

# **The Role of Youth in Zimbabwe's 2018 Harmonized Elections**

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## **Background**

Any country's social and political terrain is defined and determined by the youth mores in the case of Zimbabwe where youths make 67.7% of the population. This is not just because of who they are, but it is a fact that youths constitute 47% of the voting population in our country. Naturally, it means their views must be appreciated as they are the critical substratum of any nation. In the past, the youths' energy has been diverted towards negative contribution to the electoral process and they have become infamous and synonymous with the violence that has characterized previous elections in Zimbabwe and raven most of them to the peripheries of the electoral process. Lack of information on electoral processes, repeated rigging, violence, intimidation and vote buying during elections has daunted the prospects of youth participation as election outcomes are pre-determined by political elites.

As articulated in the Zimbabwe Constitution Section 20, young people should be given enough space to participate in all issues affecting them: in political, economic, social spheres including decision making processes. One of the key tenants of participating in decision making is to allow young people to participate both as voters and electoral candidates. Young people have often been victims of political processes, being manipulated to commit violence before, during and after elections. Due to economic challenges in Zimbabwe, youth have been key players in enacting violence.

The Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) shockingly revealed that in the 2013 harmonized elections, only 8, 87% of the youth were on the voter's roll. The statistics on the youth translates to nearly 2 million people who did not vote. Youth participation in these elections was negligible, except when used as instruments of violence and intimidation by political entrepreneurs. Common among the reasons why youth did not register and vote were lack of National Identification cards, lack of knowledge of the Zimbabwean political terrain, lack of motivation, failure to understand the benefit of voting and youths not being interested in general and also the political dynamics of the country among others.

## **What are the key Issues for youth in electoral processes?**

- **Motivation and Value**

Young people in Zimbabwe always associate politics with violence and this factor keeps them away from the process, the perception largely built from the previous history. The elections in Zimbabwe are usually associated with violence from both political formations, but mainly by the Ruling Party ZANU-PF. In that regard, young people are not motivated to participate due to an array of factors that include: the complex registration process, lack of information on candidates who satisfy and appeal to their interests, failure to attach the value of elections to their well being among others. Given this scenario, young people attach less value to the electoral processes as witnessed in the previous elections.

- **Voter Education**

Voter education is a critical component to the youth; education that is linked to the whole economic circle needs to be prioritized in order to attract a number of young people to the electoral field. Targeted voter education to young people has been at minimum level in the previous elections. There has been limited key message from young people and a vacuum in terms of young people taking the lead in motivating their fellows to participate in elections. Usually, messages were created by older people or project personnel without the understanding of key needs of the youth and not translating well or appealing to the youth. Given the introduction of the new voter registration system (Bio Metric Registration) a lot of effort should be exerted to attract youth to vote, also linking the voting pattern to their needs and rights.

- **Youth as Candidates**

The road to 2018 harmonized elections has witnessed a lot of interest by young people not only to be supporters as voters, but also taking charge as candidates. The rise of Youth CSOs, Social Movements and Youth Advocates for the past two years has seen an interesting phenomenon in the field of politics. The political draft of Zimbabwe has been largely dominated by the old and tired politicians whose tactics has contributed to the current economic shamble. Apart from the global call that has samently made it clear that youth are not only beneficiaries of the national cake, but also leaders and stakeholders- the older generation seems to be ignoring the call of young people being Not Too Young To Run. There is a general call to support a certain percentage of young people to take key leadership positions in 2018 harmonized elections. Given their demographic, youth can be a catalyst in the much needed change in Zimbabwe.

- **Restrictive Political Environment**

As noted in the various CSO Enabling Environment Reports for Zimbabwe (NAYO, 2015 and NSAA, 2016) CSOs are not operating in a fully conducive political and socio-economic environment which has further limited citizen agency as government is not keen to institute key constitutional reforms. With the introduction of Biometric Voter Registration, the youth need to be fully educated so that the process will not be used for intimidation and creation of fear.

According to ZESN, “One of the lessons learnt in 2013 is that a significant number of potential voters were not registered due to insufficient information on voter registration procedures and requirements, inadequate funding, lack of adequate personnel and the slow processing of registration queues in some areas such as Harare.”

Given the above citation by ZESN, young people are not very patient to wait in long queues or make effort to find an affidavit as proof of residence to be able to register and vote. It is however, clear that the current legislation (The Electoral Act) has a lot of loop holes that hinders youth participation, these include; the much touted proof of residence, de-link to the national constitution, lack of clear engagement by Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) with youth and Youth CSOs, it has been cited that ZEC’s unfriendliness to youth has grown over years given that youth are not considered key stakeholders in their key strategy. The CSOs strategy noted that, “The slow pace and piecemeal alignment of the country’s laws to the constitution threatens the entrenchment of democratic values that are enshrined in the constitution.” In that regard youth are not spared in the democratic deficiencies of our national laws. The general political environment for the elections should conform to SADC Guidelines on elections with all citizens, political parties, youth exercising their rights in a free and fair environment.

The Statutory Instrument 85 of 2017 (SI 85) of the Electoral (Voter Registration) Regulation 2017 has a list provided with a number of documents needed as proof of residence in Section 4 and those without residence are allowed to swear in the affidavit provided by a registration officer– a step towards the positive outcome, youth however are lobbying for a complete removal of the registration requirement as opposed to the relaxation of the proof requirement. The Leave No Youth Behind has engaged ZEC and submitted a petition before the finalization of the SI 85 OF 2017.

### **The Role of Youth CSOs in Zimbabwean Electoral Process**

According to the CSOs Election Strategy (2017-2019), “Baseline figures for youth turnout on Election Day are not available from ZEC but the Civic Voter and Education Strategy (CVE strategy) seeks to have an 80% of registered youths turn out to vote. Participation of youths in the electoral processes was limited and there were reports of disenfranchisement of young voters but there are no figures available to support this. Youth Organizations need data on registered youth voters. There were few youth candidates for the 2013 harmonized elections and again figures are not available. There are no figures available for the voter turnout by gender in the previous harmonized election but the aim of this strategy is to have 70% of the registered women voters turn out for the 2018 election.”

Given the above analysis Youth CSOs have a new chapter to write in 2018, taking the lead in combating the existing gaps such as lack of participation by young people, generate reports and

researches for youth participation in the entire electoral process, engage ZEC to provide quantified data on youth that is those from 18 to 35 years (eligible voters under youth classification according to the Constitution and Africa Youth Charter). Youth CSOs have not been taking a leading role in the past elections due to the closed space scenario, lack of directed resources to engage their target group among other. In 2018 elections youth have a greater role to Educate, to be candidates and mobilize their fellow youth to register and vote and later demand accountability from the leaders.

- **An Analysis of the current campaigns by Youth CSOs towards 2018 elections**

The young people have braved themselves and taken the space they have been limited to occupy, since 2016 a lot of youth initiatives have been mooted by young people and being led by young people themselves (15-35years). This has been a clear message on how young people are now determined to define their present and future as given by the national constitution. An interesting phenomenon is how these campaigns have already shown the positive signs and gestures towards a robust participation of youth in 2018 elections.

These are some campaigns by young people towards 2018 elections: Leave No Youth Behind 2018, She Votes 2018, I Vote 2018, Ballot Buddies, Young Voters Platform, Coalition of Young Voters, Swag My Vote, Not Too Young to Run 2018, Be the Change, Yes Youth Can among others, this shows how youth are serious to turn the tides of time- with no resources young people are running these campaigns, a key motivation to change.

- **A case analysis of the Leave No Youth Behind 2018**

### **Strategy**

The #LeaveNoYouthBehind2018 Campaign provides a strong opportunity for youths to reclaim their space within democracy in Zimbabwe beyond the electoral process come 2018 as it seeks to empower youth to take the lead in electoral processes. It seeks to bring an end to youth apathy in elections by mobilizing 2 million plus youth voters (200 000) per each province in Rural, Peri-urban, and Urban areas through peer to peer approaches – youth led mobilization strategy with structures at provincial and district level have been set up and will empower youths to stand as informed electorate and political party candidates in 2018's election. Non-partisan, peace, participation, youth primacy and non-violence are key principles informing the campaign which is based on **FIVE key Pillars of: Go Mobilize! Go Educate! Go Register! Go Vote! And Go Demand!** The campaign has Provincial Coordinators in all ten provinces of Zimbabwe, Youth Conveners in the districts and Youth Advocates at ward level. The campaign is coordinated by NAYO and advised by NANGO Youth Sector.

### **The campaign is targeting primarily:**

- First time voters – those born between 1995 and 2000;

- Apathetic youth – those of voting age but not registered and participating in electoral processes; and
- Youth candidates – those standing as political party candidates for election.

**Three key Priority Areas for the campaign (Activities) will be used to influence the pre-Election; Election Day and post-Election and these are:**

- 1. Civic participation and education**
- 2. Sustained Dialogue and Policy influencing**
- 3. Community Cohesion**

The campaign integrates peace through the **Peace Pledge**. The **Youth Charter** seeks to specify the expectations of youth from the candidates they will vote for, the Charter is a measure and guide which will empower youth to know the right candidates with their interests at heart.

### **Comparative Analysis in Africa–youth role in elections**

It is being reported that 51 percent of registered voters are youth in Kenya; the same can be cited in other Africa countries with high participation such as Gambia, Senegal, Rwanda, and Zambia. The role of Youth Umbrella bodies for example in Zambia – The Zambia Youth Network, and in Uganda the Uganda Youth Network (UYONET) has been to craft successful campaigns to mobilize and educate young people. Zimbabwe youth CSOs have vastly learnt from some of these countries through the youth exchange programs- which should be used as a motivating measure towards 2018 elections.

### **Key Points to increase youth participation in electoral processes**

- Youth friendly messaging that resonates with youth demands
- Comprehensive Voter Education and material specific for youth
- Relaxing or removal of Proof of Residence requirement
- Youth as candidates in elections
- ZEC’s friendliness taking Youth CSOs as major stakeholders
- Political Parties have a quarter system for youth
- Youth as observers in election to protect the vote

**References:**

CSO Election Strategy-ZESN (2017-2019)

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