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Zimbabwe must stop clampdown and protect fundamental rights during referendum

As Zimbabwe heads to the polls this weekend to vote on a proposed new constitution, Amnesty International urges the authorities to allow eligible civil society organizations to observe the process without harassment and intimidation.

Recent months have seen a clampdown on dissent as a number of civil society organisations have been raided by police and charged with spurious offences ranging from ‘causing malicious damage to property’ and ‘smuggling’ radios into the country.

An announcement last week by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission stated that organisations facing police investigations would be prevented from monitoring the referendum.

“The Zimbabwean authorities must stop this game playing and allow the referendum to take place in a context that ensures the internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly,” said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International’s southern Africa director.

“Previous polls in Zimbabwe have been marred by political violence and human rights abuses. Saturday offers the country a chance to prove it can make a break with the past.”

In Zimbabwe’s last Presidential elections in 2008 more than 200 people died in election related violence. Tens of thousands were internally displaced while more than 10,000 were injured.

Zimbabwe’s next general elections will take place later this year, most likely in July.

In the past six months, Amnesty International has documented police raids on seven organizations. At least five of these are groups that have been involved in voter registration and other polls-related activities. Some of them have provided local election observers in previous elections.

In a further indication that the government is attempting to stifle freedom of expression and alternative access to information, the police announced a ban on short wave radios in Zimbabwe on 19 February. It is not clear under which law this ban was made.

Following the ban, police searched the offices of Radio Dialogue in Bulawayo, seized 180 radios and charged Zenzele Ndebele, the station manager, under section 182 of the Customs and Exercise Act.

“This referendum is a litmus paper for the elections that will be held later this year. Rather than using it as a practice run for suppression and intimidation, the government must embrace it as an opportunity to reinforce respect for human rights and the rule of law,” said Kututwa.