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## Joint Press Statement

# PRELIMINARY STATEMENT OF THE ESN-SA and the ZESN JOINT ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION FOR 2024 SOUTH AFRICA ELECTIONS

31-MAY-2024

## INTRODUCTION

The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) and the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) jointly deployed a ten-member observer mission with experienced observation practitioners to observe polling processes in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape Provinces during the National and Provincial elections. The primary objective of the Joint Observer Mission was to evaluate whether the South African electoral process adhered to national laws and to determine if the country's electoral framework aligns with regional and international principles, norms, standards, and best practices. This initiative underscores the Network's dedication to advancing democratic integrity and transparent electoral processes throughout the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

## METHODOLOGY

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) accredited the Joint Mission via an online portal. The process was simple and efficient, reducing logistical hurdles for the IEC, ESN-SA, and ZESN members. The Joint Mission deployed three (3) teams in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Western Cape Provinces that met with electoral stakeholders, including the Independent Electoral Commission's Provincial Representatives, the Police, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and Faith-Based Organisations. In its assessment of the elections, the Joint Mission used various international, regional normative and legal instruments for democratic elections as benchmarks: the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring, and Observation (PEMMO) and South Africa's legal framework.

The Joint Election Observation Mission closely observed special voting on May 27 and 28, 2024, and the National and Provincial Elections (NPEs) on May 29, 2024.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

### ▪ Legal Framework:

South Africa's legal framework for the 2024 elections includes the Constitution, Electoral Act, Electoral Commission Act, and Political Party Funding Act. It establishes a democratic

state with universal suffrage and regulates political party funding. Recent amendments to the Electoral Act allowed the inclusion of independent candidates and the introduction of a third ballot, making it easier to register for new parties. However, enforcing transparency measures in political party funding has been challenging. The legal framework supports gender equality, but no specific legislation mandating women's representation in politics exists.

- **Opening of Voting Stations:**

The Joint Mission observed the opening of voting stations in the three (3) Provinces. These were characterised by long, winding queues well before opening, a testament to the citizens' eagerness to participate in the democratic process. Despite commencing polling after 8:00 am at some voting stations in both Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal Provinces, voting proceeded in an orderly manner. For example, at Port Natal School in KwaZulu Natal, voting started at 8:00 am due to the late arrival of polling materials. The Presiding Officers explained the late start to voters who were patiently waiting to cast their ballots. Voting at Ellerton Primary School began timely at 7:00 am, following the verification and sealing of empty ballot boxes. Long queues formed as early as 5:30 am, indicating voters' keen interest. At the time voting started at all voting stations visited for opening formalities, all voting stations were well-equipped with essential voting materials, including Voter Management Devices (VMDs), ballot boxes, indelible ink markers, voters' rolls, and IEC official stamps.

- **Polling Officials and Party Agents:**

Each voting station had an average of 7 voting officials, with a notable predominance of female officers, showcasing significant gender representation. The Joint Mission also noted that the major contesting political parties deployed well-trained and knowledgeable agents at most voting stations in Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, and Western Cape provinces. This deployment significantly bolstered oversight and transparency, ensuring that the voting process was closely observed and conducted with integrity.

- **Voting Procedures and Processes:**

Procedures included verifying voters' names on the roll, checking for ink on fingers, and stamping ballot papers with the IEC stamp. Clear signage was noted at the voting stations to facilitate smooth voter flow and order. Voting proceeded smoothly, with an average processing time of three (3) minutes per voter. Effective management was observed at various stations, though some, like Acacia Primary School, had insufficient VMDs, which slowed down processing. In peri-urban and rural stations, intermittent internet connections occasionally affected VMDs. Furthermore, a few voting stations observed by the team, such as Masakhane Public Library and Manyano High School, where voting machines faced issues, along with poor lighting conditions at Manyano High School in Khayelitsha Western Cape and Dabeka Senior Secondary School in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Security was ensured, with two (2) police officers inside and three (3) outside the station. The conduct of security agents was observed as professional and not intimidating.

- **Voter Participation:**

High voter participation was observed in most voting centres visited. For instance, 5,000 out of 7,000 registered voters had cast their votes at George Cambel Technical voting station by 3 p.m., while 1,112 out of 1,999 registered voters had cast their votes by the same time of observation at Kwamfundo voting station in Harare and Athlone High School; 1,059 out of 1,652 registered voters had cast their votes by 19:24 p.m.

- **Youth Participation and Professionalism:**

High youth participation was noted, with young electoral officials demonstrating friendliness, courtesy, and good training. Significant involvement of youth both as voters and as polling officials was observed, even at large voting stations with over 3,000 voters. Their professionalism contributed to the efficient management of the voting process.

- **Voting Stations Identification:**

Observers noted that some voters seemed unaware of their voting stations and did not fully understand the third regional ballot since it was introduced for the first time in South African elections. This highlights the need for comprehensive voter education in future elections. Clear IEC signage with diagrams displaying the voting process helped guide polling staff and voters, facilitating smooth voter flow and order.

- **Accessibility and Inclusivity:**

Most voting stations were accessible to individuals using wheelchairs and crutches, except in some rural areas. Height-adjusted voting booths were also present. The provision of chairs for nursing mothers and individuals with health issues was commendable. Special arrangements, such as separate entrances and dedicated polling officials for the elderly and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), demonstrated inclusivity and efficient management. For example, at Ellerton Primary School in Cape Town, Metro had a separate voting station for the elderly and PWDs, complete with its own entrance, queue, and seven (7) dedicated polling officials, including the Deputy Presiding Officer (DPO) in charge, demonstrating inclusivity and efficient management. Assisted voting was provided where necessary.

- **Results Management and ICTs:**

The Joint Mission visited the Results Operating Centre and closely followed the results collation process and the ongoing post-electoral developments. The Joint Mission was impressed by the establishment of an advanced results operational centre equipped with modern digital infrastructure to enhance transparency. The Mission noted the pivotal role of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in capturing, managing, and disseminating electoral data and information. This technological advancement has significantly improved data management and accessibility, thereby enhancing the transparency of the electoral process and instilling confidence in the management of the elections, ultimately enhancing democracy in the country.

The ESN-SA and ZESN Election Observer Mission commends the IEC for the well-managed real-time updates on results transmission, which contributed to the overall transparency of the results management process.

▪ **The Media Environment:**

The Joint Mission appreciates the media's role in informing the public and educating voters. It commends South Africa's press freedom and collaboration efforts to combat misinformation. However, it notes the absence of a regulatory framework for data protection and cybersecurity, allowing cyberbullying and incitement messages.

▪ **Civil Society Organizations:**

In its interaction with civil society in South Africa, the Joint Mission was impressed by its role in the 2024 elections. Civil society's involvement in the elections included voter mobilisation and it actively participated in educating voters about their rights and the importance of voting, and there was deliberate targeting of underrepresented groups such as young people and marginalised communities. The number of interventions undertaken contributed to the high voter participation observed in the elections.

▪ **Political Parties and Voters' Tolerance**

The joint observation team noted that voters were willingly passing through political parties' booths before voting and passing through the same booths where they would receive t-shirts and other party paraphernalia. ESN-SA and ZESN commend political party supporters for exhibiting high levels of political tolerance, demonstrating their openness to diverse political influences and a commitment to participatory democracy. However, the Joint Mission observed that only the major political parties established booths with extensive paraphernalia, which helped to enhance their visibility. This creates an uneven playing field as smaller parties were not observed employing similar strategies.

Voters also demonstrated remarkable patience and calmness, even when voting extended beyond 9:00 p.m. An example of this was observed at City Hall in Durban, where voters exhibited great restraint and perseverance despite long, slow-moving queues. This exemplifies commendable civic duty and a strong commitment to the democratic process, showcasing the resilience and dedication of the electorate during the election process.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR THE JOINT MISSION**

- The online accreditation of observers was commendable as it reduced logistical hurdles.
- The Commission's open-door policy and collaborative approach with various stakeholders, including CSOs, significantly boosted confidence and trust in the electoral process.
- Involving political parties to audit the results management system demonstrates a commitment to transparency and contributes to the credibility of the elections.

- The incorporation of a verification and independent audit mechanism within the results management process has been recognised as a best practice, further enhancing the trust and confidence of both contenders and of stakeholders.
- Additionally, the extension of voting rights to prisoners and the diaspora has not only expanded voter participation but also strengthened the democratic rights of citizens.
- The active involvement of women and youth in various roles, such as election officials, significantly bolstered their confidence in participating in future electoral processes.
- Lastly, the Commission's regular updates to the media, political parties, observers, and citizens via various media platforms played a crucial role in reassuring citizens and stakeholders, effectively managing perceptions, and increasing trust and confidence in the electoral process.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of these observations, the joint ESN-SA and ZESN observation missions make the following recommendations:

- The IEC should ensure that an adequate number of VMDs are available to all voting stations and that they should provide a backup internet connection.
- The IEC should also ensure that there is adequate lighting for all voting stations.
- There is a need to strengthen voter education efforts about the changes in electoral laws.
- The government should create a regulatory framework that protects citizens from cyberbullying.
- The IEC must reconsider regulations relating to the canvassing for support by political parties within the vicinity of voting stations during voting.
- The IEC must consider increasing the number of polling streams at voting stations to reduce voter waiting time.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite minor logistical and technical challenges, the voting process was orderly, transparent, and smooth. The efficient management and adherence to polling procedures, combined with adequate participation from political party agents and satisfactory gender representation among polling officials contributed to the smooth conduct of the elections. We hope peace prevails in the Rainbow Nation post-election.

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### **About ESN-SA**

*The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) is a regional network of 15 non-governmental organisations working in the area of elections in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. It was established in January 1998. More information is available at <https://www.esn-sa.org/>*

### **About ZESN**

Formed in 2000, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) is a coalition of 37 Non-Governmental Organizations committed to coordinating elections-related activities. ZESN's primary focus is to promote democratic processes and ensure fair elections in Zimbabwe.

More information is available at <https://www.zesn.org.zw/>