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Southern African leaders must ensure peaceful elections in Zimbabwe

Southern African leaders must ensure human rights are prioritized in the run-up to elections in Zimbabwe, Amnesty International said ahead of a key summit on the country.

The Southern African Development Committee (SADC) meets Saturday in Maputo, Mozambique to review the electoral process in Zimbabwe, where a general election will be held before 31 July.

“The SADC has played a critical role in easing the tension in Zimbabwe since the political violence of 2008. Now it has the duty to ensure that the coming elections are held in an environment free from human rights violations, including violence,” said Noel Kututwa Amnesty International's Africa Deputy Programme Director.

“Specifically, the SADC should immediately deploy human rights monitors to Zimbabwe to oversee the period before, during and after the elections.”

On 31 May, Zimbabwe’s Constitutional Court ruled that elections must be held before the end of July.

In the run-up to the second round of the 2008 presidential election – between current President Robert Mugabe of ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) leader Morgan Tsvangirai, who is now serving as the country’s Prime Minister in a coalition government – Zimbabwe was beset by a wave of state-sponsored violence that left at least 200 people dead.

Thousands more were tortured at makeshift detention camps set up across the country.

“Zimbabwe's unity government must hasten legal reforms to ensure that all rights in the constitution are enjoyed during the upcoming election,” said Kututwa.

“The SADC should ensure that Zimbabweans can participate in an election that is free from violence, harassment and intimidation, that the security sector remains impartial, and that the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are upheld.”

The elections will take place against backdrop of ongoing harassment of human rights defenders in the country.

As recently as 4 June, three activists from the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) were detained, interrogated and then released by police in the eastern town of Mutare.

According to their lawyers, the three were interrogated for allegedly possessing human rights promotional materials.

In recent months, the offices of several civil society organizations have been raided by police, who seized computers, phones and documents.

ZimRights director, Okay Machisa, who spent two weeks in a remand prison in January, is among those to have faced charges relating to legitimate human rights work.

“This pattern of abuses has to stop. Police should respect all the rights enshrined in the declaration of rights in Zimbabwe’s new constitution, including the rights of people promoting human rights in an election context,” said Kututwa.