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Zimbabwe: The Evolving Public Mood

Introduction

At the end of 2010, Zimbabwean citizens remained broadly supportive of power sharing as an antidote to political crisis. But they were increasingly critical of the halting performance of their country's coalition government. Most people also perceived declining civil liberties and feared resurgent political violence. Yet clear majorities called for constitutional reforms to limit the powers of the presidency and seemingly even for free elections in 2011 to return the country to legitimate rule.

These are the major findings of an Afrobarometer survey conducted among a national cross-section of the Zimbabwean adults in late October 2010.

Context

Following a disputed presidential election in June 2008, the former ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) entered a power-sharing pact with two wings of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in September. A Global Political Agreement (GPA) established an Inclusive Government (IG) in February 2009 with Robert Mugabe as President and Morgan Tsvangirai as Prime Minister. In practice, the IG has implemented few of the major provisions of the GPA, in large part because Mugabe and ZANU-PF have been unwilling to surrender a meaningful share of executive and military power. By October 2010, the government was essentially stalemated. With a public outreach program on constitutional reform marred by violence, with security forces and ZANU-PF militias redeployed around the country, and with both sides calling for fresh elections, the country risked relapse into another dangerous period of political instability.

Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance and living conditions in Africa. Each national survey – now conducted in 20 African countries – is based on a randomly selected national probability sample of at least 1200 respondents representing a cross-section of adults of voting age. A sample of this size yields a margin of sampling error of ± 3.0 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. All interviews are conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent's choice.

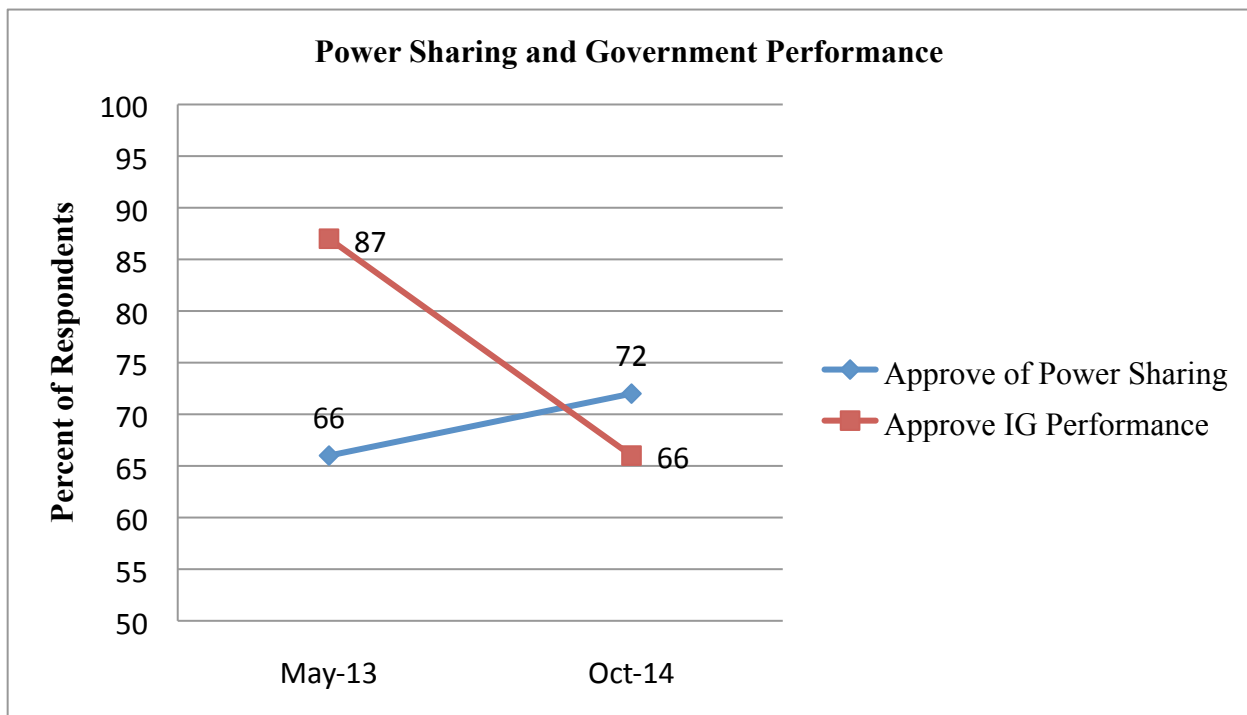
The Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), the Afrobarometer partner in Zimbabwe, conducted fieldwork for the present survey in all ten provinces of the country on 16-29 October, 2010. It was the latest in a series of Afrobarometer surveys in Zimbabwe, with previous studies

conducted in 1999, 2002, 2005, and May 2009. For the purposes of tracking trends in public opinion since the formation of the Inclusive Government, this report adds data from a survey sponsored by Freedom House and conducted by MPOI in September 2009 that contained many Afrobarometer and country-specific tracking items.

Reflecting a worsening security situation in parts of rural Zimbabwe, the target sample in the October 2010 survey fell short by eight interviews (N=1192). Intimidation by ZANU-PF militias forced the fieldwork team to withdraw prematurely from a primary sampling area in Mashonaland Central Province. Since the data from have been weighted to correct for this anomaly, we are confident that the results reliably represent a cross-section of the political opinions of Zimbabwean adults at the time of the survey.

Power Sharing: Popular But Failing

As of October 2010, Zimbabweans continued to place confidence in power sharing as a mode of governance. Some 72 percent agreed that “creating an Inclusive Government was the best way to resolve the recent post-election crisis.” This level of popular endorsement represents an increase over time because only 66 percent felt the same way in May 2009. By contrast, just 21 percent in the latest survey regard power sharing as ineffective, believing that “leaders should have found another way to resolve the crisis.”



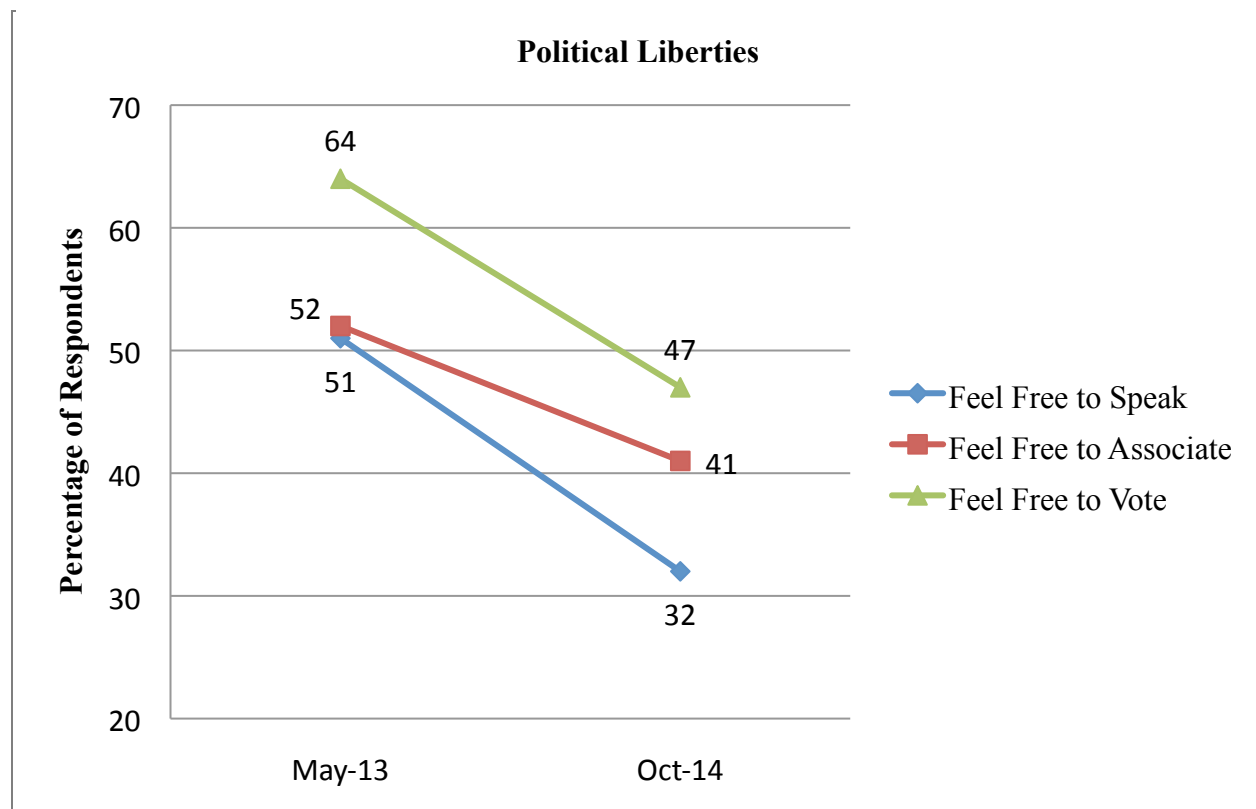
At the same time, however, a plurality of citizens in Zimbabwe also regards power sharing as a compromise that falls short of their preferred method of choosing a government. More than four out of ten (42 percent) see it as “a second-best solution, to be used only when elections fail,” a figure that held steady over the previous year. The rest of the electorate is divided, with one quarter (25 percent) seeing power sharing as “a good alternative to competitive elections, which rarely work well” and another quarter (26 percent) as “a bad alternative that should *never* replace competitive elections.”

Moreover, popular evaluations of the IG’s performance, while positive, are in decline. The honeymoon in public opinion following the introduction of coalition government in February 2009 is over. Whereas in May 2009, fully 87 percent judged that the IG was performing “well” or “very well,” some 66 percent offered the same overall assessment by October 2010. Despite a 21-point drop in perceived performance, it is noteworthy that two out three Zimbabweans still thought that the IG was doing a good job. We infer that they are comparing the IG’s tenure to the crisis conditions that prevailed in 2008 and which they worry could recur.

The reasons that confidence in the coalition government is slipping include leadership struggles and policy deadlock. Over the previous year, the proportion of citizens who thought that the parties to the IG were cooperating politically (“working well together”) dropped from barely half to just over one third (47 percent to 38 percent). Zimbabweans clearly recognize that a power imbalance among leaders impedes collective action. Two thirds of all adults interviewed in October 2010 (68 percent) consider that political power in the IG resides “mainly” or “only” with the president, a figure that rose by ten percentage points over a year earlier. Just 14 percent think power is shared equally. And, remarkably, a mere 6 percent think that power is held mainly or only by the Prime Minister.

Political Liberties: A Perceived Decline

These features and trends in public opinion are unfolding in an environment of recurrent political threats. In October 2010, seven out of ten Zimbabweans (71 percent) said that, “during election campaigns in this country,” they feared “becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence.”



As a result, and compared to the early days of the IG, when majorities said they felt at liberty to speak, associate and vote, only minorities of Zimbabweans express a sense of enjoying these freedoms today. Instead, confidence in democratic liberties is being gradually replaced by a resurgence of political fear.

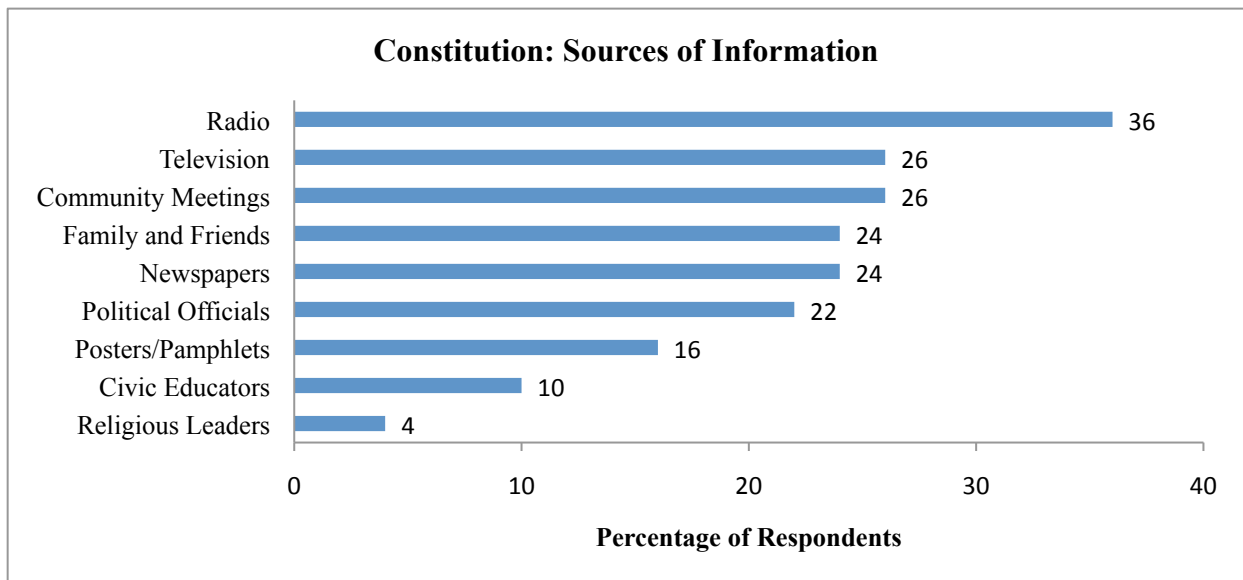
For example, just over one half (51 percent) said they were “somewhat” or “completely” free to “say what you think” in May 2009, shortly after the IG took office. In the atmosphere of October 2010, however, when agents of the old party-state were again engaging in intimidation, only one third (32 percent) held the same opinion. Looking at the same coin from the other side, some 67 percent of Zimbabweans do *not* currently feel free to speak their minds. This proportion closely matches the 65 percent who felt that people “always” have to be “careful what you say about politics” in October 2005, when ZANU-PF held a much larger share of power.

People also perceive declining opportunities to openly engage in political action. Whereas 52 percent felt free to “join any political organization you want” in May 2009, only 41 percent continued to feel this way by October 2010, an 11-point decline. And whereas 64 percent felt free to choose who to vote for in May 2009, only 47 percent expressed such confidence in October 2010, a larger 17-point decline. The fact that belief in the availability of civil and political rights is now a minority sentiment in Zimbabwe does not augur well for the quality of any upcoming constitutional referendum or general election.

Constitutional Reform: Learning About Reform

The largest recent change in public opinion concerns popular awareness of the constitutional reform process. In September 2009 Freedom House survey, before a parliamentary committee on constitutional reform (COPAC) had begun a program of public outreach, just 40 percent of Zimbabweans said they had “ever heard of the Constitution of Zimbabwe.” Within one short year, however, this figure had almost doubled to a far more respectable 75 percent. The change was due not only to COPAC’s effort to involve citizens in the constitution-making process, but probably also to a heavy-handed campaign against meaningful change in the legal framework conducted by ZANU-PF cadres, mainly in rural areas.

When asked where they obtained information about the constitution, most people said they heard “a lot” from radio (36 percent) and television (26 percent), outlets dominated by the former ruling party. Community meetings were also an important source (26 percent), up from just 10 percent in 2009. It is unclear, however, whether people were referring to meetings convened by the parliamentary committee or by political parties. Yet the fact that 22 percent obtained “a lot” of information from political officials seems to confirm that the outreach process became politicized.



Almost one in three respondents (30 percent) said they attended some kind of public meeting about the constitution. Yet only a handful (4 percent) reported that they had been prevented from attending a meeting or expressing their views on constitutional reform, which suggests that intimidation around this issue may have been more scattered or ineffective than reported elsewhere.

On balance, respondents gave the IG more positive than negative marks for its role in the constitutional outreach exercise, though many admitted to not having heard enough to have an opinion. For example, 38 percent thought the IG performed well at publicizing discussions within the government about the constitution; 29 percent thought it performed badly; and 22 percent said that they didn't know. The IG was held to have done even better at educating citizens about the issues at stake in constitutional reform (41 percent) and asking ordinary people what they would like to see in a national constitution (42 percent).

The September 2009 survey provides insight into popular preferences about the content of a constitution. At that time, large majorities called for:

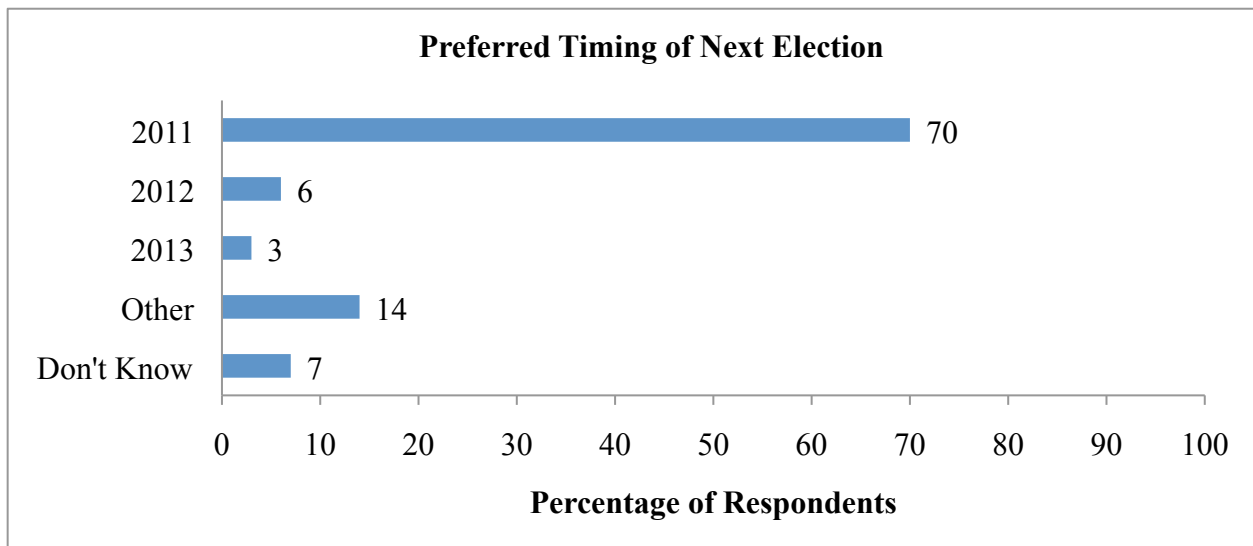
- Applying the law to every Zimbabwean, including senior public officials (86 percent)
- Ensuring all members of the House of Assembly are elected, not appointed (84 percent)
- Establishing courts that are independent of the executive branch (80 percent)
- Limiting the president to two terms in office (78 percent)
- Protecting the rights of individuals to freely express political views (77 percent)
- Ending unlawful detention (74 percent)
- Providing for the independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (73 percent)
- Protecting the rights of property owners against illegal seizure (72 percent)
- Restricting chiefs to roles in local government only, not central government (64 percent).

This survey evidence suggests that Zimbabweans clearly prefer to reform the national constitution than to stick with the legal *status quo*. Most recently, in October 2010, 41 percent of all adults who had heard of Zimbabwe’s constitution wished to completely abandon the current document (i.e. the so-called Lancaster House constitution, amended 19 times since independence). A similar proportion (40 percent) called for amendments. Only 12 percent insisted that the current constitution be retained without further changes. This small minority, however, represents a doubling of those who prefer the *status quo* since September 2009 (6 percent), probably as a result of ZANU-PF’s 2010 campaign for the retention of a charter featuring an all-powerful presidency.

Elections: Apprehensively Desired

As noted earlier, Zimbabweans prefer open elections – which involve mass participation and party competition – to elite deals to share power. This popular commitment is confirmed by the 86 percent who agree that “we should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections” as opposed to “some other method.” Support among Zimbabweans for competitive elections is among the highest recorded among the 20 African countries covered by the Afrobarometer and is exceeded only in Liberia (88 percent) and Botswana (89 percent). Such support is also growing over time, having risen from 80 percent in May 2009. But does this mean that Zimbabweans are ready for elections in 2011? How firm are popular commitments to competitive elections if these events threaten to stir up political violence?

In perhaps the most striking finding in the October 2010 Afrobarometer survey, 70 percent of adult Zimbabweans answered “yes” to a question that asked: “Do you think that Zimbabwe should hold elections next year, that is, in 2011?” Relatively few people favored deferring elections to a later date such as 2012 (6 percent), 2013 (3 percent), or later, including never (14 percent). That seven in ten would-be voters are anxious to freely elect leaders of their choice, even in an atmosphere where security forces and party militias are again on the move, is testament to the impressive depth of Zimbabweans’ commitments to political rights.



At the same time, caution may be warranted about this result. In an Alpha Media survey conducted by MPOI in August 2010 (N=1000), slightly fewer people (60 percent) answered “yes” to the question about whether elections should be held in 2011. Moreover, just 36 percent

said “yes” to a more ambiguous question: “In your view, is Zimbabwe ready for elections today?” It is unclear whether respondents were referring to their own personal readiness or the preparedness of institutions such as the electoral commission (see below). Either way, one might expect people to feel torn about the prospect of elections since their strong commitments to political rights may be offset by vivid memories of past electoral violence.

To be sure, there is broad apprehension about the quality of any forthcoming vote. Unlike in September 2009, when a slim majority (52 percent) was optimistic that the next election would be adequately free and fair, only a minority (46 percent) was similarly hopeful by October 2010. A strong predictor of the quality of the next election is the way individuals assess the quality of the disputed June 2008 presidential contest from which Robert Mugabe grabbed a pyrrhic victory. Those people who regard that election as being less than free and fair are prone to expect the same in the next election.¹

What can be done to guarantee the quality of the upcoming vote? Asked to choose the “*single* most important thing that could be done to ensure that the next elections are free and fair,” Zimbabweans listed the following:

- End violence, maintain peace (24 percent)
- Employ international and domestic observers or peacekeepers (17 percent)
- Ensure clean voting, prevent rigging (10 percent)
- Reform the constitution (9 percent)
- Guarantee civil and political liberties (7 percent)
- Provide a level electoral playing field for all parties (5 percent)
- Don’t know (10 percent)

As for the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), more people find it “unprepared” than ready to run the next election (38 versus 28 percent). But one third of the electorate (34 percent), especially rural dwellers, have not heard enough about the ZEC to hold an opinion on this subject.

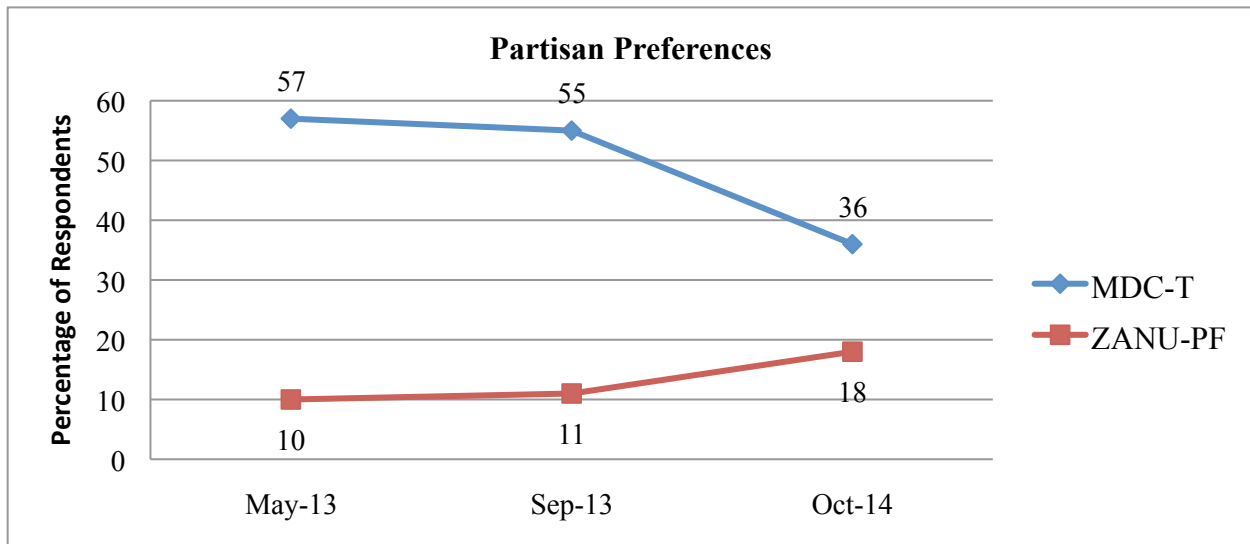
Party Preferences: Growing Reluctance to Say

The Afrobarometer has tracked the partisan preferences of Zimbabweans since 1999. Earlier surveys have documented a general trend of declining popular support for ZANU-PF and a gradually rising mass preference for MDC-Tsvangirai. But the trend has occasionally been interrupted by periods of temporary resurgence in stated loyalties to ZANU-PF, for example, around the time of the 2005 parliamentary elections, when the MDC lost seats in the House of Assembly.

Here we report expressed party preferences for the period of the Inclusive Government, 2009-2010. The question takes the following form: “If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?” In May 2009, 57 percent stated an intention to vote for MDC-T, falling to 55 percent in September 2009 and 36 percent in October 2010. The parallel tallies for ZANU-PF were 10 percent in May 2009, 11 percent in September 2009 and 18 percent in October 2010.

¹ Gamma =.572, sig. <.001.

It is worth noting in passing that Zimbabwean elections have turned into a two-party race. In the last three surveys, including in October 2010, no minor party – including MDC-Mutambara, Movambo-Kusile-Dawn (MKD) led by Simba Makoni, and the revived Zimbabwe African Peoples’ Union (ZAPU) under the leadership of Dumiso Dabengwa – has ever garnered more than one percent of the intended vote.



Most important, however, the proportion of the electorate unwilling to reveal a partisan preference has increased dramatically. Over the 18-month period from May 2009 to October 2010 the share of respondents who insisted on the secrecy of the ballot and refused to say for whom they would vote rose from one quarter (25 percent) to one third (32 percent). In addition, the proportion who said they would *not* vote also rose (from 4 to 7 percent) as did the share of those who said “don’t know” (from 4 to 5 percent). All told, therefore, the partisan preferences of fully 44 percent of the Zimbabwean electorate are today unknown, mainly because people are increasingly reluctant to reveal these affiliations to survey researchers.

Under such circumstances, we insist that the present data should *not* be used to make predictions about any forthcoming election, especially one whose date has yet to be announced. At this early moment, and with almost half of all adults holding their voting intentions close to their chests, there is simply no empirical basis for any such speculation.

Instead, activists across the political spectrum will interpret the data to their own partisan advantage. Proponents of ZANU-PF may be tempted to see early evidence of their party’s resurgence, perhaps bolstered by an electoral and military war chest extracted from newly exploited diamond fields. Adherents of MDC-T will have cause to wonder whether the party’s strategy of building political support via service delivery is enough to guarantee an absolute electoral majority in the absence of a parallel effort to rebuild the party’s grassroots organization.

We offer a more neutral interpretation here by noting the connection between declining political liberties and an individual’s natural tendency to protect the secrecy of his or her vote. Given the precedent of violent elections in the past, and ZANU-PF’s daily threats of civil war if their party loses the next election, it is entirely understandable that people should conceal their voting intentions. As evidence, we note the correlation between a person’s perception that they lack a

choice of “who to vote for without feeling pressured” and their refusal to reveal a partisan preference.²

Conclusion

In the latest Afrobarometer survey, Zimbabweans convey their appreciation for the advantages of power sharing insofar as it has brought to the motherland a measure of economic and political stability. But they regard power sharing as a temporary measure to be replaced in due course by a legitimately elected government. Accordingly, clear majorities of eligible voters want constitutional reform and possibly even free elections in 2011. But because of widespread fears that any referendum or election campaigns may be violent, they are increasingly cautious about revealing how they will vote.

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The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RDMFA/DANIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 4 research, capacity building and outreach activities. For more information, see:

www.afrobarometer.org

² Eta = .152, sig. <.001