

Youth Participation Crucial for Credibility of Zimbabwe's Next Election

The positive and wholesale participation of the country's youth will be pivotal if the next election in Zimbabwe is to be credible, free and fair. In the past the youths' energy has been diverted towards negative contribution to the electoral process and they have become infamous and synonymous with the violence that has characterized previous elections in Zimbabwe.

The Youth Forum notes and contends that youth participation in previous elections has been dismally low and highly negative. According to a study commissioned by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) in April 2010, only 18% of the current voters' roll can be classified as youth (18 – 30 years). This figure is quite shocking considering that Zimbabwe is generally regarded as a youthful population with over 60% of the country under the age of 35 years.

Contrary to the above figures which point towards an apathetic youth towards civic and political processes, young people have actually been a crucial factor in many elections that have occurred in the past. Due to the endemic shrinking of space for political participation by an elderly ruling elite, bent on perpetuating their stay in power, the energy and eagerness of young people to participate in the electoral process has been systematically channeled towards peripheral roles. It is common knowledge that previous elections in Zimbabwe has seen them competing with their mothers as praise-singers of elderly politicians at political rallies during electoral campaigning periods. Nefarious politicians have gone on to drug these youth and coercing them to perpetrate gruesome acts of violence against real and perceived antagonists and rivals of these politicians. Youth militias and vigilante groups have become synonymous with elections, and this trend was quite evident in the run-up to the sham June 27 2008 presidential run-off election, whose result we all know later culminated in the animal we call the inclusive government today.

The Youth Forum avers that for as long as the energy of young people is diverted towards such peripheral and negative roles in the electoral process, we will continue to have discredited elections in Zimbabwe. We continue to emphasize the need to have meaningful participation of young people in the electoral process as a precursor to building a robust citizen response and participation in the governance process – in allowing the citizens to have the final say on who governs them through regular, free and fair elections. Given their demographic dominance, it is through the participation of young people in the elections that Zimbabwe can truly realize democracy and a government that is truly representative of the majority. As Youth Forum, we call upon all stakeholders to prioritize ensuring that the youth are empowered to take a leading role in deciding who governs them from time to time. The Youth Forum has already taken a lead in launching the 'Youth Go Register to Vote Campaign' which seeks to have at least one million youth having registered as voters by the time the next election is held in Zimbabwe. We urge the government of Zimbabwe to be sensitive to the plight of many young Zimbabweans who are being frustrated in their quest to register as voters. We further demand that:

- The Registrar-General's office stop playing truant by turning away youth wishing to register as voters, alleging that the president has not yet called for elections. Our understanding of the law is that voter registration is an open process, just like national registration or vehicle registration, as long as it is done within working hours.
- Traditional chiefs and headmen in some rural areas stop denying youth wishing to register as voters 'proof of residence' in their areas – this proof of residence is a pre-requisite for registration and denying them this is tantamount to denying them their democratic right. We have names of such traditional leaders and note that history will judge you harshly.

The Youth Forum will not tire in its quest to see a democratic Zimbabwe where youth play an important role in safeguarding democracy.

Youth Register to Vote Today – It's Your Right Anyway!