



## **Violent election related violence in Zimbabwe: A threat to peace and human security?**

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**Abstract**

While political violence is endemic in Zimbabwean politics, it generally surges in intensity and impact during election times. Since independence, electoral violence has characterised the country's plebiscites which has contributed to many of these elections being

dismissed by some observers as not free and free. This conclusion was mainly reached because of incidences of intimidation and violence perpetrated by political players. The violence is mainly attributable to factors like inter and intra party conflicts, perceived mismanagement of elections by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), media impact, political exclusion among others. If left unaddressed, these factors pose a serious threat to the human security status of Zimbabweans as the country braces for the 2023 general elections because low intensity or localised violence is a 'training ground' for violent campaigns of a greater magnitude like civil wars. This article seeks to establish how electoral violence can be mitigated in Zimbabwe so as to ensure that the human security status of Zimbabweans can be protected. The article recommends that political parties improve internal conflict management systems enshrined in their constitutions as well as implementing electoral reforms aimed at dodging winner-take-all elections while promoting broad based political solutions which allow for electoral losers to have a role in the system.

**Keywords:** Violence; election-based conflict; peace; Zimbabwe

## **1. Introduction**

Elections play a momentous role in the nourishment of democracy. They are a vital prerequisite of democracy, the first step without which democracy cannot otherwise be established. One of the key roles of elections is the facilitation of electoral practice in a peacefully controlled and non-violent manner so that the outcome can be legitimised (Stremlau and Price 2009, 5). The notion of competitive elections occupies a fundamental place in liberal democracies and in post-Cold-War neo-liberal philosophies of proper governance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012, 1). Ndlovu-Gatsheni adds that elections are an arena in which national issues are specified, opened up to rational debate, present political actors with an opportunity to sell their ideas and policies to voters. The electorate are assumed to be able to make free and rational choices about who they would like to occupy leadership positions. As Adejumobi (2000, 59) states, elections “...are a viable means of ensuring the orderly process of leadership succession and change and an instrument of political authority and legitimation.” Elections not only allow for participation and legitimacy but also facilitate the peaceful transfer of power, making it feasible to hold the powerful accountable. This is why it is often argued that “elections facilitate communication between the government and the governed, and also have symbolic purposes by giving voice to the public” (Höglund 2006, 4). This helps to explain why elections are now included in the global peace-building strategy, which has a significant correlation between peace and democratic growth (Höglund 2006, 5).

However, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012, 1) argues that elections in the Zimbabwean context have become like empty rituals with the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front’s (ZANU-PF) one-party system and authoritarianism being concealed behind the electoral democracy system. It is sad that while the election season should be a period dominated by policy discussions, developmental issues and speeches meant to upgrade the state, it has degenerated into an epoch of intimidation, violence, threats and hate speech among other things. Since the country’s first elections in 1980, election campaigns and post-election politics have gone hand in glove with violence and death (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012, 7). Past elections in the country have consistently shown that opposition parties have been labelled as puppets, dissidents, reactionaries working hand in hand with Zimbabwe’s external enemies. For these ‘crimes’ some opposition party supporters have been victims of violence, intimidation and murder.

Next year, Zimbabweans go to polls in what appears to be a watershed harmonised plebiscite. The opposition Citizens for Coalition Change (CCC) led by Nelson Chamisa has vowed to dislodge the incumbent- ZANU-F's Emmerson Mnangagwa from the presidency. The run up to this election has shown that if effective systems are not put in place to ensure a conducive electoral environment, the election, like many others before it will be marred by violence and therefore affect the human security of Zimbabweans.

## **2. Violence in Zimbabwean politics**

Politics and violence appear to be Siamese twins. Because politics is concerned with a continuous tussle for power over scarce resources, violent conflict is bound to be perpetual while peace will always be perennial. In post-colonial Africa, political violence continues to result in grave injustice (see Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Centre for Conflict Research 2001, 1; Kovacs 2018; Sachikonye 2011). To Moser and Clark (2001, 36), political violence refers to the “commission of forceful actions driven by a sensible or insensible decision to acquire, maintain or consolidate political power” while Sachikonye (2011) defines political violence as aggressiveness over political competition. Sachikonye avows that political violence destroys political competition as it focuses on eradicating voices of dissent. This kills the culture of political tolerance, unity in diversity and is also a laugh in the face of Ubuntu; a principle which the Zimbabwean society is built upon. Political violence, according to Steinhoff and Zwerman (2008, 13), includes assaults, civil wars, uprisings, forced political rally attendance, forced memberships, guerrilla wars, kidnappings, military takeovers, rioting, politically motivated murders, uprisings, rape, mass protests, terrorist attacks, destruction of property and verbal aggression (see Dodo and Musorowegomo 2012; Meadow 2009; Steinhoff and Zwerman 2008; United Nations Development Programme 2010).

In pre and post-colonial Africa, violence has been a common occurrence. The violence that is prevalent in post-colonial Africa is deeply entrenched in colonialism. It can be contended that the violence that natives experienced at the hands of the colonisers swayed the latter to be violent people. Those who went through gross violations of their rights “manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people” (Fanon 1963, 40). Fanon adds that the colonised individuals' conflict with the “colonial order of things” put them in “a permanent state of

tension” (Fanon 1963, 41). He concludes his line of thought by arguing that those who experienced colonialism have a permanent dream to become the persecutor. In the Zimbabwean context, the pre- and post-independence political situation has been characterised by extreme political violence and gross human rights violations. Zimbabwean politics has a long history of using violence as a tool for power-seeking and rivalry. More than 50 years ago, violence became a practice and a culture.

Violence was already commonly utilised in political contests by the time the nationalist movement split in 1963, leading to the creation of ZANU as a dissident party from ZAPU (Sachikonye 2011, 25). While violence was used as a key tool in achieving independence it also served as a significant source of division. It continues to spread like a cancer, corroding the nation’s political culture and impeding the development of democracy. (Sachikonye 2011, 19). From the Chimoio and Nyadzonya massacres at the height of the liberation struggle in the 1970s, the Gukurahundi massacres experienced in the early 1980s to the post 2000 unparalleled electoral violence, the country has experienced some serious violent periods (Macheka 2022, 1). Within the liberation movement, violence had a persistent legacy. Violence was engrained in ZANU’s political culture, as seen by the song “ZANU ndeyeropa”, which means “ZANU has a history of blood”. Some of this culture’s influence might be seen in Joice Mujuru’s nom de guerre, “*Teurai Ropa*” (Spill Blood), among other ones. Mujuru would later serve as vice president of independent Zimbabwe.

Since 1981, a never-ending cycle of violence has destroyed the nation. Over 300 people were killed in political violence in Entumbane, Connmara, and Ntabazinduna in February 1981; the Gukurahundi killings in 1983–87; and the unprecedented electoral violence in 2008 (Dzimiri et al. 2014, 227). ZANU-PF’s need to maintain its grip on power has partly contributed to the politically motivated violence that Zimbabwe experiences. Political unrest in Zimbabwe cannot be understood in isolation from the hegemony of the ruling party and its racial and ethnic overtones (Dzimiri et al. 2014, 227). The scholars argue that that the ruling ZANU-PF deliberately and consistently perpetrates violence based on political and ethnic lines in a desperate bid to tighten its grip on power. Some aspects of Zimbabwe’s ethnic conflict date back to the pre-colonial era, particularly those between the Ndebele and Shona speaking populations. The struggle with ethnicity in politics became apparent during Zimbabwe’s independence war from 1963 to 1979 (Dzimiri et al. 2014, 229).

The level and intensity of political violence in Zimbabwe increased at the turn of the millennium with the formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party led by the late Morgan Tsvangirai. This was the first real threat to Robert Mugabe's presidency and in typical Machiavellian style, Mugabe used a number of violent and intimidating tactics against the opposition. Zimbabwe's political, economic, and social situation grew worse throughout this time. It was also a time of the most severe political violence since independence, with the exception of the Gukurahundi phase from 1982 to 1987. (Sachikonye 2011, 20). This has led Munoriyarwa (2019, 12) to conclude that political violence in the country is empowered by "the weight of legacies", and it occurs within a wider local setting of contingency. He further notes that political violence is necessitated by the interaction of institutions, agents and discourse mechanisms which allow violence to flourish. The culture of violence has become endemic in the country, and this has spilled over to elections that have been held in post independent Zimbabwe. As a result, violence has become institutionalised in order to create an authoritarian regime that is disrespectful of citizen rights, especially the ability to express one's choices by voting (Masunungure 2011, 19).

### **3. Contextualising electoral violence**

The subject of electoral violence has become popular among Zimbabwean scholars. A number of studies have been conducted in a bid to properly analyse this vice (Chari 2017; Mare 2019; Munoriyarwa 2020; Sauti 2022). The upsurge in scholarly literature on electoral violence depicts a society plagued by a perennial scourge that academics seek to find a panacea to. Before delving into the issues surrounding electoral violence in Zimbabwe, it is prudent to first define the concept. Electoral violence is defined as any coordinated campaign of threats made before, during, or after an election with the intention of intimidating, injuring, or coercing a political rival or stakeholder in order to determine, stall, or influence a political process (Osah and Jinmi-Ahisu 2021, 310). This shows that the need for power drives political players to organise and engage in acts of violence during election periods. Election violence is a concept that broadly refers to all types of structured acts or threats - physiological, psychological, and systemic - aimed at coercing, harming, or blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during, or after an election in order to determine, defer, or somehow influence an electoral process (Albert 2007, 133). From this, one can note that electoral violence has multiple dimensions, including institutional, psychological, and physiological.

The physical aspects include murder of political adversaries, burning, looting, shooting, abduction, and hostage-taking, as well as the violent disruption of political rallies and paramilitary attacks on polling places where ballots and boxes are snatched under threat of violence (Omotola 2010, 1). The psychological dimension pertains to official and informal measures that instil fear in the populace, which may result from physical aggression. Otomola adds that these include threats made to opposition troops by security personnel or sent via texts and phone calls. The structural component of electoral violence appears to be more prominent because it results from systemic problems, such as the politicalisation of security and election officers and the coercion of citizens by the government to register or vote, as well as unequal opportunities for political parties and candidates.

Taylor (2018, 8) emphasises how political intimidation, the use of firearms and ammunition, and other violent techniques are frequently used during electoral violence. All types of riots, looting, thuggery, political assassinations, and kidnapping that take place prior to, during, and after elections are considered election-related violence. Electoral violence has four main elements, according to Høglund (2009): (i) the motivation, (ii) the timing, (iii) the actors, and (iv) the targets. Unintentionally, the main cause of electoral violence is the desire to influence the results of the election. Munoriyarwa (2019, 9) notes that election violence often involves victims and perpetrators who know one another, fires group emotions, and mobilises the electorate with divisive and inflammatory narratives of victimisation, retaliation, and hate.

Additionally, it is clear that election-related violence does not only occur on election day, much like an election itself. It may occur prior to, during, or following the elections. Violence against electoral participants during voter registration or electioneering campaigns may be considered pre-election violence. Violence on election day involves stealing ballots or voting boxes, attacking opposition representatives or parties, and intimidating or threatening security personnel. Election-related violence may take the form of violent demonstrations against actual or hypothetical election rigging, as well as the use of force by the state in retaliation, which feeds the violence further (Omotola 2010, 3).

### **3.1 Electoral violence in the Zimbabwean context**

Between the year 2000 and 2018, Zimbabwe has held eight elections and two constitutional plebiscites. Many of these elections have been condemned by local and

international observers as unfree and unfair because of election violence (Munoriyarwa 2019, 2). The major motivating factor in the deployment of violence and rigging is the grabbing and retention of power by hook or by crook. It reflects an indirect admission that a ruling party would have lost popular support, hence the need to resort to terror and violence to compel voters to vote for it (Sachikonye 2011, 44). As far back as 1976, Mugabe articulated his conception of elections as thus:

*Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer – its guarantor. The peoples' votes and the peoples' guns are always inseparable twins (see Meredith 2002).*

The first election in independent Zimbabwe was characterised by violence. In order to mobilise rural support for the independence elections in 1980, ZANU-PF turned to its combatants who had not yet been de-militarised (that is those who had not yet entered Assembly Points). Observers noted that there was intense violence during this period. One observer explained it as thus:

*The most frequent and brutal acts of intimidation took place in ZANLA-dominated areas. Methods against voters extended from brutal 'disciplining murders' as examples of the fate awaiting those who failed to conform, to generalized threats of retribution or a continuance or resumption of the war if ZANU failed to win the election; to psychological pressures like name taking and claims to the possession of machines which would reveal how individuals had voted; and to the physical interdiction of attendance at meetings (Report by BOG, 1980: 12).*

Violence was also encountered in the 1985 election, but the post 2000 period witnessed an increase in the intensity of electoral violence. Election violence in the years before 2000 was largely under control for a variety of reasons. Pre-2000, ZANU PF was still a well-liked party compared to post-2000. Opposition parties like PF ZAPU and ZUM existed, but they were marginalized and stigmatised as being based on ethnicity. Additionally, they failed to submit enough candidates from throughout the nation to compete seriously. In the 1990 elections, the opposition Zimbabwe Union Movement (ZUM), led by Edgar Tekere, did not pose a serious challenge to ZANU

PF's hold on power because ZANU PF combined with its main rival, PF ZAPU (Munoriyarwa 2019, 12). It was unable to field candidates across the nation, although it persisted in the eastern province of Manicaland. However, the formation of the MDC in 1999 and its successful campaigning against a government-sponsored referendum for a new constitution in February 2000 enraged Mugabe. This was the first electoral defeat that Mugabe suffered since 1980. The referendum victory for the opposition happened four months before the June 2000 Parliamentary election. Violence was unleashed on opposition supporters in a bid to silence them.

The darkest election period in the history of Zimbabwean plebiscites was the 2008 presidential election. Following a generally peaceful March 29 election, things turned nasty following the announcement of presidential run off slated for June 27. Tsvangirai beat Mugabe in the presidential race but could not attain the 50 percent plus one vote needed to win the presidency. Tsvangirai's party won 116 out of the 210 parliamentary seats. To win the presidential run off, the ruling ZANU-PF party sought the services of the military, war veterans and other uniformed forces to 'deal' with perceived opposition supporters. The violence was so intense, people lost their lives, infrastructure destroyed and others maimed. Tsvangirai pulled out of the race in a bid to stop the violence.

Following Emmerson Mnangagwa's ascendancy to the throne, Zimbabweans felt that the political situation would be the same but the August 1, 2018, shootings of six civilians by some members of the uniformed forces just after the 2018 presidential election showed that nothing much had changed. Electoral violence reared its ugly head again in the March 26, 2022, by elections in Zimbabwe. The vacancies arose as a result of deaths, recalls, or dismals of members of parliament from the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-A) party fronted by Douglas Mwonozora between May 2020 and October 2020. The Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party led by Nelson Chamisa won 19 of the 28 seats in the national assembly and 75 of the 105 seats in local council while the ruling ZANU-PF party won the remaining national and local council seats (Sauti 2022, 20-21). The by elections were unique in the sense that they were the first elections that the CCC took part in and the plebiscite was also considered as a precursor to the 2023 harmonised elections.

A surge in electoral violence was witnessed during the by election campaign period with physical violence, derogatory and inflammatory language being thrown around

(Sauti 2022, 23). For instance, the country's vice president Constantino Guveya Chiwenga, declared on February 26, 2022, that in order to prevent Nelson Chamisa from winning the elections, ZANU-PF would crush CCC and Chamisa like lice. While Chiwenga was speaking at the Kwekwe meeting, ZRP soldiers were using tear gas to deter CCC supporters from joining a rally at Gokwe Center. How militarised Zimbabwe's political and electoral structures remain in Zimbabwe was also made clear by the way ZRP reacted to CCC's Meet the People demonstrations in Gokwe, Mashonaland Central, Marondera, and Masvingo. The ZANU PF party is still trying to further its hegemonic and ideological objectives by manipulating the country's security institutions. The political and electoral violence that characterised the by elections is testament of the violent political culture that the country inherited from colonialism (Sauti 2022, 24).

#### **4. Triggers of electoral violence in Zimbabwe**

While there might be a myriad of triggers of violent conflicts on the continent, electoral violence remains a major cause. This type of conflict distresses political stability, jeopardises democratic reform, hinders economic development, causes human suffering and may possibly degenerate into civil war (Höglund and Jarstad 2010, 1). Leone (2013, 1) is of the view that while democratic institutions and procedures like elections have either been introduced or reinforced, the fundamental societal power structures and norms regulating the political system remain untransformed. He adds that the history of one-party and dominant political party systems wherein politics and economics are often conflated results in exclusionary politics, which is intolerant of opposition and sometimes heavily militarised. These breed violent election-based conflict when dissenting voices emerge.

##### **4.1 The media as a driver of electoral conflict**

The media play an instrumental role in educating, entertaining and informing the public. Its part in providing election related information cannot be understated. However, the press has oftentimes accused of failing to take a stand against electoral violence through the adoption of peace journalism (Munoriyarwa 2019, 2). The media are seen to be providing information that is biased, not credible and partisan. Media's ideological polarisation has been fingered as a cause for the biased electoral reporting which causes conflict. The role of the media in triggering political and electoral violence is evident in the 2010/11 post-election violence in Ivory Coast in 2010/11 (see Odhiambo,

2007), Kenyan 2007/8 post-election violence (see Burchard 2015), and the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (see Verpoorten 2005).

The framing of electoral violence by the country's press is also a trigger of electoral violence. An analysis of The Herald's framing of the March 26 by elections' electoral violence shows that the paper was more concerned with blaming Chamisa and describing him as childish, blatant liar, naïve and an autocrat as seen in the article titled 'CCC project exposes Chamisa's poor political pedigree' published on 3 February 2022. It has also been argued that Zimbabwean newspapers' coverage of elections shows that they are "tacitly and overtly willing agents in fanning political violence by perpetuating social and political polarisation through acts of omission and commission" (Tsarwe and Mare 2019, 18).

The scholars argue that journalists from both the private and public media took "positioned" reporting styles and fuelled hate speech as well as name-calling and propaganda which epitomised central aspects of "war-like journalism". War journalism is built on the peace and war journalism dichotomy by Galtung. While "peace journalism" adopts a moral stance and journalists choose to identify "other" options for readers by providing solution-oriented, people-oriented, and truth-oriented reporting during conflict situations, "war journalism" is seen as violence-oriented, propaganda-oriented, elite-oriented, and victory-oriented (Ottosen 2010, 262). As a result, "war journalism" reproduces propaganda and encourages war, which fuels the escalation of electoral violence. The Zimbabwe Independent and the Sunday Mail presented elections as "wars" to be won or lost and this did not help the attainment of peaceful dispute settlement (Tsarwe and Mare 2019, 32). There is a danger that electoral violence will persist in Zimbabwe until the press which are central to informing people desist from (politically) polarising discourses and focus on a more informed, fact-based and objective coverage of election violence (Munoriyarwa 2020, 72).

#### **4.2 Intra-party conflicts**

Political parties across the world are not homogenous institutions that follow a specific or unitary will (Basedau & Köllner 2011, 6). The scholars contend that political parties are made up of several coalitions made up of political players seeking to pursue individual interests. During the struggle for liberation, the most dominant party, ZAPU split in 1963, paving the way for the formation of ZANU. Individuals like Ndabaningi Sithole, Henry Hamadziripi, Mukudzei Midzi, Herbert Chitepo, Edgar Tekere and

Leopold Takawira decided to form ZANU after a number of ideological and tribalistic differences. Factional fights were also witnessed within ZANU after the 1963 split and these fights were dealt with violently (see Mhanda 2011). The use of violence to deal with issues affecting parties is a common phenomenon in Zimbabwean politics. In both the opposition and the ruling ZANU-PF, party factions are endemic, and violence characterise primary elections as was the case in the primary elections held in search of candidates to represent parties in the March 26 by elections.

Party factions are created to bid for ascendancy to more powerful and influential positions in a party (Sachikonye 2011, 60). Sachikonye adds that factionalism within parties tend to coalesce around influential and powerful players within the party who seek to rival the party president. In other instances, the party president creates a faction meant to block the ascendancy of one rival player within the party. From as far back as 2000, ZANU-PF infighting towards elections was seen in provinces like Masvingo, Harare, Mashonaland East and Bulawayo. Infighting which also turned violent was witnessed in the opposition MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai in 2005. The then secretary general Welshman Ncube clashed with Tsvangirai over whether the party should participate in the 2005 Senate elections. From the weevils versus Gamatox, G40 versus Lacoste and the Mhangagwa versus Chiwenga factions, infighting within ZANU-PF has become common and it has often turned violent during elections. The same can be said for the opposition parties. The current wave of violent conflict between party members ahead of the elections in 2023 is worrying as it heightens fears that the nurturing of the culture of electoral related violence can be catastrophic going forward. A lot needs to be done to ensure that peace exists within the ruling party so that when it interacts with rival parties, violence will not be an option.

### **4.3 Interparty conflicts**

The emergence of the opposition MDC in 1999 rattled former president Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF as the Morgan Tsvangirai led opposition posed a serious threat to Mugabe's hold on power. To deal with the challenge, violence was inflicted on opposition officials and supporters in the 2000, 2002, 2008 and 2013 elections (Ndlovu-gatsheni 2012). There was hope that the Second Republic under Emerson Mhangagwa would effectively deal with inter party violence, but contemporary trends have shown that both the MDC and ZANU-PF are perfecting the art of electoral related violence which is a threat to peace and human security in the country.

In October 2021 violent clashes between ZANU-PF and MDC Alliance followers in Zvimba left many people seriously injured after ruling party supporters made attempts to stop opposition leader Nelson Chamisa from meeting Zvimba villagers (Muonwa, 2021). Bloody skirmishes between the rival parties were also recorded in Manicaland and Masvingo provinces. Mavhinga (2020) notes that president Mnangagwa has presided over several cases of abductions and torture of government critics which are yet to be resolved. He further argues that in 2019, over 70 opposition activists were abducted and tortured and in 2020, MDC Alliance activists Cecilia Chimhiri, Netsai Marova, and Member of Parliament Joanna Mamombe were abducted in Harare. However, to Makonye (2021), the MDC has also adopted the use of violence as a tool to fight ZANU-PF. The scholar further contends that Chamisa used violence to usurp power from Tsvangirai's natural successor Thokozani Khupe through the vanguard party which beat up, ridiculed and humiliated Khupe. This violent nature is also exhibiting itself in clashes with the ruling party as the tussle for political power ahead of the elections in 2023 heats up.

#### **4.4 Lack of trust in the electoral management system**

One of the most sensitive issues around elections throughout the world and a cause of conflict in African elections is the management of elections by the mandated electoral body. The Democratic Theory as espoused by Jean Jacques Rousseau contends that through elections, the credible selection of new leadership is allowed to ensure rotation of power (Dodo 2016, 22). However, the credibility of some Zimbabwean elections has been questioned which has triggered violent conflict. For instance, the opposition MDC Alliance has raised issues regarding the issue of electoral reforms which the ruling government is not keen on implementing. ZEC has been seen as complicit in alleged election thieving by the ruling ZANU-PF. Its independence has always been in question since the days of Mugabe. Opposition leaders and their supporters are of the view that ZEC is just an extension of government and can never preside over free and fair elections. In the 2018 elections, these suspicions led to violent conflict which led to the gunning down of some innocent people in Harare's central business district. MDC Alliance supporters felt that ZEC was deliberately delaying the announcement of presidential election results because it was manipulating the figures. This recent example shows how mismanagement of an

election, lack of voter education of election conflict and its impacts can have detrimental effects on human security

### **5. Policy options to deal with election-based violence**

Intra-party conflicts within the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition MDC not only threaten democratic consolidation but also pose a threat to social harmony and stability expected before and during election times. Basiru (2019, 120) argues that these fights usually snowball into intra-governmental crises which end up affecting governance and development. There is need for these parties to bolster internal conflict management systems enshrined in their constitutions. The current centralised approach to dealing within internal conflicts that exists in these parties ought to be replaced by a more decentralised approach that allows local branches to play critical roles. Additionally, Basiru (n.d.)'s call for parties to embrace non-adversarial conflict management models in political parties internal conflict management menu can be utilised by local political parties. He argues that these assist in the inculcation of a culture of trust and win-win attitudes at all levels within parties.

The paper recommends the reduction of benefits of winning elections. As articulated by Bjarnesen and Kovacs (2018) there is need for meaningful decentralisation and redistribution of political and economic power as well as strengthening institutions that are mandated with checking and balancing executive power. There is therefore need for electoral reforms aimed at skirting winner-take-all elections while promoting broad based political solutions which allow for electoral losers to have a role in the system. This reduces rate of inter party conflicts.

Additionally, the Zimbabwean government must devote time and resources to the periods between general polls. Much of electoral related violence takes place before polling day. In the Zimbabwean context, there is need to pay attention to subtle forms of election-related violence. Attention should be given to verbal threats and aggressive narratives that are key in securitising social processes during election periods. These should be urgently dealt with an effective and non-partisan police force.

There is need for the establishment of a conflict-sensitive journalism policy in Zimbabwe. This can be pivotal in the building of long-lasting peace in the country. the policy will try to ensure that media personalities operate along parameters that enhance prospects for peace. They will see to it that how they frame stories, word and phrase selection promote peace and support peace initiatives without jeopardising

basic journalism principles. This helps the professional reporting of stories without feeding the flames of conflict.

Government must ensure that ZEC's operations are transparent and effective as this can win people's trust and avoid post-election conflict. Proper management of electoral tools and systems like such as voters' registration systems and technology used to conduct elections is important according to a 2021 Policy Brief On Kenya Elections. The electoral body should explain clearly how it will make sure that the safety and security of voters, candidates, election officials and their families will be protected.

### **6. Consequences of electoral violence on human security**

Human security is one of the more salient neologisms that arose from the ashes of the Cold War. The logic behind its introduction and advocacy was clear: the realist, state-centric paradigm of security that championed the primacy of territorial integrity over that of the individual, seemed increasingly anachronistic in a world where states no longer faced the existential threat that nuclear stand-off had perpetuated (Jolly and Ray 2006, 3-4). Instead, the referent of security should be the individual. Inter-state warfare had all but ceased to exist, but civil and ethnic wars ravaged populations. These 'new wars' – a product of globalisation and the emergence of intransigent nationalisms – destroyed infrastructure, involved the intentional targeting of non-combatants, further worsened and proliferated conditions of poverty, and promoted and drove criminal activities and illegal economies (Kaldor 2007, 6).

Human security therefore entails the protection of an individual within the state from things such as violence, climate change effects, natural disasters, diseases, among others. The state has a duty to ensure that citizens are protected from all things that might harm them. It is in the same light that the paper contends that electoral violence affects the security status of people in the country. The March 26 by elections in Zimbabwe were plagued by violence, hate speech, name calling among others, and this led to physical fights breaking out between and within parties. The violence that erupted at a CCC rally in Kwekwe led to the death Mboneni Ncube at the hands of suspected ZANU-PF supporters.

Election violence has the potential to ruin years of peacekeeping and development efforts, to weaken democratic institutions, and even to spark civil war if it causes enough casualties to satisfy the threshold for civil war (Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020, 1). Electoral violence led to the death of more than 1000 civilians in Côte d'Ivoire

while over a million were internally displaced people and 100,000 refugees fled to neighbouring countries. Death, physical injury, displacement, among other things associated with violence of an electoral nature create further human security issues. While post independent elections in Zimbabwe have been known to be violent, the 2023 plebiscite has to be one with a difference because if not handled well they will end up fuelling the destruction of property and infrastructure, leave other people homeless, lose loved ones among others. All these contribute to human insecurity and affect the peace and security status of Zimbabweans.

## **7. Conclusions and recommendations**

This policy paper sought to bring to the fore some of the key triggers of pre-election violence in Zimbabwe and how it affects human security as the nation moves towards the 2023 general plebiscite. Zimbabwe must endeavour to deal with the myriad of issues that include intra and inter party conflicts as well as media's fanning of violent conflict. In the absence of such efficient mechanisms, peace will be at best significantly short-lived come 2023 and at worst almost difficult to attain. To deal with the aforementioned challenges, a number of initiatives can be implemented to effectively curb the risk of rampant election-related violence in the period leading to the 2023 election.

## **8. Recommendations**

1. Political parties in the country must deliberate on how they can improve internal conflict management systems enshrined in their constitutions.
2. There is need for electoral reforms in Zimbabwe aimed at skirting winner-take-all elections while promoting broad based political solutions which allow for electoral losers to have a role in the system. This reduces rate of inter party conflicts.
3. Information ministry must consider investing in conflict sensitive communications training for journalists so that the media do not fan electoral conflict. "Peace journalism" practices are essential in defusing political violence and socio-political polarisation.
4. There is no peace journalism practice in the country's media. Generally, journalists are ignorant are fond of making use of hate speech, confrontational, polarising and divisive discourses on electoral violence which creates the them versus us mentality between political players and their supporters. The press

sometimes goes beyond reporting on electoral violence to participating in the violence. The paper therefore calls upon media personnel to embrace peace journalism news reporting model.

5. Government ought to ponder on the idea of continuous media relations training of senior government officials, opposition parties' officials, civil society, among others with the objective of enhancing relations between these officials and the media so that there is cooperation in the reporting of electoral conflict.

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