process did not meet the requirement in the Electoral Act for a 30-day, nationwide exercise. The effort that was conducted, three days at a time in varying locations, clearly disadvantaged a significant amount of potentially eligible voters, mostly young urban voters, and favored older rural voters.
- ◆ The final version of the voters' roll, which by law is to be made available to the public prior to the election, was never provided to the public or to the contesting political parties. One hard copy, which filled the beds of two pick-up trucks, was given to the MDC-T party at about 4:00 p.m. on Election Day. Even three weeks after the elections, the Government of Zimbabwe refused to make a digital copy of the roll available, in clear violation of the Electoral Act.
- ◆ In violation of SADC guidelines on elections, state-owned media were profoundly partisan—biased against opposition parties and supportive of ZANU-PF.
- ◆ In violation of SADC guidelines on elections, senior police and military officials made strongly partisan public statements in the months leading up to elections.
- ◆ For a nation of 6.4 million voters, 8.7 million ballots were printed, 35 percent more than the international standard of five percent above the number of registered voters.
- ◆ Statistical analysis of a mid-June copy of the voters' roll shows significant underrepresentation of young voters and overrepresentation of voters above the age of 65. The demographics of that early version of the voters' roll are out of line with data from Zimbabwe's 2012 census, and with the demographics of neighboring countries.
- ◆ Analysis of the version of the voters' roll that was used for the election is impossible because, in contravention of the Electoral Act, digital copies have not been made available to political parties.
- ◆ According to the largest domestic observation effort, unusually high numbers of voters were turned away from 81 percent of urban polling places. Only 38 percent of rural polling places turned away such high numbers of voters.
- ◆ The same domestic observation effort noted that more than 25 assisted voters were seen in 49 percent of rural polling places. This is unusual in a country that is rightfully proud of its 90 percent literacy rate, the highest in Africa.

The depth and breadth of questions and concerns about the election make it impossible to know whether or not the announced results reflect popular will. This fundamental doubt weakens the legitimacy of the government and international confidence in it. While this means that the bilateral relationship between the United States and Zimbabwe will remain strained, the more important effect will be on Zimbabwe's economy. Without confidence that the government respects its people and the rule of law, the economic and intellectual capital of Zimbabwe's diaspora is not likely to return home. International investors, already uncertain of the implications of ZANU-PF's economic plans, will likely look elsewhere for opportunity. Young Zimbabweans, beneficiaries of the nation's traditionally strong educational system, will see more opportunities in neighboring countries and overseas than they do at home. Zimbabwe's opportunities for growth and development will be slowed and deferred.

The United States will stand by our commitment to the people of Zimbabwe and their aspiration to build a just, democratic and prosperous nation. We will continue to support civil society and international programs that strengthen health care, food security, economic development, and democratic institutions. We will continue to respect and support Zimbabwe's history, culture, and the intellectual and entrepreneurial capacity of her people. Ultimately, though, we look forward to a time when the Government of Zimbabwe will trust the people enough to give them a fully transparent, credible and peaceful opportunity to select leaders. Then, with the full legitimacy and power that only the people of Zimbabwe can confer, Zimbabwe can reach its full potential.