

Zimbabwe election: Bitter fallout begins
By Andrew Harding
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If you think Zimbabwe's election campaign was bitter and polarising - wait for the furious new battle taking shape in a country that rarely finds "closure" at the bottom of a ballot box.

Before the official results are even announced, and before the legal challenges are even drafted, the fight now begins for control of the narrative - of the "true story" of what just happened to Zimbabwean democracy.

Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) has been quick off the mark, condemning the entire process - apart from the counting, anyway - as "a sham" and "a huge farce".

Its numerous complaints - from the rushed and flawed voter registration process, to the last minute release of the voters' roll, to the exclusion of "almost 40% of voters" on polling day itself - will no doubt form the basis of numerous court battles in the weeks ahead.



The MDC-T's objections are given added weight by the largest network of people monitoring the election. ZESN had 7,000 "trained and accredited citizen observers" nationwide and quickly concluded that the elections have been "seriously compromised by a systematic effort to disenfranchise up to a million urban voters".

But that combined narrative faces a formidable opponent in the shape of President Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF, and - it's likely - the various regional and international organisations with observer teams in the country.

Unnamed Zanu-PF officials have already been quoted as celebrating "a landslide victory" and - assuming the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) announces something similar in the coming hours - Mr Mugabe will swiftly claim another term.

As he showed after the violence and chaos of 2008, he's a hard man to dislodge.

It will be interesting to see what happens with the parliamentary vote too - could Zanu-PF even win a two-thirds majority enabling them to amend the new constitution?

Zanu-PF will no doubt, as it has done before, dismiss ZESN as a propaganda arm of the MDC, funded by colonial Western forces.

The African Union's small team of observers have already described the process as "orderly and peaceful".

Grounds for challenge?

Although Zimbabwe's neighbours, in the form of the Southern African Development Community (Sadc), have expressed some concern about the handling of the voters' roll, they have also shown no inclination to challenge President Mugabe seriously on the bias in the state media and the open partisanship shown by the security services.

The AU and SADC may query and investigate individual incidents, but at this stage there is no indication that they will find grounds to challenge the overall results of the election.

All of which leaves Britain, the European Union, the United States and others in something of a pickle. Having been barred from sending in their own election monitoring teams, they have effectively sub-contracted their judgement to Sadc.

If they are seriously unhappy with the outcome, the West can dangle the threat of more sanctions in front of Mr Mugabe.

But he has spent five years using those sanctions as a highly effective propaganda tool at home - even at the age of 89 he remains a consummate and ruthless political operator.

And there is a discernable sense that much of the outside world - Britain and a handful of other countries apart - has simply grown tired of Zimbabwe's democratic allergies and would rather grudgingly accept a flawed result than go through another five years of haggling and misery.

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