



**Apathy, Fatigue, or
Boycott?
An Analysis of the 2005
Zimbabwe Senate Elections**

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Introduction

In most countries, elections attract enormous public attention. This is not surprising, as these political exercises constitute the heart of the democratic order. The Senate elections in Zimbabwe held on 26 November 2005, did not have the same electrifying significance as the previous elections. Morgan Tsvangirayi the opposition MDC leader referred to them as a ‘non event’. Many, including the United States’ Department of State, dismissed them as a “non-event” or a “political farce”. Significantly, these elections speak volumes, despite the mere 19.48% turnout that proved to be the lowest in the history of the country since 1980. There is still controversy as to whether the low turnout resulted from people heeding Morgan Tsvangirayi’s call for a boycott; a denunciation of Robert Mugabe’s government and his proposed Senate, or complete voter cynicism and fatigue. It is important to analyze why the remaining 80% did not participate in the polls. This paper examines the meaning of elections and democracy in Zimbabwe and discusses whether apathy, fatigue or boycott can be used to explain the appalling voter turnout during the Senate elections. The paper also assesses the arguments for and against bicameralism in Zimbabwe. It concludes by examining the implications of the split in the opposition on opposition politics in the country and the overall struggle for a democratic dispensation.

The ZANU PF government has once more erred in calling for these elections given the general disagreement with the rules of the game, without a conducive democratic environment for the holding of democratic elections. The reintroduction of the Senate was never subjected to a public debate or a referendum in order to ascertain the views of the Zimbabwean population on the new body. Zimbabwe has held more than 20 elections since 2000. These include two parliamentary elections, 16 parliamentary by-elections, one constitutional referendum, one presidential election and several mayoral elections as well as other local authority elections (ZESN 2005).

The long awaited dream, however, of normalising the Zimbabwean political crisis and collapsing economy, remains unfulfilled. The recent elections could quite conceivably have reached the stage where Zimbabweans are suffering from electoral fatigue or burnout. The Senate elections were held under the same unremitting political economic conditions as the 2005 parliamentary elections with no evidence of genuine electoral reform. There is still no properly constituted Independent Electoral Commission; a flawed voters' roll; lack of a vibrant independent media; continued existence of repressive legislation, in particular the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) which restricts basic freedoms, and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), which curtails freedom of speech; acute food shortages and a collapsing economy.

Under these circumstances one wonders why Zimbabwe continues to hold elections. Elections are supposed to be important means of legitimising state authority both locally and internationally. However, when the citizens decide not to vote and use apathy as a rational choice this requires a rethinking of the meaning of elections and democracy in Zimbabwe.

Elections and Democracy in Zimbabwe

The attitudes of ordinary people towards democracy and electoral politics are important. What do elections mean for an ordinary Zimbabwean who did not have the opportunity to vote during times of segregation and brutal repression? The first elections that led to freedom and independence in 1980 were therefore the most exciting and popular with an overwhelming voter turnout of 97%. The promise of a new era and a hope of political, social and economic change for the majority highlighted these as landmark elections, important to most people.

Democratic rule is inconceivable without elections. In Zimbabwe, however, elections have been held regularly every five years but the political system has degenerated dangerously into authoritarianism each time there have been opposition challenges to ZANU PF legitimacy. The essential function served by elections under liberal democracy is to get elites elected into power. Elections are part and parcel of the Schumpeterian definition of procedural democracy. "Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the man who are to rule them. (Schumpeter 1950:270). This is a procedural definition of democracy which is rather limited.

Elections are regarded as the hallmark of democracy by providing the citizens with the possibility of choice as to who should govern them. Most of the literature on elections refers to a democratic setting where all relevant citizens are entitled to vote; maximum political participation of the citizens; competition among political parties and a host of civil and political liberties. (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989, Dahl 1991) These norms and expectations define an ideal competitive democratic electoral process, which does not exist in Zimbabwe.

Much emphasis has been placed on the procedural, regulatory and organisation of elections in Zimbabwe. Yet for most people, elections mean very little as they do not influence anything, neither do they alleviate their suffering. Mattes and Bratton, in their survey of public opinion in Southern Africa state that “Zimbabweans feel especially unable to influence the political system and are the least likely of all southern Africans to feel they can improve things through voting and elections (Mattes and Bratton 2000:6). Since the Unity Accord between ZANU PF and ZAPU, which ushered in a one party state era, elections have become state regulated and non-competitive events where the electorate find themselves without choice.

Voting is an absolute necessity yet, in Zimbabwe’s case, it has become manifestly insufficient as a means of empowering citizens in controlling the ruling elite. This is well articulated by Adejumobi (2000: 60) “elections have become a devalued element and a fading shadow of the democratic process”. The Zimbabwean government has ignored constitutional limits and deprived people of basic human rights and freedoms. Harsh media laws have caused three daily papers to close and the harassment of foreign and local journalists continues. With such an environment, the Senate elections proved to be just another formality allowing the same elites access to power and having nothing to do with democratisation.

Background to Zimbabwe’s Bicameral Parliament

Bicameralism is not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe. At independence in 1980, the Lancaster House Constitution provided for a bicameral parliamentary system based on the Westminster Model. The House of Assembly consisted of 100 seats, with 80 members elected on the common roll and the 20 seats were reserved for the whites. Senate had 40 members elected by three electoral colleges. An Electoral College

comprising 80 black Members of Parliament elected 14 senators and a further 10 white senators were elected by the 20 white Members of Parliament. Ten were chiefs elected by the Council of Chiefs; the remaining 6 were appointed by the State President acting on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. To safeguard the interests of whites in Parliament, Section 52 (5) of the Lancaster House Constitution entrenched the racial composition of both the Senate and the House of Assembly for the first seven years of independence. However with the changes made to the Constitution in 1987, the reserved 20 white seats were abolished. The ceremonial presidency gave way to an Executive President under Constitutional amendment Act no 7 of 1987. In November 1989, the Senate was abolished under Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment No. 9, bringing into effect in 1990 a 150 member single chamber. 120 Members of Parliament were elected according to the first-past-the-post electoral system and 30 were elected indirectly, of which the President appointed 12.

In his position paper defending the new proposed Senate, the Clerk of Parliament, Austin Zvoma has argued that the system used to elect the old Senate was not founded on democratic principles as the electoral system was manipulated to protect the minority white interest. He argues that the newly introduced Senate is based on democratic principles in that senators will be elected by universal suffrage in a first-past-the-post system. The racial overtones, which characterised the pre-1990 Senate, are absent.¹ On the contrary, upper houses are regarded as complementary dimensions to the representation of different interests and opinions, thereby enhancing the

¹ Austin Zvoma is Clerk of Parliament in Zimbabwe and his paper was written to defend the move from unicameralism to bicameralism. “ The Structure, Functions of a bicameral Parliament “ Global Analysis Zimbabwe, <http://www.glob.co.zw/home>

democratic quality of that representation. It is possible that Zvoma did not care about the representation of white interests or any other ethnic interests for that matter.

Zvoma further argues that the main disadvantage of the pre-1990 bicameral Parliament was the electoral system as it was undemocratic and caused racial distortions in the composition of Parliament and the members were not directly elected. This raised questions regarding their ability to effectively represent the citizens. The reason for the removal of the Senate was that the government felt that the existence of two Houses of Parliament would unnecessarily slow down the law review process. The government had inherited a host of colonial legislation which needed speedy review. The bicameral system was abolished as a way of expediting the legislative process and law reform.

The government fast-tracked the introduction of the Senate, by passing Constitutional Amendment No. 17 of 2005. Unlike the previous 40 member Senate, the new one consists of 66 senators. The law states that they must all be 40 years and over to ensure that it comprises only mature members with adequate experience. The Act goes on to stipulate that fifty senators must be elected directly; 5 elected from each of the 10 provinces with 2 serving as the President and the Deputy President of the Council of Chiefs respectively. Eight chiefs were to be elected, representing each of the provinces except the metropolitan provinces of Harare and Bulawayo. The remaining 6 were to be appointed by the President.²

Ironically, whilst the populace seemed to have rejected the whole idea of Senate by not casting their votes, the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) (a mother body of civic organisations

which has lobbied for constitutional reform since 1999) in their draft constitution had proposed a two-chamber Parliament. They had proposed that interest groups be represented in Senate ranging from women, the youth, disabled, trade unions, ex-combatants farmers and businesses. These representatives were to be elected by the National Assembly from a short list submitted by members of the public.³

The government's draft constitutional document, drawn up in 2000 by the government led Constitutional Commission had also made provision for a Senate. This was despite opposition from the civic organisations who regarded the Senate as window dressing as it had no clear powers to provide checks against the President. Even ZESN, a strong advocate of electoral reform, was in favour of a Senate, but one elected on the basis of proportional representation with chiefs and persons elected by the House of Assembly to represent special interest groups. ZESN had comprehensive proposals on a new Senate and proposed 80 senators. Nevertheless 80 senators would be too many for a country as small as Zimbabwe which does not even have a federal government.

The composition of the proposed Senate was such that 5 senators were to be elected from each of the 10 provinces under a system of proportional representation. The other 10 senators were to be chiefs. The remaining 20 persons were to be nominated by a committee of the House of Assembly from names submitted by persons in civic society (ZESN July, 2005). As usual, the ZANU PF government went ahead with Constitutional Amendment, No. 17 without putting the matter to public debate and ascertaining views on the Senate issue. The government however, made little effort in educating

² Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) Analysis of Senatorial Constituencies November 2005, page 2.

³ NCA Draft summary of the main features of the draft constitution NCA Document http://www.nca.org.zw/fdraft/fdraft_summ.htm

the populace of the democratic value of the Senate. This was demonstrated by the lack of a comprehensive voter education exercise and passive media coverage of the campaign and the elections.

Rationale for the Reintroduction of the Senate

Why did the ZANU PF government reintroduce a second chamber after they so readily disposed of it in 1990 on the basis that two chambers slowed down law reform? The government argues that by 2005 the government realised that the legal and political environment was such that the situation was right to introduce a second chamber. The basis for this realisation is not publicly known. But according to Zvoma, the government had during the unicameral era, carried out extensive law reform through the repeal of colonial legislation and the enactment of new laws, which supported the values of the government. This could be disputed as both the government and civil society organisations embarked on two processes of constitutional reform from 1999-2000. These led to a "NO" vote in the constitutional referendum and the government constitutional document was rejected by the populace. As far as a number of civil society organisations are concerned, constitutional reform is still on the agenda and is at the core of the governance crisis in Zimbabwe.

The second reason for the reintroduction of the bicameral system, with senators directly elected by citizens, was seen as a way of further enhancing the reform of the parliamentary process (*The Herald* 17 November 2005). Whilst these reasons might seem credible on the part of government, the most important question for the government to have considered was whether the populace thought the time was ripe for the reintroduction of a Senate. A referendum on the reintroduction of the Senate would have been more appropriate. In all probability, the Zimbabwean government is now wary of the

referendum idea as the populace would have viewed it as another opportunity to decide on the legitimacy of the ZANU PF government, as they did with the 2000 Constitutional Referendum. However, a strong message was clearly sent to the government that Senate was not an important issue as 80% of the populace stayed away from the polls.

The introduction of a second chamber in Zimbabwe was controversial from the beginning as it was introduced under Constitutional Amendment No. 17 of 2005 which reintroduced a bicameral parliamentary system. The people of Zimbabwe have long been struggling for a review and reform of the Constitution and not piecemeal constitutional changes that appear to further entrench the ZANU PF government. However a second chamber, which has the power to review, decline or accept any legislation, proposed by the first chamber is believed to be able to balance political power. It would also formally represent diverse constituencies, regional, class and ethnic. The ZANU PF government argues, "apart from providing checks and balances, the two houses also serve as a review mechanism for each others' actions and decisions" (*The Herald* 17 November 2005).

The introduction of a second house provides an additional opportunity of overseeing the executive. Abrupt change of law is rendered difficult thereby minimising the chances for social upheavals caused by the introduction of new policies to a public that is ill prepared for the change. The government argued that errors made by one house can be identified and be rectified in the other. Furthermore, the passing of legislation from one house to the other allows issues to be argued to a fuller extent and a wider range of relevant opinions to be expressed (Wiese, 2003: 2). Nevertheless senates are essentially contested institutions (Meny and Knapp 1993). Their very existence is a matter of dispute. Smaller polities tend to have unicameral

legislatures and the larger countries like the USA, Canada and Australia with federal polities tend to have both a Senate and House of Representatives. In Africa, the Westminster model of government led to the introduction of bicameralism in some countries.

Those who support bicameralism argue that two chambers enhance the representation of sub-national governments. It is also believed to be a guarantor of stability in the transition to democracy (Wiese, 2003).

Furthermore, the second chamber acts to prevent the excessive concentration of power in the hands of a single institutional actor and compensates for the apparent deficiencies elsewhere in the system. In theory second chambers do this by checking the power of an ascendant chamber whilst providing the legislature as a whole with an additional tier or extra dimension to offset the power of the executive. This would not work where the executive is already powerful.

The other justification for bicameralism originates theoretically from JS Mill who believed that it would prevent the tyranny of the majority by checking the excesses of the more popular chamber. In the case of Zimbabwe, if the goal is to improve the quality of legislation and achieve increased representation then the inclusion of a second chamber is an appropriate means to achieve these ends, but the populace needed to discuss its composition. Given the political realities in Zimbabwe however, the electoral system will ensure the dominance of the ruling party in both chambers thus negating the usefulness of the second chamber.

A Critique of Bicameralism

Those who oppose the second chamber in Zimbabwe do so because of the political and economic context. Those in opposition are not interested in any of the new laws or institutions created by

the ZANU PF government as they believe that the government is illegitimate. The opposition does not have confidence in the electoral system, which they believe has been covertly corrupted by the ZANU PF government.

Furthermore, as the corrupt electoral system will ensure the dominance of ZANU PF in both houses, the Senate is seen as a convenient mechanism for distributing consolation prizes for political failure and appeasing politicians ejected from more active political office. Those in the opposition in Zimbabwe argue that Senate is intended to satisfy ZANU PF's patronage needs. Finally for a country like Zimbabwe that has been reeling under an economic crisis since 2000 with an inflation of 586% and unemployment at 70%, a second chamber is costly and serves no constructive purpose. Most people believe that Zimbabwe cannot not afford the luxury of a "useless" Senate. These sentiments are clearly expressed by one of the clergyman in Zimbabwe:

Can we afford to have such luxuries at this dire moment? More to the point- can our economy afford these expenses and sustain development? In the first place do we need a Senate and what is its role and relevance in our present situation?⁴

The second chamber, whether it was to be popularly elected or by presidential appointment is not going to bring bread and butter to poverty-stricken Zimbabweans. Generally those who oppose bicameralism argue that a second chamber would only give rise to endless complications. One of the complications would be a constant clash of authority and the possible failure in maintaining the equilibrium of the two houses in terms of power (Wiese, 2003:5). It is argued that the one house would always emerge superior regardless of whatever legal provisions might be in place. The

⁴ Rev Fr Norbert T Fokisa O. Carm of St Killians' Mission in Rusape, Zimbabwe. The Standard 13 November 2005.

inferior house might refuse to be eclipsed and it might seek to enhance its power through petty annoyance. This might afflict the Senate in Zimbabwe as it is regarded as not legitimate by the populace, rather as an old people's home established to appease the ZANU PF geriatrics. In general, it is argued that bicameral legislatures are generally slower than unicameral legislatures, which can be a real disadvantage. The argument is that the existence of two chambers each sharing in legislation will involve pointless delays in the process. This is due to the duplication of paperwork as well as deadlocks resulting from mutual jealousies and conflict of authority (Wiese, 2003:5)

Senate Elections and the Crisis of Electoralism

Why should Zimbabwe continue to hold elections when they hardly fulfil the people's basic expectations of freedom of choice, movement and association? Multiparty elections are not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe but they have been held under undemocratic circumstances resulting in election outcomes that have not led to the consolidation of democracy. The crisis of electoralism is demonstrated by the populace's lack of confidence in their institutions of governance. Most of the institutions are manipulated to ensure support for the incumbents. Electoral contests are understood to maintain the ZANU PF government in power

The greatest hindrance to the consolidation of democracy is that the electorate has never been offered a political choice as the opposition is harassed and persecuted. The opposition has never been accepted as part of the democratic process. There is a well established pattern of ruling party violence and intimidation and the characterisation of opposition parties as illegitimate since 1980 (Kriger, 2005:1) Krieger argues that whilst more public attention was paid to the violence and intimidation of the 2000 elections, a

study of all the elections held since 1980 expose startling similarities in the ruling party's discourse and coercive mechanisms. Opponents were cast as reactionary enemies of the state and mere puppets of the whites in the 1985 1990, 1995 and the year 2000 and the 2002 presidential elections. The Senate elections however, were quite peaceful as there were no serious contenders and they clearly revealed the electorate's lack of interest. It is unlikely that elections or even their aftermath can be peaceful in Zimbabwe unless ZANU PF is assured of a clear win. The lack of interest in the Senate elections and cynicism that they were not going to bring any positive results demonstrates the crisis of electoralism in Zimbabwe.

Political Economic Environment Leading to the Senate Elections

2005 was election year for Zimbabwe as two major elections were held, that is the March parliamentary elections and the uneventful November Senate elections, in which ZANU PF has emerged as the outright victor. The March polls gave ZANU PF a two-thirds majority as it won 78 of the 120 elected seats. This allowed it to change the Constitution as it saw fit. With this resounding majority there was no compulsion for the ZANU PF government to accelerate any talks with the opposition as they gained only 41 seats and lost the 16 seats gained in the 2000 elections. In the wake of what the MDC alleges to be a stolen election, it was left dumbfounded and wondering whether to pursue a much more confrontational approach. However, from the outset, some analysts had already predicted the possible split or further weakening of the MDC, as Landsberg had predicted:

...It remains weak on structure, weak on leadership, and above all weak on strategy. These deficiencies suggest that the MDC could be defeated by ZANU PF at the polls. This means that the prospect of a disintegration of the MDC as a

political party should not be ruled out. A defeat for the MDC in next year's parliamentary election could spell the beginning of the end for this once hopeful party (Landsberg, 2004:8).

Just as the populace was settling down after the March polls, the ZANU PF launched a devastating assault on its unsuspecting impoverished citizens by embarking on a massive urban clean-up exercise code named "Operation Murambatsvina" or Operation Restore Order (ISS Report September 2005). It was a crackdown on unlicensed street markets and traders to rid the capital of illegal structures, businesses and criminal activities. The clean-up operation started on 19 May 2005 and by 9 July launched a new operation codenamed *Garikayi* or "Stay Well".

Whatever the reasons by the government had for the clean-up exercise, the opposition MDC accused the ZANU PF government of taking revenge on its urban supporters and trying to provoke conditions that would justify a state of emergency. The MDC further argued that the clean-up exercise was a medium to long term strategy hatched in response to the March elections and designed to ensure that a maximum possible number of people move from urban areas to rural areas and thus would be easier to control (Crisis Group Africa Report No 93 June, 2005).

Although an estimated 2.5 million people were affected by this exercise, the impact of this on the senatorial elections is not clear. Whether these people, if registered, would have voted in these elections or not, is difficult to ascertain. The operation exercise proved that though that in spite of the deep anger at the crackdown towards the government, there was no mobilisation or protest to challenge this state of affairs. The MDC did very little in response. The ZANU PF government was in control of a population, once again browbeaten into submission.

Whilst the populace was recovering from operation Murambatsvina, the Zimbabwean Parliament adopted Constitutional Amendment No. 17 on 30 August 2005. This established the Senate, among other issues. In addition, the same Act prevents court challenges to government seizures of land as part of the land reform programme. It also allows authorities to withdraw passports from individuals suspected of travelling outside the country to conduct terrorist activities. The civics as usual voiced their disapproval at the piecemeal changes to the Constitution rather than its complete overhaul. As usual, they were completely ignored.

However as soon as the election date for the Senate elections was set, bickering in the MDC drew most people's attention. Similar to the March poll, the MDC was again faced with the predicament of whether to participate in or boycott the elections. The party was divided into two confrontational camps along ethnic lines. The Shona faction supported the Party's president Morgan Tsvangirayi who called for a boycott and regarded the Senate elections as hopeless at a time when the country was facing such dire economic hardships. The Ndebele faction, led by secretary general Welshman Ncube, insisted that the party must participate in the elections and fielded 26 candidates.

As the arguing continued within the MDC, it gave the ZANU PF more ammunition with which to attack the MDC so the matter of whether to participate or not, was put to a vote. The MDC national executive council voted narrowly, thirty-three to thirty one in favour of taking part in the elections. Tsvangirayi flexed his muscles and overruled this decision and maintained that the party was to boycott the elections. The pro-Senate group went ahead and participated in the elections. It was more the name calling and almost the feast fighting in the MDC which caught the people's attention rather than the upcoming Senate elections.

The media had a field day with the MDC and its internal wrangles. The Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ) reported that of the 76 campaign reports by the national broadcaster 67 or 88% were on ZANU PF while 7 or 9% were on the MDC. The MMPZ further reported that the excessive coverage of ZANU PF did not amount to critical examination of the party policies and the role of Senate but just levelled attacks on the MDC and Britain (MMPZ Media Weekly Update, November 21-27 2005). Tsvangirayi's was called by names such as an "undemocratic, corrupt and power hungry dung beetle" because of his calls for a boycott (MMPZ, 2005).

Senatorial Delimitation

Allegations of gerrymandering are levelled against the Delimitation Commission every election year, a testimony of the lack of confidence in the management of the electoral process. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, allegations that electoral boundaries were manipulated to give an advantage to the ruling party were rife. It is not surprising the boundary manipulations were suspected for the Senate elections as the same December 2004 delimitation report was used. The 120 existing constituencies used for the March 2005 elections were collapsed to make 50 senatorial constituencies. ZESN submits that the basis for delineating the 50 constituencies remains a mystery (ZESN, 2005). ZESN notes that in some provinces the number of Senate seats is almost equal to the provinces House of Assembly seats, especially in Matabeleland. According to ZESN it also appears as if the government left the constituencies captured by ZANU PF in the March 2005 polls intact. This has left some constituencies with uneven populations with a variation of 39 718 to 180 39 registered voters (ZESN Analysis of Senatorial Elections November 2005).

It is worth noting however, that in the United States there are only two senators for each state irrespective of size and

population. Alaska with its more than 400 000 inhabitants has the same number of elected senators as California with over 24 million citizens so as to maintain strict equality between all the members of the federal state and to prevent domination by the most highly populated states. (Meny and Knapp, 1993:190). Maybe cash-strapped Zimbabwe should have designated less numbers of senators per province rather than the maximum of five.

Voter Fatigue and Apathy in the Senate Elections

A few days before the Senate elections analysts had already predicted high levels of voter apathy as very little political activity was observed. In politics, apathy denotes the deliberate withdrawal of citizen participation in an electoral process. Furthermore, voter fatigue is extreme exhaustion experienced by voters when they are required to vote too often without influencing any particular political outcome. Voter apathy causes notoriously low voter turnout rates and could be used as a protest vote. A protest vote could have occurred for a number of reasons in the Zimbabwean Senate elections. Firstly voters were expressing dissatisfaction with government and the electoral process by refusing to vote because they knew that the outcome would be preordained. They knew that ZANU PF would be the overwhelming winner.

Secondly voters were clearly not interested in the Senate issue as clearly demonstrated by their lack of enthusiasm. Thirdly, voters felt that as usual, their vote would not count since there is a strong belief in Zimbabwe that elections are rigged and only serve to reproduce ZANU PF hegemony. Fourthly, voters just felt that this new body called the Senate would not bring about any positive change to their daily struggles for survival and a better socio-economic condition for themselves and their families.

This was clearly articulated by a voter in Matebeleland South “I have heard about the election but I do not know when it is..... I personally have little interest I am tired of voting and things remain the same, with life getting tougher” (*Irin News* 23 November 2005). Fifthly, there was very little voter education and ZANU PF did not aggressively campaign as it normally does in other elections. The pro-Senate MDC rebels were hampered from their campaign by Morgan Tsvangirayi’s call for a national boycott of the Senate elections.

Was the Call for a Boycott a Success?

It is clear that voters boycotted the polls preferring instead to carry on with their daily struggles to make ends meet. Furthermore, just as the Zimbabweans rejected the constitutional referendum in 2000 they also demonstrated that they did not approve of the Senate, which was introduced by a controversial amendment to the Constitution. In Zimbabwe, calls for a boycott have never stopped the ruling party from going ahead with elections. The effectiveness of a boycott in Zimbabwe is never really quite clear. In the 1995 parliamentary elections, about five opposition parties boycotted the elections in protest at the uneven political playing field that favoured the ruling party while denying all other parties even a slight chance of winning the elections (Makumbe, 2000:92). However, all the parties that boycotted the elections thereafter completely disappeared from the political landscape. The same argument concerning the lack of a level playing field led the MDC to consider boycotting the March 2005 elections, an action that is considered to have affected the MDC’s preparedness for the polls and the active participation of their supporters. For the Senate elections, the MDC leader went on a campaign for a boycott. He called on the people to prepare to take to the streets and challenge President Robert Mugabe. Street protests are no longer an

attractive option for most Zimbabweans as fatigue and the fear of the wrath of the ZANU PF government make it an extremely risky option. The resolution by the 26 rebels in the MDC to continue with the elections partially weakened Tsvangirayi’s call for a boycott. Nevertheless, the call for the boycott also worked against the 26 MDC rebels who, except for the 7 senators who won seats, lost to the ruling party. If the MDC had been united over the boycott, it would have been more successful and emerged from the Senate elections as much stronger. However Tsvangirayi’s call for a boycott was successful but not the only contributory factor, as people in the MDC strongholds refrained from voting even when there was an MDC candidate. This was clearly illustrated in Harare where the MDC candidates erroneously thought they would win a seat.

The Election and Its Outcome

The Senate elections were totally unsuccessful as illustrated by the low voter turnout of 19.48% and the 19 uncontested seats. Even the Chairperson of the Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries, Victor Tonchi had this to say whilst observing the elections “ I have observed a number of Elections in Zimbabwe but this time that enthusiasm is lacking, there is a very low voter turnout” (*Zimbabwe Standard*, 28 November 2005). The insignificance of the Senate elections is also demonstrated by the lack of enthusiasm evidenced by the local and international observers. ZESN observed that there were very few accredited regional and international observers although the Minister of Foreign Affairs had invited several groups and African countries to participate in observation. The Senate elections clearly show to what lengths the ZANU PF government is prepared to go in order to retain power. The Senate elections also provided the catalyst for the split in the opposition due to issues that were already simmering in its ranks. It also gave Zimbabweans the

opportunity to launch a quiet protest both against the idea of establishing a Senate and the government. However, according to ZESN the campaigning and political environment was peaceful. The COMESA Observer Team and the SADC Electoral Observer Mission (SEOM) both described the elections as free and fair.

The Senate Election Results by Province

Elected senators		
Province	ZANU PF	MDC
Bulawayo Province	0	5
Matabeleland North	3	2
Matabeleland South	5	0
Masvingo Province	5	0
Harare province	5	0
Mashonaland West	5	0
Mashonaland Central	5	0
Mashonaland East	5	0
Manicaland	5	0
Midlands	5	0
Total	43	7
Appointed by the President	6	
President & Deputy President of the Council of Chiefs	2	
Chiefs from the 8 provinces	8	
Total Number of seats	66	
Total votes cast	631 347	
Total Registered voters	3 239 574	
Percentage poll	19.48%	

(Figures adopted from ZESN Senate elections and Gutu North Parliamentary by election Report Advance Copy December 2005)

A total of 631 347 voters turned out to vote out of a total of 3 239 574 registered voters. The Senate elections were contested by a total of 92 candidates of whom 26 were female. Nine of them were elected uncontested whilst 11 won on Election Day. So the Senate can boast of bringing 18 women on board. The remaining 6 lost the election. ZANU PF won the 24 of the contested seats whilst 19 seats were uncontested bringing their total number of seats to 43 ZESN contends that there was widespread celebration by ZANU PF at the 19 uncontested seats. The results also show a clear ethnic factor on the part of the MDC as they won in Matabeleland where the rebel group originates. In Harare, where MDC candidates were fielded in what is normally an MDC stronghold, they lost, showing that the Shona faction heeded the call for a boycott. The 7 seats won by the opposition further demonstrate the lack of popularity of the pro-Senate faction.

Implications on the Opposition

Political parties are important for the proper functioning of a democratic system; the disintegration or mere weakening of opposition parties should be viewed with trepidation. It is in the presence of a strong and viable opposition party in which hopes for a democratic future in Zimbabwe reside. The MDC's rise to prominence on the back of the civic movement had placed it in a strong position to challenge ZANU PF hegemony but that opportunity was lost in 2000. It would be difficult now for the opposition movement to regain that initiative and ride on the strength of popular protest as even the people are tired. They had put their hopes on the MDC but now seem to realise that the ZANU PF government cannot be dislodged through a skewed electoral process.

The Senate elections were also notable for the near disintegration of the MDC. The shattering split over whether or not

to participate in the elections sounded the death knell of the opposition. A formal split between the Ndebele and Shona Faction of the MDC would even further weaken the party. However, the Senate elections and the dispute whether to participate or not is not solely responsible for the MDC split. The discussion over the fate of the opposition began soon after its defeat in the March 2005 polls. The election losses had triggered the debate in the country about the MDC's future with certain analysts predicting a third force to lead the country forward. The MDC as a movement had already been struggling to maintain unity along ideological, leadership, ethnic and generational lines. There had been previous calls for Tsvangirayi to step down (Crisis Group Africa Report 7 June, 2005). It is now not clear whether the MDC will be able to revitalise itself and maintain its important position as the only opposition in Zimbabwe. The Ndebele Faction cannot survive on their own as a narrow ethnic political party. As it is, their participating in the Senate elections has made them very unpopular in the opposition wing. The support for a boycott was also endorsed by other civic society organisations such as the ZCTU and the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) Whilst Tsvangirayi's position has been strengthened by the partial success of the call for a boycott, it is not clear whether he can make political capital out of this and be able to mobilise the lethargic opposition supporters. Utmost skill is now necessary to renew the party and renew its structures and relationship with the civics. The chances are that a new party might arise. There are reports of serious factionalism in ZANU PF itself with some party officials being linked to the formation of the United People's Movement (UPM) led by the former Information Minister, Jonathan Moyo (*Financial Gazette*, 12 January 2006) A split in ZANU PF might be the only way to form a strong opposition which can link up with Tsvangirayi's MDC faction. As in all African countries, the growth of

a strong opposition in Zimbabwe remains a serious problem. All these factors leave the whole democratisation process in an untenable position.

Implications on the Struggle for Democratisation

Democracy cannot be measured by the number of elections held by a country but how deeply the democratic principles, basic rights and freedoms are ingrained in the population. The struggle for democratisation in Zimbabwe continues but it is no longer clear as to who is leading the struggle. ZANU PF's unchallenged rule continues on the basis of their grip on Zimbabwean electoral politics, their monopoly of state resources, a legal framework stacked against dissent and the general ineffectiveness and fragmentation of the opposition. However, in as much as the MDC should be worried about its future as a party, the ZANU PF government should think seriously about the low voter turnout as it is a key indicator of democratic responsiveness. As the no vote in the constitutional referendum shook the ZANU PF, so the low voter turnout should send a loud message to the ZANU PF government that the people are absolutely fed up, both with Mugabe and Tsvangirayi as neither have the capacity to change their livelihood. ZANU PF can bask in the imagined glory of the opposition's lack of organisational capacity but only at its own peril and to the detriment of democracy in the country. The implications of an alienated society are quite unimaginable.

Conclusion

The most striking feature of the Senate elections was the record low voter turnout illustrating the level of fatigue felt by Zimbabweans. It also begs the question as to whether the Senate was legitimately elected. The 19 unopposed senators should find their position untenable as being uncontested hardly signifies popular support. The deep

economic crisis has left most Zimbabweans scrounging for a living and Tsvangirayi's call for a boycott might have been in their favour. Furthermore general confusion over the purpose of the new Senate has left a number of Zimbabweans wondering whether bicameralism will be an answer to the political ills of the country. A second chamber will hardly improve the democratic stakes of the country.

Basically, the question of whose purpose Senate was intended to serve was never answered. Whilst the low voter turnout might be indicative of a rebuff to Mugabe or that people heeded Tsvangirayi's call for a boycott, the truth of the matter is that essentially Zimbabweans have had enough of an undemocratic political system and are tired of participating in undemocratic political processes that do not seem to yield any positive results. For these reasons, the "opting out option" seems to have played a major role in the elections. The fact remains however, that it is the Zimbabweans themselves who must summon the willpower to extricate themselves from this political quagmire. As long as the *status quo* is retained, the ball remains firmly in the court of ZANU PF.

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