Digital Technologies and Election Management in Zimbabwe: Pseudo-democratic Transition and Contorted Delirium?

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Abstract

This article examines the extent to which the adoption of biometric voter registration in election management in Zimbabwe has appeared a phantom on the horizon regarding democratisation. While the emergence of digitalised election management brought with it expectations of credible electoral processes and outcomes in a country with a history of rampant electoral malpractices in manually managed processes, the phenomenon is yet to yield positive results regarding democratisation in Zimbabwe. Despite the shift from manually managed electoral process to a digitalised approach, the quagmire of irregularities has persisted in Zimbabwean elections. This is largely attributable to the trajectory of governance in Zimbabwe which appears to militate against the exploitation of the opportunities presented by digital technologies in democratising elections in the county. This said, the conclusion drawn from this article is that the configuration of political power, particularly issues of the breach of the democratic principles of separation of power and separation of personnel, are disingenuous to technology-induced democratic transition to credible elections. Secondary research was used to obtain data for this article as data were gathered from books, journal articles, newspaper articles and institutional reports.

Keywords: digital technologies, election management, biometric voter registration, democratic elections, Zimbabwe

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Résumé

Cet article examine dans quelle mesure l'adoption de l'enregistrement biométrique des électeurs dans la gestion des élections au Zimbabwe est apparue comme un fantôme à l'horizon de la démocratisation. Alors que l'émergence de la numérisation de la gestion des élections a suscité des attentes quant à la crédibilité du processus et des résultats électoraux dans un pays avec une histoire de mauvaises pratiques électorales rampantes au cours du processus géré manuellement, le phénomène n'a pas encore donné de résultats positifs en matière de démocratisation au Zimbabwe. Malgré le passage d'un processus électoral manuel à une approche numérique, le bourbier des irrégularités persiste encore lors des élections au Zimbabwe. Cela est largement attribuable à la trajectoire de la gouvernance au Zimbabwe qui semble militer contre l'exploitation des opportunités présentées par les technologies numériques dans la démocratisation des élections dans le pays. Cela dit, la conclusion tirée de cet article est que la configuration du pouvoir politique, en particulier les questions de violation des principes démocratiques de séparation du pouvoir et de séparation du personnel, sont peu propices à une transition démocratique induite par la technologie vers des élections crédibles. La recherche secondaire a été utilisée pour obtenir des données pour cet article, car les données ont été recueillies à partir de livres, d'articles de journaux et des rapports institutionnels.

Mots-clés : technologies numériques, gestion des élections, inscription biométrique des électeurs, élections démocratiques, Zimbabwe

Introduction

This article examines the extent to which and why the adoption of digital technologies in election management in Zimbabwe has not culminated in averting challenges associated with electoral fraud in the country. This is against the backdrop that the emergence of digital technologies as key elements of election management processes has brought hope for the democratisation process in most African states and beyond. The anticipation was that digitalising election management was a step forward in terms of guaranteeing the credibility of electoral processes and outcomes on the continent where electoral malpractices are rampant. In the Zimbabwean context, the advent of digitalised election management, characterised by reliance on biometric voter registration (BVR), has remained disingenuous to the envisaged role of digital technology in minimising electoral fraud.

The above is not to imply that digital technologies are not *sine qua non* to the democratic culture of conducting credible elections. The problem appears to evolve around the political culture, governance structures and

political organisation in Zimbabwe since 1980. In Zimbabwe, election management institutions, procedures, regulations and personnel serve as agents representing the interests of the governing political party at the expense of democratic values. Hence, the emergence of digital technologies for election management in Zimbabwe appears to be a phantom on the horizon for the democratic process in the Southern Africa state.

In spite of the above, issues of the digital technologies and election management nexus with democratic evolution in the Zimbabwean context have not received sufficient scholarly attention; yet the politics of electoral management dominates Zimbabwean electoral lexicons. With a history of controversy and contestation of the voters' roll and results, elections in Zimbabwe had not been perceived as the mainstay of democracy until the adoption of the biometric registration system in September 2017. At this juncture, it suffices to highlight that the digitalisation of voter registration in Zimbabwe brought hope for the democratisation process in the Southern African state.

The anticipation was that digitalising voter registration was a step forward in terms of guaranteeing the credibility of the electoral process and outcome in a country where electoral malpractices are rampant. Nevertheless, the adoption of the BVR system seems not to have led to the envisaged role of digital technology in minimising electoral fraud in Zimbabwe; at least in the 2018 elections in which the biometric registration system was used for the first time. This is not to imply that digital technologies such as the BVR system are not *sine qua non* to the democratic culture of credible election management.

There is a two tier explanation to this phenomenon. On the one hand, the problem appears to revolve around the trajectory of political culture, governance structures and political organisation in Zimbabwe. This trajectory has its roots in the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 2000 to challenge the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). How the emergence of the MDC changed the democratic course in Zimbabwe is discussed in the section that historicises dynamics of voter registration in the country. What is important at this juncture is to illustrate that in the Zimbabwean context, election management institutions, procedures, regulations and personnel serve as agents of the governing political party.

On the other hand, it is crucial to highlight that the dynamics of the political system in Zimbabwe are largely influenced by the government's ostensible desire to survive the imperialist onslaught and regime change agenda largely fomented by the United Kingdom (UK) and the United

States of America (USA). Therefore, it can be argued that the closure of political space in Zimbabwe and elements of undemocratic governance thereof can best be comprehended as means to an end; survival vis-à-vis the legacy of a history of subjugation. With the main opposition political party, the MDC, having alleged links with neo-imperialist forces and pursuing a regime change agenda, it is not surprising that ZANU PF took an Afro-radicalist stance characterised by electoral hegemony to remain in power and safeguard the sovereignty of the state. While this can be dismissed as propaganda, it could also be a reality driving authoritarian politics in Zimbabwe.

Theorising the digitalised election management–democratisation nexus in Zimbabwe

The theoretical foundations of this article combine assumptions of the principal–agent and bounded discretion approaches. Both theories belong to the category of delegation approaches. The two were selected because they illuminate the dynamics of the implications of the configurations of authority, organisational structures and power on digitalised election management processes vis-à-vis democratisation in Zimbabwe. The principal–agent theory is inclined to the state sovereignty maximising tendency that results in the government as the principal with exclusive appointing authority influencing political decisions and outcomes undertaken by the agents appointed by the principal (Gailmard 2012: 3; Lenz 2012; Healy and Malhotra 2010; Achen and Bartels 2002; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Borrowing from this approach, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and other electoral institutions as agents managing elections operate consistently with the wishes of the appointing authority.

Like principal–agent theory, bounded discretion theory argues that the state will not delegate institutions unless they serve its interests (Ginburg 2004). Hence, the shift for democratic purposes to digitalised election management in Zimbabwe remains a pseudo-democratic transition as long as there is no separation of powers between the election management body, personnel and procedures on the one hand and the government on the other hand. More so, it remains contorted delirium due to the fact that as long as the Zimbabwean government maintains its nationalistic-cum-Afro-radicalist stance justified in terms of safeguarding national sovereignty, reliance on a biometric registration system or even full scale digitalisation of elections might always encounter governance-related limitations. This is attributed to the spirit of self-determination to insulate the concomitant implications of the traction of the neo-imperialist agenda.

Contextualising the Digitised Election Management–Democratic Elections Nexus

At this juncture, it is essential to conceptualise the dynamics of the digitalisation of election management which has taken the form of BVR in the Zimbabwean context. BVR denotes the process of utilising biometric technology to capture the unique physical features of an individual such as fingerprints, iris and facial scans, among others, in addition to demographic data of the voter for identification purposes (Holtved 2011: 4). Reliance on biometrics such as fingerprints helps ensure a clean voters' register by eliminating multiple registrations and multiple voting (Gelb and Diofasi 2016: 1).

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA 2017: 10) maintains that 'a credible voter register confers legitimacy on the electoral process'. It can therefore be argued that the use of biometric technology in elections enhances the principle of 'one man one vote' and improves the credibility of elections and the democratic electoral process thereof. Thus far, most countries in the region have achieved relative success with this approach. However, successful elections also rely on a host of political and administrative processes that, while procedurally correct, may not result in well-conducted elections or even acceptance of the results by electoral stakeholders.

On a broader scale, even administrative and procedural 'success' may fail to satisfy demands for more popular, rather than merely procedural, participation in the political process (Pottie 2010). However, the GENKEY Report (2016: 4) underscores that BVR in the African context is usually let down by the poor quality of data capture at the registration stage which results in the existence of duplicated voters in the register. While this may resonate with the Zimbabwean context, it can be argued that biometric voter technology is a foreign technology that is relatively new to Zimbabwe. Hence, it can be expected for ZEC to have made mistakes in the initial phases of the system. Following this background, it can be argued that the deployment of these digital technologies in election management in Zimbabwe is a new phenomenon and the extent to which they have minimised electoral irregularities and malpractices in the interests of democratic elections should be aggregated.

The concept of democratic elections emanates from the principle that sovereignty is bestowed in the people; people are entitled to the rights to choose the government, take part in governmental affairs and the conduct of public affairs (Merloe 2009: 1). As the mainstay of democracy, elections

are envisaged to reflect the will of the people as well as accountability, inclusivity and transparency in terms of the electoral process. It is essential at this point to highlight that while democratic elections are internationalised, there are ulterior motives to this system. According to Gathii (2000: 70), the system is an appendage of the West who are architectures of the good governance doctrine which is used as a machination to influence national governance processes of the Third World in order to pursue the former's political interests. Going by this argument, it can be argued that this partly explains why the way Zimbabwean elections are conducted reflects some degree of scepticism to the extent that the ruling party whose background is revolutionary treats opposition parties as enemies of the state pursuing a neo-imperialist agenda.

To this end, even though the emergence of digitalised election management such as the BVR system brought expectations of credible electoral processes and outcomes on the continent with a history of electoral malpractices in manually managed processes, the phenomenon has not added much meaning to democratisation in Zimbabwe. This is attributable to the trajectory of governance in Zimbabwe that appears to militate against the exploitation of the opportunities presented by digital technologies to hold credible elections in the country. Apart from these internal governance dynamics in the Southern African state, the modalities of international governance, particularly neo-imperialist tendencies associated with democracy and elections, appear to influence the ruling party in Zimbabwe to resort to undemocratic electoral practices designed to safeguard sovereignty. The next section partly explores the evolution of this trend.

Digitalised Election Management: Biometric Voter Registration in Zimbabwe

The adoption of the BVR system in Zimbabwe was largely influenced by political circumstances around the electoral malpractices that have characterised the country's political landscape since 2000. To comprehend the trajectory of BVR in Zimbabwe, it suffices to briefly explore the pre-BVR political antecedents and challenges in the country. A discussion of elections in Zimbabwe almost always tempts one to start from the 2000 elections when a formidable opposition in the form of the MDC emerged to challenge the electoral hegemony of ZANU PF. This is so because a bulk of the patterns and features pertaining to the dynamics of political culture of absolute sovereign rule, the ZANU PF dominated electoral landscape, and attitude and behaviour towards opposition parties are traceable from the turn of the new millennium.

With the onset of multi-party politics in Zimbabwe at the turn of the millennium, the trajectory of election management in Zimbabwe has depicted a trend of democratic deficit whose concomitant implications have hindered the assistance of digital technology in democratic evolution. While digitalised election processes such as biometric registration do not necessarily determine the legitimacy of elections, the extent to which these processes have altered the institution of elections raises questions regarding the changes brought and challenges posed by digital technologies in election management in Zimbabwe. Consequently, issues pertaining to the legitimacy, credibility and trust of election systems, practices and outcomes in Zimbabwe are controversial as they invite varying ideological standpoints.

The Biometric Voter Registration System–Democratic Elections Conundrums in Zimbabwe

Like previous elections since 2000, the contestation of the 2018 election results in Zimbabwe was a product of a political system riddled with deliberate and unprecedented democratic deficit and authoritarian practices. The practices are best comprehended as deliberate because the way the political system is configured is designed to use all means to consolidate the power of the governing political party. Hence, the adoption of the BVR system ideally to minimise electoral malpractices has appeared illusory in ending the problem of election rigging in Zimbabwe. This explains why the 2018 elections have illustrated Russel and Zamfir's (2018: 4) argument that even though digitalised voter registration minimises the scope of human error, it is not watertight and does not bring instantaneous solutions to insulate electoral fraud in a corrupt political environment. This argument summarises the quagmire in Zimbabwe that has rendered the reliance on digital technology in election management worthless in shifting towards democratic elections.

Moreover, it suffices to question with concern the rationale behind the advocacy for the adoption of digital technology in election management by particularly Western European powers including the USA, UK and France, among others, as well as Euro-North American institutions such as the European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN). When the Zimbabwean government adopted the BVR system in 2017, the UNDP was the leading entity to partner with the government on training and funding logistical issues. This concern could be allayed by the view that these state and non-state actors are aligned to the neoliberal school of thought that perceives democratic elections as a panacea to peace and security. Be that as it may, neoliberal democracy is regarded as a threat

to the sovereignty and welfare of Third World countries. The following dynamics illuminate the factors that have militated against the strength of digitalised voter registration in Zimbabwe.

The legacy of ZANU PF's electoral hegemonic influence is the starting point in the illumination of how the political system in Zimbabwe has hindered the contribution of digital technology to improving the credibility of elections. It suffices to highlight that this electoral hegemony has its roots in the configurations of power and closure of political space since the 1980 elections in Zimbabwe in order to maintain and perpetuate a one-party psychology (Jinadu 1997: 2; Sithole and Makumbe 1997: 122). The authoritarian system in Zimbabwe was compounded by the adoption in 1979 of the Gukurahundi policy which is a chauvinistic, commandist and dogmatic policy designed to annihilate the opposition (Sithole and Makumbe 1997: 133). For the Gukurahundi policy and closure of political space to materialise in consolidating ZANU PF's undemocratic tendencies, the bureaucracy which is involved in the conduct of elections such as ZEC was politicised. The system was made more vicious and complex with the emergence of the MDC in 2000. Hence, due to this political power system, technological solutions such as BVR used in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe fell short of improving the capability of ZEC to plan and conduct the elections democratically.

Notwithstanding the adoption of the BVR system as part of the broader electoral reforms envisaged to extinguish electoral irregularities in Zimbabwe, the planning and conduct of the 2018 elections still left a lot to be desired. One of the shortcomings of the biometric system, as it was employed in Zimbabwe, was the reluctance by the government to institute comprehensive supporting political and legal reforms. According to the Election Resource Centre (ERC) (2018) report, the elections were conducted without an appropriate legal framework due to the government's reluctance to align the biometric system with the provisions of the 2013 Constitution which emphasise the independence of ZEC, among other provisions.

The delays in the collation and announcement of results was understood against this background (BBC 2018). Resonating with the ERC Report, Sibanda (2018) maintained that improving the credibility of elections in Zimbabwe required the BVR system to be accompanied by appropriate administrative, legislative and political reforms. Even though headway was made with the adoption of Statutory Instrument 85 of 2017 to legalise and legitimise the biometric system, not much was done to transform the electoral system and subsequently minimise the double registration and inaccuracies that were inherent in the voter register.

Hence, the BVR system that was expected to solve the problem of ghost voters in Zimbabwe's electoral democratic evolution ended up creating a bigger problem in the context of the inaccurate voters roll. According to Zenda (2018), the adoption of the BVR system was welcomed by Zimbabweans as a solution to the manipulation of the voters roll which the ZANU PF party usually uses to rig elections. More so, the adoption of the BVR system coincided with the dawn of the Mnangagwa administration in November 2017 which inaugurated the illusion that the post-Mugabe government was instituting genuine transition to democracy including the conduct of democratic elections. As reality dawned, it became apparent that the transition from Mugabe to Mnangagwa illustrated more continuity than change (Southall 2017: 90), which Maromo (2017) describes as 'Mugabeism without Mugabe'.

To substantiate the above claims, it can be argued that the existence of 250,000 ghost voters found in the 2018 voters roll, which Beardsworth (2018) observed to be either invalid, wrong entries or statistically improbable, illustrates the magnitude of the electoral democracy deficit in Zimbabwe in spite of the digitalisation of voter registration. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network Observation Report (ZESN 2018: 43) also highlighted the existence of 77,814 statistically improbable voter details in the 2018 voter register. However, this is not to imply that the BVR system is not panacea to electoral democracy. What appears to be cause for concern is the configuration of power structures and processes in Zimbabwe's political system.

In resonance with the issues raised by other observer missions, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Election Observer Mission (SEOM) Statement (2018: 8) raised the inaccuracy of the voter register as one of the discrepancies that characterised the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. In addition to the SADC report, the African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) to Zimbabwe Preliminary Statement (2018: 4) raised the concern of ZEC's failure to allow independent and proper audit of the voter register as one of the discrepancies of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. Given the pan-African brotherhood and solidarity that define relations between and among African states, one would have expected SADC and the AU to endorse the electronic voter register used in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe as credible as they did with the previous manually managed register.

A theory was therefore generated by Zimbabweans that the two African regional institutions have a tendency to endorse elections in the country because of the legacy of pan-Africanist brotherhood that bind African states. However, the 2018 elections have defied these odds. The distinction between

the 2018 elections and the previous ones is the use of the BVR system in the former. It can therefore be argued that digitalised voter registration has made it easier on the part of the observer missions to unearth voter register discrepancies in Zimbabwe. Apart from voter register problems, the pan-African institutions illuminated ZEC's lack of independence.

Therefore, it suffices to underscore the lack of independence of ZEC as the primary source of the undemocratic predispositions that impeded the role of BVR in conducting credible elections in 2018 in Zimbabwe. The point of departure in ZEC's lack of independence is the composition of the personnel of the Commission vis-à-vis the appointing authority thereof. ZEC is composed of a chairperson and eight commissioners appointed by the head of state in consultation with the Judicial Service Commission.

It can be argued that the involvement of the head of state in the affairs of the election management body compromises the independence of the Commission and the subsequent execution of its mandate in a transparent and open manner. Consequently, the lack of independence of ZEC was cited as one of the contributing factors to the shortcomings and irregularities in the registration of voters for the 2018 elections (EUEOM Report 2018; ERC 2018). It is against this political background of the manipulation of procedures and institutions in Zimbabwe that BVR could not enhance the credibility of the voters' roll in the 2018 elections.

In continuation of the above, the manipulation of procedures and institutions that are supposed to conduct democratic elections illuminates the politicisation of election management in Zimbabwe. The EUEOM Report (2018) raised the issue of the envelopment of former security personnel in the election management institution arguing that this compromises the capability of ZEC to carry out its duties impartially and independent of the government and military interference. What the EUEOM Report highlighted is indeed a worrisome phenomenon in election management in Zimbabwe. In the 2018 elections for instance, former military officer Utloile Silaigwana was appointed as the acting chief election officer and on 1 July 2019 he was named the substantive chief election officer.

While there is nothing wrong in giving a former soldier such a responsibility, the history of Zimbabwean politics has shown that the members of defence forces, including the retired, once paid allegiance to ZANU PF. Be that as it may, it suffices to illuminate the self-determination drive that piques the ruling party to act and behave the way it does. Interference in institutions such as ZEC and democratic practices such as BVR cannot therefore be understood independently of the strategy to check and extinguish the neo-imperialist advances in the country.

The same can be said in relation to how the ruling party relates to all other state institutions including the police, judiciary, intelligence services and media as they form a formidable force to consolidate the power base of this political party. Exploring this undemocratic yet necessary connection, Matyszak (2017: 3) maintained that ZEC operates as an appendage of the ruling party whose conduct of elections and non-compliance with electoral laws are either ignored or facilitated by the courts. At this juncture, it suffices to make reference to how the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe decided the *Chamisa v Mnangagwa and Others* case in which Justice Malaba chose to ignore the issue of the ghost voters in the 2018 voters roll which was part of the fulcrum of the contestations (Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe: Judgment in *Chamisa v Mnangagwa and 24 Others* CCZ 42/18). The case illustrated the complex connection between the Zimbabwean bureaucracy and the extent to which the connection has militated against the role of digital technology, albeit in the 2018 elections, in deterring electoral malpractices.

The political culture of intolerance towards democratic elections by the Zimbabwean government further undermined the capacity of the BVR system to strengthen electoral democracy. Chikerema and Chakunda (2014: 57) argue that by monopolising agents of political socialisation, the ruling party in Zimbabwe has promoted a political culture of intolerance to democracy. This resonates with Makumbe (2009: 2) who maintains that Zimbabwe has since 1980 been drifting away from democracy towards authoritarianism. If these arguments are anything to go by, it is not surprising that digitalised voter registration was carefully deployed in a manner that does not plug all the loopholes for manipulating elections in favour of ZANU PF.

These include failure to avail the voters roll in time for inspection, the existence of duplicate and ghost voters, as well the lack of verifiability, traceability and transparency of the results that were finally announced. These dynamics of electoral democratic deficit in Zimbabwe, even in the presence of digital technology, confirm Sanusi and Nassuna's (2017) assertion that electoral processes in Africa are repositioned to benefit incumbent political parties. While the trend to appear intolerant towards democracy is indeed worrisome, it can be argued that approaching elections with caution the way the ZANU PF does is a direct product of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2006: 11) observes to be influenced by the legacy of the long history of imperialism.

Apart from technical related modalities, the use of BVR was exploited by state security agents, military personnel and ZANU PF activists as an intimidation and voter mobilisation strategy to influence decision-making of rural voters. To illuminate how the BVR system was manipulated for voter mobilisation, Zenda (2018) observed the politicisation of the system

by ZANU PF militia who projected the narrative that voter registration was a requirement to benefit from government food aid and farming inputs. An Al Jazeera post-election review conducted by Mhaka (2018) also unearthed voter intimidation tactics by the 5,000 soldiers deployed in the rural areas in Zimbabwe by propagating the narrative that if one votes for the opposition the BVR system will detect it and such people will be punished.

The above facilitated voter intimidation and, the outcome of the elections and the instability that followed. While the politicisation of election processes can be justified on the basis of what Niels (2008: 142) calls pan-African resistance to neo-colonialism, it can be argued that elements of power hunger and deep state are prevalent in Zimbabwean politics. Hence, efforts to consolidate power and state capture by manipulating even digitalised voter registration could be disguised as the safeguarding of sovereignty against the threat of neo-colonialism.

While the deployment of digital technologies has been associated with deterrence of electoral malpractices by proponents of the technologies, the technologies have not eliminated certain pre-election and post-election biases. For instance, digital technologies cannot deter voter intimidation, vote buying and unequal access to state media for campaigning as is evident in the Zimbabwean political context. Mhaka (2018) raised concerns pertaining to these malpractices in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe. This adds to the observation on Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire by Gelb and Diofasi (2016: 15) that incumbent governments may exclude certain groups of people from participating in elections by limiting registration centres to areas where the ruling political parties have support. In the case of Zimbabwe, state-sponsored intimidation and torture of opposition leaders and their supporters are rampant (Moyo 2013). Having said the above, this research intends to explore how this and other political and structural factors have impeded the effectiveness of election technology in deterring election manipulation in Zimbabwe.

According to Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis (2018: 1398), in some cases digital technologies involved in voter registration, voter verification and result transmission can guard against electoral malpractices and boost public confidence. This resonates with Gelb and Diofasi's (2016: 13) observation that election technology reinforced voters' trust in electoral processes in Ghana in 2012 with the conceived reduction in electoral fraud. On the contrary, the deployment of BVR, verification and electronic transmission of results have not altered voter perception of the electoral processes in Zimbabwe. Against this background, this research seeks to analyse the dynamics associated with political systems in Zimbabwe and

their correlation with making the functional operations of election digital technologies disingenuous with democratic transition.

At face value, it can also be argued that digital technologies have promoted pseudo-democratic practices by letting power concentrate in the hands of the few political elite. According to Yard (2010), election technologies risk transferring power 'away from the many' into the 'hands of the few'. Yard's argument resonates with the situation in Zimbabwe whereby the incumbent government as the appointing authority appears to delegate to institutions such as ZEC personnel who are biased towards preferences of the ruling party. Hence, power is centralised in the hands of the head of state and management of electoral processes is done partially resulting in allegations of electoral fraud.

Be that as it may, it is not the election technology that results in the concentration of power in the hands of the few, but the configurations of political structures and power in the Zimbabwean political systems. It is these dynamics in the Zimbabwean context that this research intends to juxtapose with efforts at using election technologies to fix election manipulation with a view to enhance democratisation endeavours.

The long-term sustainability of digitalised election management has also been put into question. Logistical and organisational challenges relating to reliance by Electoral Commissions in Africa on the funding, equipment and expertise provided by resourced state and non-state actors highlight heavy dependence on foreign aid (Envrensel 2010). Making observations on these challenges with reference to the phenomenon in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Akumiah (2010) questioned the long-term sustainability of the digital revolution in election management (see also Evrensel 2010). While dependence on funding, expertise and technology could result in the interference with election management by aid providers, this research, although acknowledging and recognising this problematic, focuses on the trajectory of how, why and to what extent digital technologies have appeared disingenuous to democratic transition to credible elections in Zimbabwe.

Suggestions for the Future of Digitalised Election Management in Zimbabwe

The point of departure in making policy and practical suggestions for the future of digitalised election management is an explanation for the rationale for digitalising election management in Zimbabwe. Like in other parts of the world, vote rigging revolving around voter registration, vote counting and results transmission necessitated the switch from manual electoral processes to digitalised ones. The inquiry that can be made therefore pertains

to whether or not technology is the solution to undemocratic elections in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular.

Answering the above question should not be done independently of the international political economy of elections, political ideas and solutions, including election technology, to African problems. To this end, it can be argued that the proliferation of election technology in Africa is associated with capitalist machinations to prescribe solutions to the world for the purposes of maximising profits since election technology is developed largely in the capitalist world.

Be that as it may, it suffices here to explore the rationale for digitalising in the first place vis-à-vis the sustainability of retaining the traditional manual process in Zimbabwe. No matter what theory is generated to criticise digitalised election management, digital technology is a panacea to democratic elections in Zimbabwe. Electoral contestations that have been experienced since 2000, whose concomitant implications have undermined peace and security in the country and the Southern African sub-region, substantiate this. The major problem has been around the voter register which has been found infested with ghost voters. Even though the adoption of the BVR system did not solve this problem, at least in the 2018 elections the continued use and improvement of this system coupled with legal and political reforms, including the independence of ZEC, could go a long way in improving democratic elections in Zimbabwe.

More so, there is a need to adopt full scale digitalisation of election management in Zimbabwe. Full scale digitalisation denotes adopting election technology at all stages of elections including voting, tabulation, counting and results transmission. Had digital technology been adopted at all stages in Zimbabwe, assessing its contribution to democratic elections could have been easier because the areas of contention invoked could have been technically verifiable. However, digitalising all aspects of elections is a mammoth task given the financial costs involved. When Zimbabwe adopted the BVR system, UNDP and the EU provided financial aid to augment the government's financial capacity.

Apart from financial constraints, the risk of software hacking or manipulation of technology to the advantage of one candidate cannot be eliminated in digitalised election management. With technologically advanced states such as the USA being susceptible to manipulation of digitalised elections, as in the case of the alleged Russian manipulation of the USA electoral process, less developed states such as Zimbabwe could be worse off with election technology. Nevertheless, the benefits of election technology outweigh its disadvantages.

For instance, the BVR system can be credited for improving trust in the electoral process in Zimbabwe. The increase in the rate of participation of youth in elections in Zimbabwe can be invoked to substantiate this claim. According to a survey by Bratton and Masunungure (2018) (also see Bratton 2014), the BVR system increased the rate of youth voter registration from 57 per cent recorded in 2013 to 73 per cent in 2018. Prior to the 2018 digitalised voter registration phase, voter apathy amongst the youth had become rampant due to mistrust in the manually managed process. The increase in the rate of youth registration can be attributed to the trust the youths placed in digitalised voter registration in Zimbabwe. Hence, the further innovation in Zimbabwe's electoral system by adopting full scale election management could further strengthen democratic elections in the country.

Even though election technology has its challenges, it should be understood and accepted as a relevant twenty-first century solution to twenty-first problems in Zimbabwe. In this day and age, all aspects of life and society are digitalised. This extends to elections. Be that as it may, reforming the electoral system in Zimbabwe outside the context of digitalising election management is like musing without instruments.

This is because digitalising election management provides an effective way for political competitors and the citizenry to check and verify the accuracy of election data (Pran and Merloe 2007: 21). Adding to this assertion, Magaisa (2017) maintains that the BVR system offers more precision in the verification process which would reduce the turning away of voters. In the final analysis, it can be argued that it is imperative to adopt full scale digitalised election management in Zimbabwe.

It is imperative to accompany full scale election management digitalisation in Zimbabwe with policy and legal frameworks as part of wider electoral reforms. This entails having the correct administrative system, the right value system and political will to make this work. Even though it appears that there were more political factors to undermine the BVR system in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, the underlying factor is the absence of electoral reforms to complement the biometric system. As a recommendation for the future, there is an urgent need to adopt policy and legal reforms prior to embarking on full scale digitalisation of elections in the country. This is against the background of the politicisation of electoral processes in the country in the pursuit of authoritarian politics that are ideologically justified along anti-imperialist explanations.

While there is a need to guard against neo-colonial tendencies associated with the Western machination of digitalising election management, there is also a need to check and limit the power hunger-induced authoritarian

ideology propagated by ZANU PF. To deal with this quagmire, a balance should be struck between national interests and democratic reforms. This calls for political will on the part of the government to institute policy and legal reforms that make ZEC an independent election management body and liberalisation of the Zimbabwean political environment.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it can be concluded that the partial digitalisation of election management in Zimbabwe has appeared disingenuous to the envisaged role of election technology in minimising electoral fraud. This is attributable to the trajectory of political power configurations and ideological issues in Zimbabwe. Discrepancies such as the existence of 250,000 ghost voters in the 2018 voters' roll, failure by ZEC to avail the voters' register on time for verification, and the BVR intimidation strategy were influenced by these power politics dynamics in Zimbabwe. While the existence of issues such as margin of error in the voters' roll is inevitable, the existence of 'ghosts' in the voter register can arguably be attributed to a deliberate strategy to reposition the electoral process in favour of the incumbent political party. To leave no stone unturned, it suffices to stress the argument that the Zimbabwean government's quagmire to counter neo-colonial advances is also at the apex of the seemingly undemocratic practices in the way the electoral machinery operates.

From the above, it can be argued that the clash between democratisation in the context of reforming the electoral system by digitalising elections through adopting BVR and pursuing a political strategy hinged on survival has made the adoption of biometric registration a pseudo-democratic transition and contorted delirium. The adoption of the technology in the Zimbabwean context emanated from the contention that ZANU PF has undue influence on the electoral process and outcome, including in the constitution of ZEC, the voting calendar, voter register, and funding of the infrastructure for the conduct and transmission of election results. This influence, it has been maintained, has been giving the political party undue advantages over their opponents.

In the end, the manual electoral processes came in for blame for compromising the credibility of the electoral process and outcomes. The solution to this was espoused as adopting electoral reforms including digitalising voter registration. However, with adoption of the BVR system, the question that still lingers is: do digital technologies have the capacity to limit electoral fraud at the level of voter registration and manipulation of

final counts and to ensure popular will is exercised? This question cannot be comprehended independently of how the electoral body and election support institutions and procedures in the country in question are organised and structured.

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