

Credible poll, a responsibility of all

The May 20 tripartite elections present a very unique opportunity for Malawi. In the aftermath of former president Bingu wa Mutharika's sudden death, and immediate attempts by some actors to usurp power, much reflection about that incident and the resilience of our Constitution is required ahead of May.

This election, regardless of who the eventual winner will be, will mark the completion of a democratic transition and peaceful transfer of power. This should not be taken lightly given the anxieties and fears Malawi experienced in April 2012. Therefore, the May 20 poll is a litmus test for democratic institutions in Malawi.

Elections, by their very nature, are 'conflictual'. As the Malawi Electoral Commission (Mec) kept insisting during the presentation of nomination papers for presidential candidates that this is a race in which no one enters and expects to lose. What becomes key, therefore, are the systems that are built with the purpose of strengthening the conduct of elections and ensuring that the entire electoral process is transparent and accountable.

In this regard, all key stakeholders - Mec,

government, civil society, media, development partners and, most importantly, all Malawians - need to understand their various mandates, act within those and do their part in inspiring confidence into the process.

The forthcoming tripartite elections have seen a number of civil society organisations adding value to their role by going beyond merely observing and critiquing the electoral process but to also take up substantive initiative to contribute to the successful conduct of elections in Malawi.

What has long lacked in key democratic processes - not just in Malawi - are solutions to the myriad of challenges that continuously befall the usually under-resourced electoral management bodies (EMBs). Solutions, more than critique, have a direct impact on fostering accountability and promoting transparency. This should be the new direction in many countries that have hugely contested electoral processes.

Here at home, the recent launch of the Malawi Election Information Centre (MEIC) by the Malawi Electoral Support Network (Mesn) marks a solid commitment by the CSOs involved to collaborate on a single

platform and add value to the forthcoming elections.

As Mesn chairperson Steve Duwa observed in his speech at the launch event on March 27, the responsibility of having a free, fair and credible election rests not in the hands of Mec alone but in the entire collective of the nation.

"We are taking an active responsibility in ensuring that our role moves beyond merely observing elections to supporting institutions legally mandated with this responsibility such as Mec," he said.

Added Duwa: "[MEIC] was set up to ensure that citizens play a critical role in monitoring the conduct of the 2014 tripartite elections, report on and alert relevant authorities of incidences and electoral malpractices so that they are swiftly addressed in real-time.

"MEIC has put in place a platform that allows for the collection and dissemination of information relating to the pre-election, election and post-election phases. Citizens are, through that platform, able to share experiences of various aspects of the electoral process, such as the launching of party manifestos, political campaigns, security issues and level of election preparedness through a free SMS service across leading

network operators."

The full weight and significance of a platform like the Election Situation Room (ESR) initiative may not capture the imagination of many Malawians as yet. This is the first-time it is being run in any case. However, the impact of the ESR will be felt for many more years to come when Malawians increase their engagement with data and begin to base their decisions and choices on reliable, accurate and evidence-based information from across the country.

For now, and for the very first time, voters and interested citizens as far wide apart as Nsanje and Chitipa can, with the aid of a basic mobile phone, converge on a single platform and contribute towards the holding of a free, fair and credible election in which they play a critical part and their voices are heard.

More significantly - and if accurately captured and ably represented - the voices and experiences shared on this platform will enable Malawians to gain a full and complete picture of what is happening around the country pre, during and post-election times.

At the MEIC launch, Duwa made another significant point, saying Mesn took "great pride" in watching over the convergence of

democracy with technology. In doing so he may have been making the point that future electoral processes may not be able to escape the presence and influence of technology and that there may be grave consequences for not integrating technological innovation into key democratic processes such as elections.

"The ESR initiative," Duwa said, "points to a future in which technology empowers citizens to become actively engaged throughout the electoral cycle, exercising their rights by participating in the on-going democratic processes of their country across multiple platforms."

In the final analysis, it is important to insist that technology is not an end in itself but an enabler of the exercise of fundamental rights. The occasion of Malawi's 50th Independence anniversary and the holding of tripartite elections presents Malawians with an opportunity to recover their citizenship and their voice.

The tools are there, will there be any takers?

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