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LIMITATIONS OF BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY AS AN EFFECTIVE MECHANISM OF EXPRESSING THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE

The recent outcome of the elections in Zimbabwe exposes the limitations of bourgeois democracy as an effective mechanism of expressing the will of the people. Since attaining independence from British colonial rule in April 1980, the country has been holding regular elections every five years as per its Constitution, but the people of Zimbabwe have little to show for their right to vote.



The Zimbabwean economy has been on its knees for decades, forcing millions of the people to leave the country to seek better economic opportunities in other countries, including in South Africa and Britain. It must be a bitter pill to swallow for Zimbabweans who proudly defeated British colonial rule through their gallant chimurenga only to be forced to seek better economic prospects in the former colonial master country. Some blame the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy on economic sanctions imposed by the western countries led by Britain and the United States of America following a decision by the Mugabe administration to take

land from the white settlers and distribute it to indigenous Zimbabweans. Others blame the economic meltdown on mismanagement and corruption within the ruling party which had been winning elections by more than 80 percent.

While what triggered the collapse of the economy may be in dispute, what is undisputed is that millions of Zimbabweans have had to leave their country in search of better economic prospects elsewhere. When some were trekking back to Zimbabwe to vote, others remained in South Africa, arguing that their vote would not make a difference as elections would still produce a ZANU-PF victory.

Those who shunned the elections may feel vindicated. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) has declared incumbent President Emmerson Mnangagwa as the winner of the August 2023 elections.

Predictably, the main opposition party, the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) led by Nelson Chamisa has rejected the election results, arguing that they were rigged. While Chamisa can point logistical challenges such as the shortage of voting material in areas that his party has demonstrated popular support, by and large the elections were peaceful. Chamisa had openly stated before the voting that he could lose the elections if they were rigged. That was not a helpful statement. In other words, he would only accept the results of the elections if he was declared a winner.

On the other hand, Mnangagwa welcomed the results of the elections which he described as peaceful, free and fair.

Mnangagwa has a serious challenge. The SADC observer mission raised serious concerns about the elections. While it may be easy to dismiss the European Union observers or other western observers, it may not be as easy to dismiss SADC. The posture that the regional body would take on the Zimbabwe elections would indicate whether the ZANU-PF government enjoys the support of their neighbours or if it would be isolated.

Although the media did not report large scale acts of violence or intimidation, the election process was heavily in favour of the ruling ZANU-PF. The opposition did not have access to the State media and in some instances, they were prevented from campaigning freely.



Voting in Zimbabwe has become a ritual that occurs every five years. The process does not lead to any real political and economic change. In an ideal democracy, there should be a connection between the votes that the electorate gives to a party in power and its performance in office. In other words, if the economy is performing well, creating more jobs, reducing poverty and delivering better social services such as health and education, the voters can reward the incumbent party with their votes. But not in Zimbabwe. The country has been experiencing record unemployment, hyperinflation and worsening poverty that has forced millions of its people to leave the country. It is difficult to understand why ZANU-

PF would still win the elections despite its poor performance as a governing party. The popular narrative that ZANU-PF leaders and active supporters peddle is that ZANU-PF is the party that delivered liberation from British colonial rule. It is the only party with struggle credentials. It is these credentials that make some of its leaders believe that they have a divine right to rule Zimbabwe. Opposition parties that dare challenge the ZANU-PF hegemony are dismissed as counter-revolutionaries funded by western powers.

But the truth is that the best way of keeping a ruling party in power should not be through intimidation, violence and an unfair electoral process but should be through delivering better quality of life for the majority of the people.

There are lessons for South Africa. There are some amongst us who peddle the false gospel of the ANC as the sole and authentic representative of the people of South Africa. They would want us to believe that they alone fought for freedom. They would deliberately downplay the role of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania in the anti-pass campaign led by the charismatic Mangaliso Sobukwe, which led to the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960. They would want to downplay the spark of June 16 1976 that ignited the revolution. They would never openly admit that the Soweto student uprising was a product of the Black Consciousness Movement. They would downplay that many leaders in government today, including President Cyril Ramaphosa and Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma cut their political teeth in SASO which was led by Bantu Biko.

Once the ruling party successfully projects any other political party as irrelevant and against the revolution, it deploys its cadres to create more myths about the fact that there is no alternative. It is quite common to hear a fully grown man or woman, who has a good education, uttering a ridiculous statement: "If we don't vote for the ANC, which party can we vote for?"

Many people who are unhappy with the performance of the ruling party tend to shun the electoral process. They believe that by not voting, they are punishing the ruling party. When people are disgruntled with the ruling party over its failure to deliver basic services such as water, electricity and roads, they stage violent protests and blockade roads. They burn tyres and prevent other people from going on with their business of going to work or school. In their anger, the protestors would loudly declare: we will not vote!

This is because for these people, voting means only voting for the ruling party. Political leaders should help educate voters of the potency of the vote. A vote is a powerful tool to effect real change in a democracy.

People who have lost faith in the electoral system can become a real danger to the democratic project. When people believe that their votes do not matter, they can be exploited by extremists who may want to launch an insurrection. The political stability that we have become so accustomed to may be history because of an outbreak of war. Wars create a fertile ground for foreign powers to exploit Afrikan countries and their resources. People of the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo know all too well how war has been used to create ideal conditions for the plundering of their minerals.

It is in the long-term interests of the political leadership of Zimbabwe to restore the declining faith in the electoral system of the country. People should have sense that their vote matters. As it is, there is an increasing feeling that voting is just a 5-yearly ritual designed by ZANU-PF to give semblance of legitimacy to the rule of ZANU-PF.

When Zimbabweans cross a crocodile infested Limpopo River to smuggle themselves into South Africa in search of better economic prospects, they are delivering a clear message to the politicians that the system has failed them. When thousands of Afrikans risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea on boats, with hundreds drowning, their acts of desperation are triggered by the failure of the social and political system in their countries.

The decay of revolutionary morality on our continent, including in Zimbabwe and South Africa, undermines the people's march to genuine social and economic justice. Afrikan leaders who are propelled by greed and insatiable appetite for self-enrichment play into the hands of the foreign forces that are bent on undermining Afrika's progress.

The failure of the political system in Zimbabwe as displayed by the poor handling of the elections and the failure of the leadership in that country to address deepening poverty, unemployment and hunger is not just a problem for the people of Zimbabwe. It promotes the anti-Black agenda that feeds into the racist narrative that Black people just cannot govern.



But what is the solution? In the short term, the solution lies in the empowerment of ordinary people to hold those in power accountable. The first step is to make those who are politically unconscious conscious. Ignorance is the biggest enemy of the people. Despotic regimes may be kept in power through force and violence, but the most ingredient element of their stay in power is the ignorance of the majority. A soldier or a police officer who is protecting a corrupt politician does not make the connection that the acts of the corrupt political leader deny his mother quality healthcare in public hospitals. It is common to see poorly-paid soldiers and police officers beating up people who are staging protests to demand better services and a low cost of living.

What is clear is that holding regular elections does not necessarily resolve the underlying economic challenges that lead to underdevelopment, poverty and hunger. If regular elections were a panacea for economic growth, millions of Zimbabweans would not be forced out of their country to seek better economic prospects elsewhere.



the civil unrest. Again Zimbabweans, like their counterparts from other Afrikan countries where there is no economic progress and social justice, will continue to wander across the globe seeking better economic prospects. Why? Because, like in many parts of the Afrikan continent, we lack visionary and ethical leaders in the mould of Thomas Sankara, Julius Nyerere and Sekou Toure.

The biggest problem of our continent is that we lack visionary and ethical leadership that acts in the best interest of the people.

Zimbabwe is a very rich country. It has many precious minerals and gas. It has some of the best arable land in the world. Contrast that with a small island country, Singapore. Singapore has nothing. They even import drinking water from Malaysia. But they have visionary leaders that have turned their country into a model State. The best professionals in Singapore work for the State. The State works like a well-oiled machine and delivers the best services from health to education. In fact, some of the Afrikan leaders go to Singapore when they seek medical attention.

After the recent elections in Zimbabwe, it is possible that the main opposition party which has already rejected the results of the elections may call on the people to protest. Such a move will plunge Zimbabwe further into economic crisis because of