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Zimbabwe: No confidence in the electoral process without local election monitors

As international pressure grows on Zimbabwe to accept the immediate deployment of observers for upcoming presidential elections, now less than 40 days away, Amnesty International calls upon the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and the European Union to insist that local monitors should also be involved in monitoring the polls.

“International and regional observers, even if they are allowed into Zimbabwe in the next week, would work best alongside local civil society observers who are experienced in detecting vote rigging,” Amnesty International said. “International promotion and protection of human rights should be a partnership between Zimbabwean civil society and the international community,” the organization said.

Amnesty International appealed to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, meeting in London on 30 January, to press Zimbabwe to allow its own civil society to scrutinize the conduct of the presidential elections on 9 and 10 March without state interference.

Amendments to the election code passed into law in December 2001 created a government-controlled body that will accredit only those local, regional and international observers who have been invited by the foreign affairs minister or the Electoral Supervisory Commission (ESC) to observe the 9 to 10 March election. This provision contains the risk that only members of the Zimbabwe civil society whose political opinion government approves of will be allowed to observe the election.

Further, the new changes to the election code allow only chosen civil service employees to actually monitor the vote count. Only monitors, as opposed to observers, may bring irregularities in the conduct of the poll to the authorities' attention. Previously, in the June 2000 parliamentary elections, domestic Zimbabwean monitors played a key role in detecting attempts to rig the polls.

Other stipulations in the new electoral code bans any foreign donations for voter education, limits all voter education materials to those approved by the ESC, and threatens six months imprisonment for anyone not registered by the ESC carrying out voter education.

Amnesty International reaffirms the views of the local chapter of Transparency International, which noted that a "prerequisite for a fair electoral process is the independent monitoring of the poll -- by international but also by domestic observers."

The organization this week mobilized its worldwide membership to ask parliamentarians abroad to contact Zimbabwean members of parliament to provide them with encouragement and call attention to any violent attacks against them -- amid a government crack-down on campaigning.

Two rallies by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) have been broken up recently. Last week, some 25 MDC supporters were arrested in Bulawayo by police after ruling party supporters blocked their rally. Police acted in a clearly partisan manner by allowing the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) to prevent a lawful, peaceful assembly. On the weekend, further reports indicated a second rally involving two members of parliament in the suburbs of Harare was also violently suppressed by the ruling party, assisted by riot police.

"We do not support or oppose any government, nor support or oppose the political views of the people whose rights it tries to protect, but are solely concerned about the rapid escalation of human rights violations in Zimbabwe," Amnesty International reiterated. The great majority of abuses committed since the run-up to the June 2000 elections have been perpetrated by ruling party activists against opposition supporters.

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