
Role of parliament in electoral reform

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Introduction

The electoral reform process is a permanent feature of any democratic society. Each country is unique and as such will implement reforms, which take into account its political realities. Parliament plays an important role in the enactment of the electoral laws, which seek to capture the peoples' hopes, wishes and aspirations. Any electoral reform should seek to create peace, stability and an enabling environment, where citizens are free to exercise their choice in a democratic manner.

The role of Parliament in the electoral reform process cannot be over emphasised. The policy makers can either impede or promote the reform process and therefore important that the policy makers are informed and educated about the need for electoral reform. Without this knowledge, the reforms can be manipulated to gain political mileage or they can be used to advance the interests of the general public. At most electoral reforms are conducted as a result of number of factors that include among many; voter apathy, responsiveness to international developments, political party and internal and external observers assessments of the electoral performance etc.

Parliament Of Zimbabwe and The Electoral Reform Process

The Zimbabwe electoral system is heavily borrowed from the British system, which uses the *first past the post (FPTP)*. Since 1980, the country has been conducting its major elections on a periodic and regular basis. The

political environment has been characterised by electoral reforms based on political realities. Parliament of Zimbabwe has also played a key role during the electoral reform process.

Electoral Laws Enacted by Parliament of Zimbabwe

In the last few years, the electoral system went through a number of reforms which were largely influenced by the socio-political environment and other regional developments. A number of electoral laws have been enacted by Parliament of Zimbabwe and these include; the Political Parties (Finances) Act (2001), the Electoral Act(2004) and the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission Act (2004). The Political Parties (Finances) Act sought among other things to limit the influence of bribes and to regulate financing of candidates in an election. The Electoral and Zimbabwe Electoral Commission Acts both sought among other things to co-ordinate the electoral process through the setting up of an independent electoral body. The two Acts also incorporated a number of recommendations in the SADC Principles and Guidelines governing democratic elections such as;

- ❖ the use of translucent ballot boxes,
- ❖ the conduct of voting in one day,
- ❖ verification of ballots and counting at the polling stations,
- ❖ limited postal votes to civil servants on diplomatic missions or those on duty outside their constituencies and
- ❖ Promotion of gender equity in the management of elections.

Public Participation in the Reform Process

The desire for electoral reforms also calls for public participation in the whole process. Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, has held wide consultation on electoral reforms in to get the views of the stakeholders through public hearings. The Committee analysed the views after which a report was tabled before the House. The aim of such a process is to ensure that there is input of all stakeholders in the electoral reform process, which is acceptable to all interested parties.

Implications of Electoral Reform

There are a number of factors, which have to be taken into consideration when conducting electoral reforms, such as:

- ❖ The priorities of the nation
- ❖ The cost and administrative implications
- ❖ The socio-political context
- ❖ The electoral system
- ❖ International and Regional Standards

Priorities of the Nation

Electoral reforms should be considered within the broader social, political and economic environment. For example, certain sections of the Zimbabwean community have been advocating for constitutional reform. While this is a noble idea, the nation has other pressing needs, which are of paramount importance. In this case Parliament can act as a watchdog, to see to it that the current electoral laws are creating an enabling environment for transparent, free and fair elections.

Cost and Administration Implications

In advocating for electoral reform, Parliament has to consider the implications that these reforms will have on the fiscus.

Socio-Political Context

Every country is unique and at the same time at different levels of political development. Therefore cultural consideration has to be taken into account when conducting electoral reforms since all reforms should be viewed in terms of their positive impact on democratic development.

Electoral Systems

There are 3 major electoral systems used in the world, which include: proportional representation, plurality/majority systems and mixed systems. These systems have an impact on the election results. The systems are drawn from conventions and historical experiences. However, whatever system is used, Parliament should ensure that this promotes equality and basic human rights.

International and Regional Standards

The electoral reforms or systems that we have in today's world are based on a number of international covenants, treaties and other kinds of legal instruments affecting political processes. It also has to be appreciated that there is no single complete set of universally agreed international standards for elections. However, there is consensus that electoral reform should include the principles of free, fair and periodic elections that guarantee universal adult suffrage, the secrecy of the ballot and freedom from

coercion. Parliaments are encouraged to ratify some of these international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Conclusion

Electoral reform is an going process that should always be guided by the principles of equality and the respect of basic human rights. All states are at different levels of political development, hence the electoral reforms adopted differ. At the end of the day what is essential is to conduct reforms which will lead to a peaceful and stable society and Parliaments should always play their role of enacting laws that safeguard the interests of the people.

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