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Policy Dialogue Report

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Zoom Online

## SALO Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe



### Executive Summary

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, the Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) hosted a public dialogue titled “Civil Society Briefing on Zimbabwe” in partnership with the Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA). The purpose of this meeting was to discuss new developments that are taking place leading up to the 2023 Zimbabwean national elections. This meeting created a space for civil society leaders to provide an update on the deteriorating human rights situation in Zimbabwe. The dialogue was chaired by **Munjodzi Mutandiri** (SALO) and **Lwazi Somya** (SALO) made the opening remarks for the meeting.

Speakers included *Jestina Mukoko* - Director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, *Zenzele Ndebele* - journalist, filmmaker and human rights activist, *Peter Mutasa* - chairperson at Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, *Sitabile Dewa* - a member of the Women’s Academy for leadership and Political Excellence, and *Dr Dale McKinley* - a member of Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia.

## Summary of Presentations

### **Jestina Mukoko**, Zimbabwe Peace project

Jestina expressed her concerns about the developments of gruesome murders and violence that have been taking place in Zimbabwe leading up to the 2023 election. Jestina explained how these developments and events are trying to overpower democratic voices by threatening the lives of the outspoken. She emphasised the murder of MoreBlessing Ali and how it transpired,

*“Looking at the Murder of MoreBlessing Ali, I am really worried about the developing narratives, a narrative where we are increasingly seeing a fight over dead bodies.”*

There is a situation in Zimbabwe where political parties claim people as their members after they pass away, even though they did not recognise the individual when they were alive, however, they do not take any responsibility to investigate the cause of death. There was another case of an activist who had been killed and was also claimed by Zanu-PF and a conflict between political parties ensued about who will host the funeral.

In her opinion, the violence that was taking place was triggered by irresponsible statements from the leaders which influenced the actions of their followers.

Jestina also stressed the ongoing processes related to the upcoming elections, including the lack of documentation for some citizens. This issue was raised due to the urgency for every Zimbabwean citizen to vote in the 2023 elections and if one is undocumented, they will not be able to vote. Therefore, the situation has become a political issue. Jestina believes that the situation is an obstacle because many people cannot access documentation and in some parts of the country the process of documentation has been inadequately conducted - many receive their document without pictures, which would not be a valid proof of identification at the voting station.

### **Zenzele Ndebele** Journalist, filmmaker and human rights activist

Zenzele started his input from the journalist and media point of view. He expressed how complex it has become to cover news in Zimbabwe, especially during election times when they witness the most violence. There is a culture that has been developed by the ruling party that if you do not work for the government, you are automatically labelled as anti-government and you are the enemy. The history of Zimbabwe has been shaped by this culture and the violence that erupts is used to manipulate the voting process.

The media faces many challenges and pressure from the government, especially the ones that do not cover news in favour of the government. There have been changes in the law that oppose Section 62 of the constitution which grants the media the right to freedom of the press and freedom of media to access information. As a result, the media has been denied access to resources and certain environments of work. Every

journalist, even accredited journalists, has to register with the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to be able to cover news about the elections and the fees are claimed to have doubled. All these pressures are put in place to prohibit many writers from participating or to push the mainstream media out. However, reporters and media that are linked to the government do not experience any of these inconveniences.

Zenzele speaks about how the prohibition of media will have an effect on the Zimbabwean community - the media is the voice of the people, it speaks for the voiceless. If the media cannot bring the news to the people and give a voice to people's opinions, people are going to self-censor and withdraw from speaking about affairs that involve the government because they fear for their lives. Zenzele concludes that history is about to repeat itself, judging from the government's action towards the media and what the response may be from the community of Zimbabwe.

### **Peter Mutasa, Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition**

Peter's contribution focused on the need to identify properly the nature of the current Zimbabwean regime before strategies and solutions can be found. He believes that Zimbabwe is ruled by a military dictatorship that is failing in all aspects - economically, socially, and politically. It has mostly gone unnoticed that the constitution of Zimbabwe is no longer active, and all constitutional rights have been abolished. The state is supposed to protect its citizens from any kind of violence, but the state has been perpetuating violence against the people.

Peter goes on to explain that constitutional rights being eroded by the government include freedom of expression, the right to religion, freedom of conscience and all political rights. He gives an example of activists who have been speaking out against the government such as Hopewell Chin'ono and Mduduzi Mathuthu, who have been arrested and prosecuted for practising their rights and speaking truth to power. Citizens are being harassed and intimidated for supporting the opposition party and he has witnessed how the state intimidating church leaders to persuade people to support the ruling party

*"You saw in 2007/08, where they would brutalize church leaders for seeking to have a prayer meeting. So, Archbishop Bishop Magaya, and others were prevented from having a church prayer meeting and they were arrested - 34 people were arrested for that. This is simply showing how all our freedoms are gone."*

This intimidation, torture, and arbitrary arrests of Zimbabweans are used as a strategy to instil fear to silence people. Peter explains that Zimbabwe is imitating colonial laws and repressing dissenting voices. The state claims to be liberating the country against colonialism and imperialism when in actuality they adopted the colonial laws and abandoned the values of the liberation struggles - the regime is repressing and brutalizing the people of Zimbabwe just like the colonial regime used to.

Peter concludes with his expectations for 2023 in Zimbabwe. He claims that the upcoming elections in Zimbabwe will be bloody, as can be seen in the violence that has already taken place. There will be more murders, arrests, and intimidation. He claims that there have been no changes to ensure free and fair elections:

- the state media remains partisan,
- the intimidation against unions and opposition parties remains,
- the justice system remains partisan,
- traditional ZANU-PF leaders have not changed,
- local chiefs, district committees and traditional leadership structures control the community through food aid and are often coerced to vote for the ruling party,
- the justice system has no legitimacy and often acts in the favour of the government.

Therefore, Peter suggests that going into 2023, Zimbabwe will need assistance locally, regionally, and internationally to raise Zimbabwean voices. He calls upon political structures from the region and international institutions to stand with Zimbabwe in the promotion of free and fair elections and he suggests two to do this. First, there should be a guarantor to mediate between the ruling party and the opposition to stop the violence. Second, a clear roadmap that is based on the constitution should be established to eliminate unlawful forces and reinstate the constitution and justice system. The Zimbabwean issue is not a periodic issue, it has been happening for decades and regional structures such as the UN, EU, and SADC need to establish intervention measures.

### **Sitabile Dewa, Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence**

Sitabile touched on all aspects that are affecting Zimbabwe economically, socially, and politically. She expressed her sadness about the horrific events that are taking place in Zimbabwe, including high levels of corruption, violence, impunity, and arbitrary arrests. Zimbabweans are struggling to make ends meet, they are frustrated by the political state of their country, and they are witnessing horrific scenes of murder and violence against women and children.

The case of violence against women and children continues to rise. The increase was more evident during the COVID period and Sitabile believes that it is a result of the lack of intervention from the government. When the youth and activists take to the streets to advocate for human rights and demand the deliverance of social services, they are arbitrarily arrested, tortured and murdered with no justice for these crimes.

Safety and access to social services are guaranteed for citizens that belong to the ruling party:

*"If you want a stand, you need to prove that you belong to a certain political party and to be specific, the ruling party. So, who can dispute the fact that maybe Moreblessing got the card to protect herself from the harassment, the intimidation...? And this is not peculiar to Moreblessing. So many of these cases, even in rural areas where if you want to access food aid, you need to prove that you belong to the ruling party."*

Women in particular face extreme violence if they show any interest in standing for public office. The Zimbabwe Constitution does allow females to participate in democratic processes however, that constitutional right has not been practised in Zimbabwe.

In her final words, expressed how she wishes that Zimbabweans would stand together in the 2023 elections and vote for the most deserving candidate that would bring change to Zimbabwe. If the elections are contested, there will be more Zimbabweans fleeing the country to neighbouring and international countries, in hopes of better lives which could lead to a spike in xenophobia in these countries. Therefore, Zimbabwe must hold fair and transparent elections because Zimbabwean affairs do affect the rest of the region and the region needs to contribute effectively to ensure that they promote free elections in Zimbabwe.

### **Dr Dale McKinley, Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia**

As a result of the political affairs in Zimbabwe, many have fled the country to neighbouring countries, specifically South Africa. Dr Dale McKinley believes that the xenophobia crisis in South Africa is a result of a combination of the political and economic crises in the country. South Africa is suffering from a governance crisis and high levels of corruption. He believes that xenophobia has worsened after the initial violent breakout in 2008 for many reasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the failure of the South African government to deliver basic social services and the high unemployment rate of South Africans. Foreign nationals have suffered the consequences of a failing government and immigrants in South Africa have been used as a tactic in political affairs - they are scapegoated for the high unemployment rate and blamed for taking all the jobs, leaving South Africans without. Some political leaders have been supporting these utterances and are blaming foreign nationals for the shortage of jobs. The newly developed National Labor Migration Policy will set quotas for the employment of foreign nationals and list critical skills that are required for foreign nationals to get employment while reserving certain sectors for South African citizens.

These sentiments have paved a way for the establishment of xenophobic organisations like Operation Dudula. Operation Dudula is known for demolishing the businesses of foreign nationals, attacking informal traders, and evicting foreign nationals from houses, claiming that they cannot own houses or rent in South Africa. This has been happening in all parts of South Africa, however, Johannesburg has experienced the most violence. Operation Dudula gained support from locals and the South African Police services have been unable to fully protect or defend the foreign nationals from Operation Dudula:

*“You see them standing back, they're not enforcing the law, they're not arresting people on incitement to hatred. You have Chapter Nine Institutions like the South African Human Rights Commission, which are basically doing nothing - absolutely nothing, they're completely sitting back and keeping quiet.”*

## **Questions and Contributions from Participants**

- **Nhlanhla** contributed by asking what can be done to ensure that history does not keep repeating itself since the current situation is a familiar one.

- **Munjodzi Mutandiri** asked about the issue of Diaspora Votes and what has been done to ensure that those in the diaspora can vote.
- **Tendai Mbanje** contributed to the issue of regional intervention, stressing that civil society groups in Zimbabwe need to be capacitated. He claims that regional democratic spaces seem to be shrinking or failing *“what we experienced is that regions, because of democratic disparities, seem to be faced with much more challenges - so to look inwards might be a good approach in terms of finding solutions”*.

## Responses from the Panel

- **Peter Mutasa** concluded by commenting on the question raised by Nhlanhla with encouraging words: *“let's not lose heart. It was never possible for us to have a democratic transition in Zimbabwe without a properly planned roadmap. Seeing that we're coming from a brutal war, the liberation struggle was not a picnic. It was brutal. It was a bitter struggle.”*
- **Justina Mukoko** answered the question asked by Munjodzi Mutandiri. The diaspora assists their families through remittances and that they are Zimbabweans and should be given the right to vote. However, *“it's a conversation that we need to be finalising so that when we get to the elections, we know that our relatives who are in the diaspora are able to vote.”* If it does not happen, she encourages those in the diaspora to travel back home to vote.
- **Dr Dale McKinley** concluded by emphasising the importance of reviewing strategies and tactics and coming up with plan B if plan A does not work. *“So, we're working closely, for example, with the comrades in Swaziland right now and they've told us they've realised that all these dialogues, all of these things are not working - the repression is becoming worse, it's just going underground, and the SADC is useless. The ANC is not going to come to the rescue, the South Africans are not coming there. They're not putting pressure because of other political and economic assignments, same in Zimbabwe. And so, they're going to have to look, and they're now seriously considering a whole other strategic [approach].”*

## Conclusion

This dialogue hosted by SALO brought together members of the Zimbabwean civil society to provide an update on new developments that are taking place leading up to the 2023 elections. The platform allowed participants to voice their frustrations about the ongoing undemocratic events that are taking place in Zimbabwe, intending to influence the results of the 2023 elections. The dialogue also provided a platform where civil society members were able to discuss what can be done within Zimbabwe to reinstate the constitution that has been suspended. Suggestions were made as to how civil society can begin to tackle the issue of democracy within the state.

*The analysis and recommendations included in this report do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.*

**About the Southern African Liaison Office:**



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

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**Norwegian People's Aid**