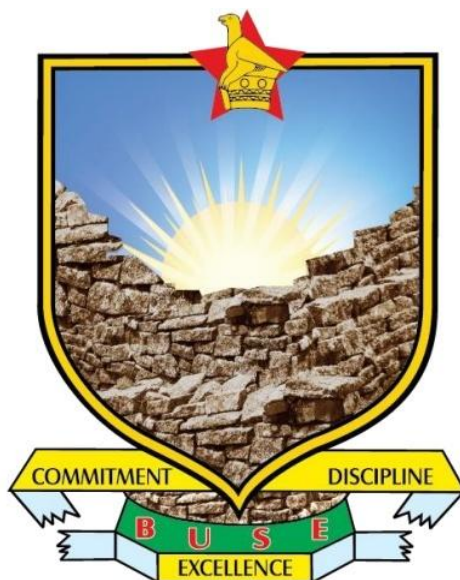


**BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION**  
**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES**



**Assessing the Implementation of SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing  
Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 General Elections**

**BY**

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A Dissertation submitted to the Department of Peace and Governance in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the Master of Science in International Relations

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections during Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections. Amid persistent concerns over electoral integrity, transparency, and inclusiveness in Zimbabwe's electoral history, the 2023 elections provided a significant opportunity to assess the country's compliance with regional democratic norms. . Employing a qualitative case study approach underpinned by interpretivist epistemology, the research utilises content analysis of official documents, legal frameworks, media reports, and observation mission statements. In addition, semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants from electoral bodies, political parties, civil society organisations, and the media provide rich, experiential insights into the dynamics of electoral administration and political contestation. Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo, was employed to identify patterns and discrepancies in stakeholder perspectives and institutional practices. Findings reveal significant structural and procedural barriers to full compliance with the SADC Principles and Guidelines, including concerns over ZEC's impartiality, unequal media access, voter intimidation, and the limited implementation of electoral reforms. While there were pockets of improvement, particularly in administrative planning and voter registration, the elections fell short of meeting the minimum standards for democratic legitimacy as outlined by SADC. The study concludes that sustainable electoral reform in Zimbabwe requires the depoliticisation of state institutions, robust civic engagement, and stronger regional enforcement mechanisms. By interrogating the disjuncture between formal electoral norms and practical realities, the study contributes to the discourse on electoral governance in transitional democracies and offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic processes in Zimbabwe and across the SADC region.

**DECLARATION FORM**

I, Sithatshisiwe Ncube, B241304A hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work and it has not been copied or lifted from another source without acknowledgement.

Signature...  .....

Date.....08/08/2025.....

Supervisor Dr C Muchemwa

Signature 

Chairman Dr J Kurebwa

  
Signature.....

**Dedication**

This research is lovingly dedicated to my parents, whose sacrifices and unwavering support laid the foundation for my academic and personal growth.

To the people of Zimbabwe, who continue to hope for a truly democratic society, this study is for you. May it contribute, in its small way, toward the realisation of free, fair, and credible elections.

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I express my sincere gratitude to Almighty God for granting me the strength, perseverance, and clarity of purpose to complete this research.

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Lastly, I wish to acknowledge my family and friends for their unwavering encouragement and patience. Your belief in me kept me motivated throughout this journey.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AU	African Union
BVR	Biometric Voter Registration
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
ECES	European Centre for Electoral Support
ECF-SADC	Electoral Commissions Forum of SADC Countries
EISA	Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa
EMB	Electoral Management Body
EU	European Union
FPTP	First-Past-The-Post
GPA	Global Political Agreement
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPRC	National Peace and Reconciliation Commission
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADC PF	SADC Parliamentary Forum
SAPES	Southern African Political Economy Series
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ZANU–PF	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
ZEC	Zimbabwe Electoral Commission
ZESN	Zimbabwe Election Support Network
ZHRC	Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission
ZRP	Zimbabwe Republic Police

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of the study**

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has long been committed to promoting democratic principles and electoral integrity among its member states. Central to this commitment are the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, which serve as a framework to ensure that electoral processes within the region adhere to standards of fairness, transparency, and credibility (SADC, 2021). These principles emphasize the full participation of citizens in democratic processes, equal access to state media for all political parties, and the prevention of political violence and intimidation. The 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe presented a critical opportunity to evaluate the practical implementation of these guidelines within a complex political landscape.

Despite the established framework, the 2023 harmonized elections in Zimbabwe faced significant scrutiny from various observer missions. Reports highlighted issues such as delayed opening of polling stations, concerns over the independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), and allegations of media bias favoring the incumbent party (SADC, 2023; European External Action Service, 2023). These challenges raised questions about the extent to which Zimbabwe's electoral processes align with SADC's democratic standards. This study aims to critically assess the adherence to the SADC Principles and Guidelines during Zimbabwe's 2023 elections, providing insights into the effectiveness of regional frameworks in promoting democratic governance.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has established comprehensive frameworks to promote democratic governance among its member states. The Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections outline essential standards for conducting elections, emphasizing citizen participation, political tolerance, equal access to state media, and the independence of electoral institutions (SADC, 2021). These principles aim to ensure that member states uphold democratic values during electoral processes.

Zimbabwe, as a SADC member, is expected to adhere to these guidelines. However, its electoral history has been fraught with challenges. The 2018 general elections, the first after the resignation of long-time leader Robert Mugabe, were seen as a litmus test for the country's commitment to democratic reforms. Despite hopes for a new democratic era, observer missions reported several irregularities. The SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) noted issues such as delays in the release of the voters' roll, concerns over the independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), and allegations of voter intimidation (SADC, 2018).

The 2023 general elections presented another opportunity to assess Zimbabwe's adherence to SADC's democratic principles. However, the SEOM's preliminary report highlighted significant shortcomings. The mission observed procedural and process deficits, including a lack of transparency around the voters' roll, contentious delimitation reports, skewed access to state media, and voter intimidation. These issues were deemed at odds with Zimbabwe's constitution, Electoral Act, and SADC's Principles and Guidelines for Democratic Elections (SADC, 2023).

The SEOM's unprecedented critique of the 2023 elections marked a departure from its typically cautious assessments. The mission's findings have prompted discussions within SADC about the need for decisive action to address electoral irregularities in Zimbabwe. Analysts suggest that the SEOM's report could force the region to push for more robust interventions to uphold democratic standards (Nation, 2023).

These recurring electoral challenges have broader implications for Zimbabwe's international standing. Efforts to rejoin the Commonwealth, for instance, have been hindered by concerns over the country's democratic progress. The Commonwealth's observer group cited significant flaws in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections, questioning the credibility and inclusivity of the process. Consequently, the UK's Foreign Office has recommended reevaluating Zimbabwe's conditions in 2025, maintaining that the nation falls short of the Commonwealth's democratic standards (The Times, 2024).

In light of these developments, it is imperative to conduct a thorough assessment of Zimbabwe's implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. Such an evaluation will provide insights into the country's progress, identify persistent challenges, and inform strategies to enhance the credibility and fairness of future electoral processes.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Despite Zimbabwe's formal commitment to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, significant concerns persist regarding the integrity and credibility of its electoral processes. The 2023 general elections further exacerbated these concerns. International observer missions, including those from SADC itself, reported that the elections fell short of regional standards. The SADC observer mission noted that the polls did not meet the requirements outlined in Zimbabwe's constitution, highlighting issues such as delayed ballot paper distribution, which forced voting to be extended by an additional day (The Guardian, 2023). Additionally, the European Union observer mission reported that the elections were conducted in a climate of fear, further undermining their credibility (The Guardian, 2023).

Opposition parties have also voiced strong objections. The Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC), led by Nelson Chamisa, rejected the 2023 election results, citing widespread irregularities and alleging that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) failed to uphold its constitutional mandate by announcing incorrect results (TVC News, 2023). Chamisa described the election as a "gigantic fraud" and called for solidarity from regional partners to address the political crisis (The Guardian, 2023).

These persistent issues have broader implications for Zimbabwe's international standing. Efforts to rejoin the Commonwealth have been hindered by concerns over the country's democratic processes. The Commonwealth's observer group cited significant flaws in the 2023 elections, questioning their credibility and inclusivity. Consequently, the UK's Foreign Office has opposed Zimbabwe's immediate readmission, recommending a re-evaluation of conditions in 2025 (The Times, 2024). The purpose of this research is to assess the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe.

## **1.3 Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to assess the extent to which the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe adhered to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. .

## 1.4 Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Identify key electoral challenges that hinder the full implementation of these guidelines.
2. Examine the extent to which Zimbabwe's 2023 elections adhered to the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections.
3. Assess the role of electoral stakeholders, including the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society, and regional bodies, in ensuring democratic elections.

## 1.5 Research Questions

1. What were the major electoral challenges and irregularities observed in these elections?
2. To what extent did the 2023 general elections align with the SADC electoral principles?
3. How did electoral stakeholders influence the implementation of democratic electoral processes?

## 1.6 Assumptions

The study on the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections during Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections is based on several assumptions that guide the research process. These assumptions provide a foundation for understanding the electoral processes, stakeholder behavior, and the broader political context.

### 1. Assumption of Compliance with SADC Guidelines

It is assumed that Zimbabwe, as a member of the SADC, is committed to implementing the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. This includes ensuring free, fair, transparent, and credible elections, as stipulated in the regional framework (SADC, 2021). The study assumes that the government, electoral bodies, and other stakeholders are aware of and seek to adhere to these guidelines, at least in principle.

### 2. Assumption of Institutional Independence

The study assumes that key electoral institutions, particularly the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), operate independently and without undue political influence. While previous elections in Zimbabwe have been marred by allegations of bias, this study assumes that, at least formally, the ZEC is mandated to function as an independent body responsible for managing the electoral process (European External Action Service, 2023). However, the degree of practical independence remains a subject of investigation.

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

Assessing the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2018 and 2023 general elections holds substantial significance for several reasons. A thorough evaluation of Zimbabwe's adherence to SADC's electoral principles provides critical insights into the nation's commitment to democratic processes. The SADC Electoral Observation Mission's (SEOM) final report on the 2023 elections highlighted that certain aspects did not meet the requirements of Zimbabwe's Constitution, the Electoral Act, and SADC's Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021) (SADC, 2023). By identifying specific areas where the electoral process fell short, this study can inform targeted reforms to strengthen electoral integrity and democratic governance in Zimbabwe.

The study's findings can guide policymakers in enacting evidence-based reforms to address identified electoral deficiencies. For instance, the SEOM report recommended that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) should make the voters' roll available to stakeholders in a timely manner, as stipulated by the Electoral Act (SADC, 2023). Implementing such recommendations can enhance transparency and stakeholder confidence in future elections.

Evaluating Zimbabwe's compliance with SADC's electoral guidelines contributes to the broader discourse on democratic standards within the Southern African region. The SEOM's critical assessment of Zimbabwe's 2023 elections marked a departure from previous observer mission reports, underscoring the importance of upholding regional democratic norms (Gukurume, 2024). This study can thus serve as a benchmark for other SADC member states, promoting the harmonization of electoral practices across the region.

By highlighting areas where electoral processes have deviated from established guidelines, the study empowers civil society organizations, political parties, and other

stakeholders to advocate for necessary changes. The SEOM report noted concerns about the independence of ZEC, particularly due to the close connections some of its commissioners had with senior officials of the ruling ZANU-PF party (SADC, 2023). Addressing such issues can foster a more level playing field for all political actors.

This research adds to the academic literature on electoral governance and democratization in Southern Africa. By providing a detailed case study of Zimbabwe's recent elections, it offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing regional electoral standards in diverse political contexts.

In conclusion, this study is pivotal in promoting democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe and the wider SADC region. Its findings are expected to inform policy reforms, strengthen regional democratic norms, empower stakeholders, and enrich academic discourse on electoral governance.

### **1.8 Delimitations of the Study**

This research is delimited explicitly to an in-depth examination of the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections during Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections. By focusing exclusively on this electoral event, the study aims to provide a detailed analysis of the adherence to regional democratic standards within a contemporary context. The key delimitations are as follows:

1. **Time:** The study concentrates solely on the 2023 general elections. This temporal focus allows for a comprehensive analysis of the most recent electoral processes and the current political and legal frameworks influencing them.
2. **Geographical Focus:** The research is confined to Zimbabwe, providing an in-depth case study of SADC guidelines' implementation within a single member state. While acknowledging that other SADC member countries have conducted elections during the same period, this study does not extend its analysis beyond Zimbabwe's borders.
3. **Thematic Concentration:** The investigation centers on the implementation of SADC's electoral principles, specifically evaluating aspects such as the independence and conduct of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), the legal and institutional frameworks governing elections, the role of political parties, media access, and the participation of civil society organizations. Other factors influencing electoral

outcomes, such as economic conditions or international diplomatic relations, are considered beyond the scope of this study.

4. **Stakeholder Perspectives:** The study emphasizes the perspectives of domestic stakeholders, including electoral bodies, political parties, civil society organizations, and voters within Zimbabwe. While international observer missions' reports are considered, the research does not extensively explore the viewpoints of foreign governments or international organizations outside the SADC framework.

## 1.9 Limitations of the Study

Conducting research on the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections during Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections presents several limitations. Recognizing these constraints is crucial for contextualizing the study's findings and ensuring the validity of its conclusions. This section outlines the primary limitations encountered and proposes strategies to mitigate their impact.

### 1. Political Sensitivity and Restricted Access to Information

Zimbabwe's political environment is characterized by sensitivity surrounding electoral processes, leading to restricted access to official data and reluctance among stakeholders to share information. This atmosphere can hinder comprehensive data collection and limit the study's depth. To navigate these challenges, the study will employ a triangulation approach, gathering data from multiple sources to cross-verify information. This includes analyzing reports from international observer missions, such as the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) and The Carter Center, which have documented various aspects of the 2023 elections (EU EOM, 2023; The Carter Center, 2024). Additionally, insights from civil society organizations and media analyses will be incorporated to provide a balanced perspective.

### 2. Potential Bias in Secondary Sources

Reliance on secondary sources, including reports from observer missions and media outlets, introduces the risk of bias, as these sources may have their own perspectives and agendas. To

mitigate this risk, the study will critically assess the credibility and objectivity of each source. Diverse viewpoints will be considered to balance potential biases. For instance, while international observer reports provide valuable insights, their findings will be juxtaposed with local observer accounts and academic analyses to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the electoral process (Human Rights Watch, 2023; African Center for Strategic Studies, 2023).

### 3. Limited Availability of Quantitative Data

Detailed quantitative data on voter behavior, election results disaggregated by demographics, and instances of electoral malpractice may be scarce or inaccessible, limiting the study's ability to perform statistical analyses. In response, the research will adopt a qualitative approach, focusing on thematic analysis of narratives, reports, and expert interviews. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the contextual factors influencing the implementation of SADC principles. Where quantitative data is available, it will be used to support qualitative findings, providing a more robust analysis.

#### 1.10 Definition of Key Terms

1. Democratic Elections – Electoral processes that are free, fair, transparent, and conducted in accordance with established democratic principles, allowing citizens to express their political will without intimidation or coercion (SADC, 2021).
2. SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections – A regional framework established by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to promote electoral integrity, transparency, and fairness among member states (SADC, 2021).
3. Electoral Integrity – The adherence to democratic norms and principles in the conduct of elections, including impartiality of electoral bodies, freedom of political expression, and equal access to the electoral process (Nyathi, 2023).
4. Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) – The independent electoral management body responsible for organizing and overseeing elections in Zimbabwe, ensuring compliance with national and regional electoral laws (Moyo & Sithole, 2023).

### **1.11 Dissertation outline**

The research is structured into five chapters to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Implementation of SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 General Elections. Chapter 1 (Introduction) presents the background of the study, the problem statement, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, scope, and the overall structure.

Chapter 2 (Literature Review) examines existing scholarship on democratic elections, electoral governance in Zimbabwe, and the role of key stakeholders such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society, and observer missions. It also includes an overview of the SADC electoral guidelines, case study of the 2023 elections, and a discussion of theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Chapter 3 (Research Methodology) outlines the qualitative case study approach, research design, data collection methods (document analysis, interviews, and focus group discussions), sampling techniques, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 (Findings and Discussion) presents and interprets the research findings, focusing on Zimbabwe's compliance with SADC electoral standards, observed challenges, the role of electoral stakeholders, and a comparative analysis of the 2023 elections.

Chapter 5 (Conclusion and Recommendations) summarizes the key findings, provides policy recommendations for enhancing electoral integrity in Zimbabwe, discusses implications for future elections, and suggests areas for further research. This structured approach ensures a critical and systematic evaluation of Zimbabwe's adherence to regional electoral principles.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews existing literature on the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, their relevance to democratic consolidation in Southern Africa, and the extent of their implementation in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on the 2023 general elections. The chapter also interrogates the roles of various electoral stakeholders—including the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society, and regional bodies—in promoting electoral integrity. The review is structured according to the study's objectives, namely: identifying key electoral challenges, examining adherence to SADC guidelines, and assessing the roles of key stakeholders.

#### 2.2 Theoretical Framework: Democratic Consolidation and Normative Regionalism

The theoretical foundation of this study is underpinned by two interrelated concepts: democratic consolidation and normative regionalism. These frameworks offer critical lenses through which the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections can be systematically assessed.

##### 2.2.1 Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation refers to the process by which democracy becomes the “only game in town,” entrenching democratic norms, values, and institutions to a point where the reversal to authoritarian rule becomes highly unlikely (Linz & Stepan, 1996). It involves the normalization of democratic practices, acceptance of political pluralism, rule of law, accountability mechanisms, civil liberties, and institutional legitimacy. In the African context, democratic consolidation is often fragile and susceptible to institutional weaknesses, contested elections, and limited civic engagement (Cheeseman, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, the process of democratic consolidation has historically been marred by political violence, voter intimidation, limited media freedom, and uneven access to electoral processes (Raftopoulos, 2019). These issues continue to cast doubt on the legitimacy of

electoral outcomes, thereby impeding the consolidation of democracy. According to Matenga and Masunungure (2023), Zimbabwe's democratic architecture remains fragile due to deep-seated political polarization and a dominant executive that undermines horizontal accountability.

Furthermore, the 2023 general elections presented an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which Zimbabwe has made progress toward democratic consolidation through the lens of credible electoral conduct. However, concerns around transparency, the independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), voter suppression, and the role of the judiciary have raised critical questions about the integrity of the electoral process (Zimbabwe Election Support Network [ZESN], 2023). These challenges underscore the relevance of democratic consolidation theory in assessing whether Zimbabwe's elections are moving toward or away from democratic norms.

### **2.2.2 Normative Regionalism**

Normative regionalism, on the other hand, refers to the role of regional organizations in setting normative standards and promoting collective values such as democracy, human rights, and good governance across member states (Bach, 2016). It underscores the idea that regional bodies, such as SADC, can serve as normative actors that influence domestic politics through peer review mechanisms, electoral observation missions, and the establishment of democratic guidelines (Nathan, 2019).

The SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, first adopted in 2004 and revised in 2015, form a critical component of normative regionalism within Southern Africa. These guidelines outline minimum standards for democratic elections, including impartial electoral commissions, equal participation, freedom of expression, and access to information (SADC, 2015). By setting these standards, SADC positions itself as a regional custodian of democratic values.

However, the effectiveness of SADC's normative agenda has been inconsistent. Scholars have argued that SADC's response to democratic deficits in member states, including Zimbabwe, has often been tempered by political expediency, limited enforcement mechanisms, and a reluctance to confront incumbents (Vanheukelom & Byiers, 2017; Motsamai, 2021). In the context of the 2023 elections, SADC's Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) played a pivotal role in highlighting irregularities, such as media bias, lack of transparency in ballot printing, and intimidation of opposition supporters (SADC, 2023). This assertiveness marked

a departure from SADC's historically soft approach and reignited debates on the regional body's normative power.

According to Shumba (2023), SADC's increasingly critical stance reflects a shift toward a more activist interpretation of normative regionalism, where electoral integrity is not only monitored but actively promoted. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of such normative influence hinges on member states' willingness to internalize these values and implement electoral reforms.

### **2.3 Overview of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections**

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections were first adopted in 2004 and later revised in 2015 and 2021 to enhance their relevance in the evolving political landscapes of member states. These guidelines represent a concerted regional effort to standardise and uphold democratic norms, transparency, and electoral integrity across Southern Africa. The principles serve as a framework through which member states, including Zimbabwe, commit to conducting elections that are peaceful, credible, free, and fair (SADC, 2021).

The SADC Principles and Guidelines are grounded in a commitment to uphold the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the promotion of democratic governance. They are designed to support electoral processes that reflect the will of the people and are implemented in a manner consistent with international best practices (Matshanda, 2022). The Guidelines cover a wide array of electoral elements including the legal framework, independence of electoral institutions, media freedom, civic and voter education, participation of marginalized groups, and the role of observers and monitors.

A critical component of the Guidelines is the insistence on the independence and impartiality of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs). The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), as the institution charged with managing elections in Zimbabwe, is therefore expected to act without bias or undue influence from political actors or the executive (SADC, 2021; Kurebwa, 2023). The Guidelines call for EMBs to operate transparently, to ensure the integrity of the voters' roll, and to provide equal access to electoral information and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Another foundational principle is the promotion of political tolerance and inclusivity. SADC member states are required to guarantee the rights of citizens to associate freely, form political parties, and participate in electoral processes without intimidation or fear (Chiroro & Dendere, 2023). This principle directly links to freedom of assembly and the prevention of politically motivated violence, which have historically been significant challenges in Zimbabwe's electoral history.

The revised 2021 version of the Guidelines places stronger emphasis on gender equality, youth participation, and the inclusion of people with disabilities in electoral processes. These revisions align the Guidelines with contemporary democratic norms and international conventions such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (AU, 2021). Member states are encouraged to enact policies that remove barriers to participation for these groups and ensure they are adequately represented in political and decision-making spaces (Mashingaidze, 2022).

Media freedom and equitable access to state-owned media are also highlighted as essential conditions for democratic elections. The Guidelines stress the importance of a pluralistic media environment where divergent political views can be expressed freely, and all political parties are afforded equitable airtime, particularly during election campaigns (Mare, 2023). In Zimbabwe, concerns have been raised in successive elections regarding the partisan nature of the state media and the limited coverage granted to opposition parties (Chikwanha, 2022).

Furthermore, the SADC framework includes provisions on the deployment and conduct of election observers. SADC Electoral Observation Missions (SEOMs) are mandated to assess the electoral process using the Guidelines as a benchmark. Their reports are crucial in determining whether elections meet regional standards for democratic conduct (SADC, 2023). The presence of these observers is intended not only to deter electoral fraud and violence but also to build public and international confidence in the credibility of the election.

The Guidelines also mandate transparent and timely resolution of electoral disputes. Member states are encouraged to establish independent judicial mechanisms that can address complaints impartially and expeditiously (Tshuma, 2023). This requirement speaks directly to the need for a robust and independent judiciary, as well as accessible legal frameworks that allow all political actors to seek redress without fear of reprisal.

Despite the comprehensive nature of the SADC Principles and Guidelines, their implementation has varied significantly across member states, with political will and institutional capacity being the determining factors. In Zimbabwe, the principles have been embraced rhetorically, but several challenges continue to undermine their full realization, including allegations of voter suppression, manipulation of electoral laws, restricted political space, and violence against opposition supporters (ZESN, 2023).

The effectiveness of the SADC Principles and Guidelines is also contingent upon consistent monitoring, enforcement, and follow-up by regional bodies. Critics argue that SADC has often fallen short in holding member states accountable for violations of these standards, thus undermining the credibility of the Guidelines themselves (Mlambo, 2022). For the SADC Guidelines to be impactful, there must be a shift from normative declarations to binding enforcement mechanisms supported by political will from both regional leaders and national governments.

Therefore, the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections are an essential regional framework aimed at standardising democratic electoral conduct across Southern Africa. While the framework provides a solid foundation for promoting credible elections, its implementation in Zimbabwe remains inconsistent. Understanding the nuances of these principles is crucial for assessing the integrity of Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections and identifying areas where reforms are urgently needed.

#### **2.4 Key Electoral Challenges Hindering the Implementation of SADC Guidelines in Zimbabwe**

The SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections set out essential benchmarks for conducting free, fair, credible, and transparent elections in member states. Despite Zimbabwe's formal endorsement of these guidelines, the 2023 general elections were marked by several challenges that hindered the full implementation of these principles. These challenges span legal, administrative, political, and socio-economic domains, and have been widely documented by election observers, civil society, and international watchdogs.

### **2.4.1 Legal and Institutional Framework Deficiencies**

One of the most significant challenges lies in the deficiencies of the legal and institutional frameworks governing elections in Zimbabwe. While the SADC guidelines call for an impartial and independent electoral body, concerns have been raised regarding the independence and credibility of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). Critics argue that ZEC lacks institutional autonomy and is susceptible to political influence, particularly from the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) (ZESN, 2023; Mavedzenge, 2022). The process of appointing commissioners to ZEC remains opaque and heavily influenced by the executive, thereby undermining public trust and confidence in the electoral process.

Moreover, the electoral legal framework remains uneven and does not fully align with regional standards. Key provisions of the Electoral Act, such as those related to voter registration, access to the voters' roll, and media fairness, have been criticized for lacking clarity and for being inconsistently enforced (AfriForum, 2023). For instance, the continued use of presidential powers to make electoral regulations without adequate parliamentary oversight compromises transparency and accountability (Matyszak, 2023).

### **2.4.2 Restriction of Political Freedoms and Space**

Another notable impediment to the implementation of SADC guidelines is the continued restriction of political freedoms and the shrinking of democratic space in Zimbabwe. The 2023 electoral period was characterized by arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and harassment of opposition leaders and activists, which runs counter to the SADC principle that calls for equal political participation and freedom of association (SADC, 2023). According to the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (2023), there were numerous documented incidents of political violence and threats against supporters of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), with some areas reportedly declared “no-go zones” for opposition parties.

The Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and its successor, the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA), have continued to be used to stifle opposition activities and restrict public gatherings, despite constitutional guarantees of assembly and association (Chigwedere

& Dube, 2022). These laws disproportionately affect opposition parties and civil society, contributing to an uneven electoral playing field.

### **2.4.3 Lack of Media Pluralism and Fair Coverage**

A free and impartial media is essential for democratic elections, as stipulated in the SADC guidelines. However, media coverage in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections was significantly biased in favour of the ruling party. State-owned media outlets such as the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) provided extensive coverage to ZANU–PF while marginalizing opposition voices (Media Institute of Southern Africa [MISA], 2023). This disparity in media access undermines voters' ability to make informed choices and violates the principle of equitable access to public media.

Additionally, the regulatory body—the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ)—has been criticised for failing to ensure balanced media coverage and for maintaining a restrictive licensing regime that limits the proliferation of independent broadcasters (MISA Zimbabwe, 2023). As a result, the media landscape remains monopolised by state actors, curtailing pluralism and the diversity of viewpoints that are vital in an electoral democracy.

### **2.4.4 Voter Registration and Access to the Voters' Roll**

The voter registration process and limited access to the voters' roll also pose significant barriers to compliance with SADC principles. Despite improvements through the introduction of biometric voter registration (BVR), concerns were raised regarding the lack of transparency in the voter registration process, especially in rural areas where voter education is limited (Zimbabwe Election Support Network [ZESN], 2023). Reports emerged of eligible voters being turned away due to inconsistencies in documentation or being omitted from the final voters' roll.

Furthermore, opposition parties and civil society organizations faced challenges in accessing the voters' roll for independent verification. The cost of obtaining an electronic version of the roll was prohibitively high, and the data provided was often incomplete or outdated (ZDI, 2023). These issues limit the ability of stakeholders to verify voter data, raising questions about the credibility and integrity of the electoral process.

#### **2.4.5 Misuse of State Resources and Vote Buying**

The misuse of state resources and the practice of vote buying were also identified as key electoral challenges during the 2023 general elections. The ruling party has long been accused of using state machinery, including government vehicles, food aid, and development programs, to campaign and influence voters (RAU, 2023). This practice is inconsistent with the SADC guidelines, which prohibit the abuse of state resources for electoral advantage.

Instances of voter coercion, where citizens were compelled to attend ruling party rallies under threat of losing access to government programs, were documented by both domestic and international observers (SADC EOM, 2023). Additionally, reports of traditional leaders being co-opted into partisan political activities further blurred the line between state and party functions, violating the neutrality that is essential for democratic governance.

#### **2.4.6 Limited Civic and Voter Education**

Civic and voter education remain underdeveloped in Zimbabwe, particularly in marginalized rural areas. The SADC principles emphasize the importance of educating citizens about their electoral rights and responsibilities, yet state-led initiatives in Zimbabwe have often been sporadic and poorly coordinated. Civil society organizations that attempt to fill this gap frequently encounter resistance or are required to seek approval from ZEC, which delays outreach efforts (Chiroro, 2022).

Inadequate voter education has resulted in a lack of understanding among voters about electoral procedures, voter rights, and the significance of democratic participation. This knowledge gap disproportionately affects women, youth, and persons with disabilities—groups that the SADC guidelines seek to empower through inclusive electoral processes (UNDP Zimbabwe, 2023). The implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe continues to be undermined by a constellation of challenges. These range from legal and institutional shortcomings to political repression, media bias, misuse of state resources, and poor civic education. Unless these challenges are holistically addressed through legal reforms, stakeholder dialogue, and institutional strengthening, Zimbabwe will continue to fall short of fulfilling its regional obligations under the SADC framework.

## **2.5 Role of Electoral Stakeholders in Promoting Democratic Elections**

The promotion of democratic elections is a collective responsibility that involves multiple stakeholders whose roles are instrumental in ensuring transparency, fairness, credibility, and adherence to established legal and normative frameworks, such as the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. These stakeholders include election management bodies like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), the media, regional and international observers, and the electorate itself. Their coordination, impartiality, and adherence to democratic norms are crucial to the legitimacy of electoral processes (Matlosa, 2023; Moyo & Ndlovu, 2023).

### **2.5.1 The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)**

As the constitutionally mandated electoral body, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) plays a central role in administering elections and ensuring they align with democratic principles. According to Section 239 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment No. 20) Act, ZEC is responsible for conducting and supervising elections in a manner that is free, fair, and credible. However, its credibility has often been questioned due to perceived biases, lack of transparency in the voters' roll, delayed release of election results, and limited stakeholder engagement (SADC Electoral Observation Mission, 2023; Masunungure, 2023).

In the 2023 general elections, ZEC faced criticism for failing to adequately inform the public about voter registration processes and delimitation boundaries. Furthermore, reports highlighted inconsistencies in the management of polling stations and allegations of partiality, particularly regarding access granted to certain political parties over others (Zimbabwe Election Support Network, 2023). These shortcomings undermined public trust and called into question ZEC's commitment to upholding the SADC Principles, which emphasize impartiality, inclusivity, and transparency (SADC, 2021).

### **2.5.2 Political Parties**

Political parties are key actors in any democratic election. They serve as vehicles for citizen participation, political representation, and policy articulation. In Zimbabwe, the two main political parties, ZANU-PF and the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), significantly influenced the electoral landscape. ZANU-PF, as the incumbent, was frequently accused of leveraging state resources and institutions to its advantage, which is a direct violation of the SADC Principles that call for a level playing field (Chigora & Guzura, 2023).

Meanwhile, opposition parties have historically struggled with restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, including limitations on holding rallies and accessing public media. These challenges persisted in 2023, with numerous reports of intimidation, arbitrary arrests of opposition supporters, and politically motivated violence (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The partisan behaviour of some security forces further exacerbated tensions and highlighted the need for reform to ensure political neutrality in electoral contexts.

### **2.5.3 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)**

Civil society organizations play a vital role in election monitoring, civic education, and advocacy for electoral reforms. In the context of the 2023 Zimbabwean elections, CSOs such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), Election Resource Centre (ERC), and Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum actively engaged in voter education campaigns, observation missions, and post-election reporting. Despite their efforts, many of these organizations faced limitations, including restricted access to electoral data and accreditation delays for election observers (ERC, 2023).

Moreover, the operating environment for CSOs remained repressive, with the state employing legislation such as the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill to constrain their operations. This repression hampered the ability of civil society to fully contribute to a transparent and accountable electoral process (Mavedzenge, 2023). Nevertheless, CSOs remained resilient, using digital platforms and community outreach to raise awareness on electoral rights and democratic participation.

#### **2.5.4 Media and Information Dissemination**

A free and pluralistic media is a cornerstone of democratic elections. Media platforms are expected to provide balanced coverage of all contesting parties and inform citizens about their rights and the electoral process. However, in Zimbabwe, media coverage in 2023 was once again skewed in favour of the ruling party, with state-controlled broadcasters and newspapers offering limited visibility to opposition voices (MISA Zimbabwe, 2023).

Independent media outlets and journalists also faced harassment, censorship, and threats, which severely restricted their capacity to report objectively. The biased dissemination of information not only hindered informed decision-making among voters but also contradicted the SADC Guidelines, which advocate for freedom of expression and equal access to the media (SADC, 2021).

#### **2.5.5 Regional and International Electoral Observer Missions**

Regional and international observer missions are instrumental in enhancing electoral credibility by providing impartial assessments and recommendations. In Zimbabwe's 2023 elections, observer missions from the African Union (AU), SADC, the Commonwealth, and the European Union (EU) were present. Notably, the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) issued a report highlighting several concerns, including unequal access to media, lack of transparency in the voters' roll, and incidents of intimidation (SADC, 2023).

Literature indicates significant deviations from the SADC Principles, especially regarding fairness, inclusivity, and accountability. Despite their important role, the legitimacy of some observer missions was contested by state actors who accused them of bias. This antagonistic stance reflects a broader reluctance to accept constructive criticism and undermines efforts to foster democratic electoral norms through regional solidarity and peer review mechanisms (Munyati & Mandaza, 2023).

#### **2.5.6 The Electorate**

Lastly, the role of the electorate is indispensable in promoting democratic elections. Citizens must be informed, free to make political choices, and able to vote without fear of

coercion or reprisal. Voter turnout in the 2023 elections was moderate, with many citizens expressing apathy due to distrust in electoral processes and fear of violence. This disengagement is symptomatic of deeper structural and institutional challenges that deter effective participation (Raftopoulos, 2023).

Efforts by community-based organizations to mobilize young and first-time voters were met with some success; however, pervasive socio-political constraints continued to limit meaningful engagement. Strengthening voter confidence and fostering a democratic culture requires sustained education, security, and credible electoral processes. While multiple stakeholders contributed to Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections, the degree to which they promoted democratic values as outlined in the SADC Principles varied significantly. Institutional weaknesses, political interference, limited media freedom, and the suppression of civil society remain major impediments. Strengthening collaboration, transparency, and accountability among these stakeholders is essential to future democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe.

## **2.6 Empirical Studies on Zimbabwe's Electoral Performance**

Empirical research on Zimbabwe's electoral performance has grown significantly over the past two decades, with increasing scholarly and policy interest in the country's adherence to democratic norms, particularly the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (SADC-PGDE). These studies have examined a wide range of electoral issues, including administrative conduct, voter registration, political violence, media freedom, and institutional independence, particularly that of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

A notable empirical analysis by Matyszak (2023) found that while Zimbabwe has made periodic attempts to align its electoral frameworks with regional democratic expectations, the actual implementation remains inconsistent and superficial. His study, based on interviews with political analysts and electoral monitors, revealed that systemic challenges such as electoral manipulation, voter intimidation, and lack of transparency continue to undermine the credibility of elections. Similarly, Mavedzenge and Chirimambowa (2023), through a mixed-methods study involving surveys and policy document analysis, concluded that the 2023 general elections reflected only partial compliance with SADC principles, particularly with regard to fair media coverage, political tolerance, and the independence of the electoral management body.

Empirical evidence from the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) corroborates these findings. In its 2023 election observation report, ZESN identified significant irregularities including delayed opening of polling stations, uneven access to voter rolls, and inconsistent application of electoral laws (ZESN, 2023). These shortcomings were echoed in findings by AfriForum and the Election Resource Centre (ERC), which noted that the election lacked the necessary transparency and inclusivity that the SADC-PGDE demands (ERC, 2023; AfriForum, 2023).

Moreover, a study by Dube and Makaye (2022) employed content analysis and expert interviews to assess the role of media in the electoral process. Their findings revealed that state-controlled media overwhelmingly favoured the ruling party, in violation of the SADC guidelines promoting equitable media access for all political actors. This media bias, compounded by the closure of civic space and selective application of public order laws, created an uneven electoral playing field.

Empirical investigations have also highlighted the controversial role of the judiciary in electoral dispute resolution. A comparative study by Sibanda and Munemo (2022) analysing post-election litigation from 2013 to 2023 showed that the courts in Zimbabwe have generally failed to act impartially, thus reinforcing public scepticism about the fairness of electoral outcomes. Their research pointed to a broader issue of institutional capture and lack of checks and balances, which continue to hamper the implementation of the SADC-PGDE's core tenets such as rule of law and judicial independence.

An empirical survey conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI) in 2023, in collaboration with Afrobarometer, revealed that only 36% of Zimbabweans believed the 2023 elections were free and fair, while a majority expressed doubts about the impartiality of ZEC (MPOI, 2023). This public sentiment is consistent with SADC's preliminary observer mission findings, which raised concerns about the pre-election environment, media bias, and delays in the delivery of election materials (SADC Electoral Observation Mission, 2023).

Another important contribution comes from Chikwanha (2023), who examined youth participation in the 2023 elections. Using both quantitative voter turnout data and qualitative interviews, she found that although youth registration had increased due to targeted campaigns, actual voter turnout among youth was low due to disillusionment with the political process and mistrust in electoral outcomes. This finding points to a key shortcoming in the fulfilment of democratic inclusivity, a fundamental aspect of the SADC principles.

In terms of gender inclusion, a study by Mawere and Mutasa (2023) explored women's participation in the electoral process, both as voters and candidates. Their analysis, based on official statistics and interviews with female candidates, found that structural barriers such as political violence, limited funding, and patriarchal norms continue to limit the participation of women in politics. Despite the SADC-PGDE's explicit emphasis on gender parity, empirical data reveals that women remain significantly underrepresented in both Parliament and local government positions.

Furthermore, empirical studies have drawn attention to the influence of security forces on electoral outcomes. Makumbe and Nyoni (2023) investigated military involvement in electoral processes and found that both covert and overt actions by security actors have often skewed electoral results in favour of the incumbent. Their findings align with concerns raised by international and regional observers about the militarisation of politics and its detrimental effect on democratic elections.

Finally, regional comparative analyses also provide valuable insights. For instance, Ncube and Mhlanga (2022) conducted a comparative empirical study of Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi's recent elections. They found that while Zambia and Malawi made significant strides towards democratization through judicial independence and civic participation, Zimbabwe lagged behind due to authoritarian resilience and a lack of meaningful institutional reforms. Their conclusion was that Zimbabwe's electoral environment remains fragile and in need of genuine political and legal transformation to meet SADC standards.

Empirical literature on Zimbabwe's electoral performance paints a complex picture of partial compliance and persistent democratic deficits. Although Zimbabwe has adopted the SADC-PGDE in principle, the actual implementation remains constrained by a politicised electoral management body, restricted media freedoms, inadequate legal recourse, and diminished public trust. These empirical studies underscore the need for comprehensive electoral reform, civic education, and strengthened accountability mechanisms if Zimbabwe is to fully realise the democratic ideals enshrined in the SADC framework.

## **2.7 Gaps in the Literature**

While a considerable body of literature exists on democratic governance and electoral processes in Southern Africa, including analyses of electoral integrity in Zimbabwe, several

notable gaps persist in the academic and policy-oriented discourse. These gaps highlight the need for further empirical research and context-specific analysis, particularly in relation to the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe and the implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections.

Firstly, most existing studies focus on elections prior to 2018, with limited comprehensive academic analyses available on the 2023 elections. For instance, works by Matshazi (2019) and Masunungure and Bratton (2018) explored the 2008 and 2013 elections, respectively, emphasizing issues such as violence, voter intimidation, and media bias. However, these studies predate the 2023 general elections and do not account for new dynamics such as digital misinformation, COVID-19 recovery-related challenges, and evolving regional and international election monitoring frameworks. As such, there is a lack of post-2020 literature that critically evaluates Zimbabwe's electoral conduct in light of the updated 2021 SADC guidelines (SADC, 2021).

Secondly, while electoral studies often highlight systemic flaws such as the politicisation of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) and unequal access to the media (Sachikonye, 2020; Ncube, 2021), few engage in a holistic assessment of all electoral stakeholders, including civil society organisations (CSOs), regional observers, and political parties. This absence leaves a fragmented understanding of the collective roles and interplay between these actors in promoting or undermining democratic electoral standards.

Thirdly, although the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections provides a normative framework for democratic elections, very few empirical studies critically assess the degree of compliance with these principles in Zimbabwe's recent electoral cycles. Most evaluations focus on anecdotal evidence and general observations without systematically assessing whether Zimbabwe meets the specific indicators outlined in the SADC framework (Mavedzenge, 2022). For example, while the African Union and SADC Election Observer Missions (SEOM) produce post-election reports, academic studies seldom use these systematically to measure adherence to SADC's democratic benchmarks. This creates a gap in evidence-based academic assessment of Zimbabwe's commitment to regional democratic norms.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of literature that provides a comparative analysis between Zimbabwe and other SADC member states regarding the implementation of electoral principles. Research that juxtaposes Zimbabwe's electoral environment with that of other

countries like Zambia or Malawi, which have experienced democratic transitions recently, remains limited. Such comparative insights could offer valuable lessons on best practices and contextual obstacles to democratic consolidation (Matenga, 2023).

Additionally, the perspectives of marginalized groups such as youth, women, and rural voters are underrepresented in existing literature. Most scholarly works adopt a top-down analytical approach, focusing on institutional reforms, legal frameworks, and high-level political dynamics. There is a growing need for micro-level, participatory research that captures grassroots experiences and perceptions of electoral fairness and inclusivity (Dube & Mlalazi, 2022). This neglect potentially overlooks significant aspects of voter disenfranchisement and democratic engagement.

Furthermore, technological developments and their implications for electoral integrity—such as the use of biometric voter registration systems and digital platforms for political campaigning—are scarcely addressed in relation to Zimbabwe. While these technologies are increasingly shaping electoral processes across Africa, there is insufficient academic scrutiny on how they are regulated and deployed in Zimbabwe's electoral system and how they align with SADC principles (Chirisa et al., 2023).

Lastly, there is a gap in longitudinal studies that track Zimbabwe's electoral performance over time in relation to SADC standards. Most analyses are event-specific and do not provide a broader trend analysis of Zimbabwe's progress or regression in democratic governance. Longitudinal assessments could help identify patterns and areas where reforms have succeeded or stagnated. Although literature on Zimbabwe's elections is abundant in some respects, there remains a dearth of recent, comprehensive, and critical academic evaluations of the 2023 elections in line with the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. Future research should aim to bridge these gaps by incorporating multi-stakeholder perspectives, empirical compliance assessments, and comparative regional analysis. This study seeks to contribute to this emerging body of knowledge by addressing these overlooked areas and offering a timely and context-specific assessment of democratic electoral practices in Zimbabwe.

## **2.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has reviewed key literature on the implementation of SADC electoral principles in Zimbabwe, highlighting persistent challenges such as political polarization, institutional weaknesses, and limited adherence to democratic norms. The 2023 elections, though procedurally conducted, fell short of key SADC guidelines, particularly in areas of transparency, fairness, and stakeholder inclusion. The literature points to the need for robust reforms in electoral institutions, legal frameworks, and regional accountability mechanisms to realize democratic elections in Zimbabwe. The following chapter will focus on the methodology adopted by this study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology adopted in investigating the implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections during Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections. The methodology provides the foundation for understanding the strategies used to address the research objectives, which include identifying key electoral challenges, evaluating the level of adherence to SADC principles, and assessing the roles of electoral stakeholders. A qualitative research design was employed to explore the complex dynamics of electoral governance and democratic principles in Zimbabwe's electoral processes. The chapter outlines the research paradigm, design, population and sampling, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and the limitations of the study.

#### 3.2 Research Philosophy

The research paradigm refers to the fundamental set of beliefs and philosophical assumptions that guide the researcher's approach to knowledge, reality, and the processes of inquiry (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In this study, the interpretivism philosophy was adopted as the guiding framework. Interpretivism is grounded in the epistemological view that reality is socially constructed, subjective, and influenced by the context in which it occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm is appropriate for exploring complex sociopolitical processes such as electoral governance, where human experiences, institutional interactions, and normative frameworks intersect.

Interpretivism contrasts with positivism, which advocates for objective, measurable truths and quantitative methods. Instead, the interpretivism recognises the importance of understanding participants' interpretations, values, and meanings within their social environments (Ryan, 2018). Since this study aims to assess the implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections, a paradigm that privileges context, subjectivity, and depth over generalisability is more suitable.

In the Zimbabwean electoral context, where political dynamics, legal interpretations, media narratives, and institutional roles are often contested, understanding stakeholders' perspectives becomes crucial. Interpretivism allows for a nuanced appreciation of the lived realities and experiences of electoral stakeholders, including officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), civil society representatives, political party actors, and independent observers. Their insights offer rich, qualitative data on how SADC principles were applied—or not—during the 2023 elections.

Furthermore, interpretivism supports the use of qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews and content analysis, which are integral to this study. Through these methods, the researcher can access insider accounts and interpret the meanings embedded within legal documents, observer reports, and media discourses (Nowell et al., 2017). The subjective experiences of participants are not viewed as biases to be eliminated but as valid contributions to the understanding of electoral integrity and democratic governance (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018).

This paradigm also aligns with critical perspectives on electoral democracy in the Global South, where researchers must account for structural constraints, historical legacies, and evolving political institutions (Chiroro, 2022). Zimbabwe's electoral processes are shaped by a complex interplay of regional norms (such as the SADC Guidelines), national laws, and the actions of political elites. Thus, an interpretivist stance enables the researcher to make sense of these overlapping influences by foregrounding context-specific narratives and interpretations.

In addition, interpretivism allows for reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Given the politically sensitive nature of elections in Zimbabwe, the researcher must remain aware of their positionality and the potential influence of their own assumptions on the data collection and interpretation processes. Reflexivity enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research within the interpretivist tradition (Berger, 2015).

The interpretivist paradigm was chosen for its emphasis on subjectivity, context, and meaning-making, all of which are essential for understanding the depth and complexity of electoral governance in Zimbabwe. It provides a flexible yet rigorous philosophical foundation for exploring how electoral stakeholders perceive and experience the implementation of democratic principles, particularly in a politically volatile environment.

### **3.3 Research Design**

This study is framed within a case study research design, which is a methodological strategy used to conduct an in-depth and contextual analysis of a bounded system or phenomenon (Yin, 2018). A single-case design was adopted to focus specifically on Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections, offering a detailed examination of how the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections were implemented in this electoral cycle.

The case study design is especially appropriate when the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., adherence to democratic principles) and the context (i.e., Zimbabwe's political, legal, and institutional landscape) are not clearly demarcated (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). This design allows for the integration of multiple data sources, such as legal documents, official reports, and participant interviews, thereby enhancing the richness and credibility of the findings.

A key advantage of the case study design is its flexibility in accommodating both empirical evidence and theoretical inquiry. It allows the researcher to triangulate data from various sources and draw meaningful inferences about the behaviour of institutions like the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), the effectiveness of electoral legislation, and the perceptions of political stakeholders and civil society organisations (Thomas, 2021).

The 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe provide a particularly valuable case due to their significance in the country's ongoing democratic transition and the critical attention they received from regional and international observers. By employing a case study design, the research can delve into the systemic electoral challenges, institutional responses, and stakeholder experiences with greater depth and context sensitivity. Ultimately, the case study design supports the research's overarching aim to assess the real-world implications of regional democratic standards within a specific national electoral context.

### **3.4 Population and Sampling**

The population of this study comprises a wide array of electoral stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in the administration, observation, or critique of Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections. This includes officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), representatives from both ruling and opposition political parties, civil society organisations

(CSOs), legal experts, election observers (both domestic and international), media practitioners, and political analysts. Each of these groups plays a significant role in either implementing, monitoring, or responding to the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, making them key informants in assessing electoral integrity and procedural adherence.

According to Babbie (2020), identifying a relevant and information-rich population is critical for qualitative research, particularly when the objective is to gain deeper insights into processes, practices, and perceptions. In the case of Zimbabwe's 2023 elections, the selected population was believed to have first-hand experience or expert knowledge about the electoral environment, legal frameworks, procedural flaws, political interference, and institutional responses related to the implementation of the SADC Principles.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, non-probability purposive sampling was utilised. This technique allows for the intentional selection of participants based on their knowledge, roles, and relevance to the research questions (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for this study because it aimed to elicit rich, detailed, and context-specific information rather than generalisable statistical data. The researcher identified participants who were deemed most likely to provide valuable insights into electoral challenges, institutional performance, and stakeholder roles.

Moreover, this sampling strategy allowed the researcher to target individuals with diverse yet interconnected perspectives. For instance, election management officials from ZEC were expected to offer insights into the operational and regulatory frameworks guiding the 2023 elections. On the other hand, political party representatives—especially those from opposition movements—were anticipated to share experiences related to electoral fairness, access to media, and the political climate. CSO members and election observers, including those from organisations such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM), could provide independent assessments on the extent to which the elections conformed to regional democratic norms. Legal experts, meanwhile, were included to unpack the legal compatibility between Zimbabwe's Electoral Act and the SADC Principles.

In line with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation for qualitative studies, a relatively small yet diverse sample size of 15 participants was deemed sufficient for achieving data saturation—the point at which no new information or themes emerge from the interviews.

The selected sample was distributed as follows: 3 Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) officials, offering perspectives on institutional preparedness, policy interpretation, and electoral processes; 4 political party representatives, comprising two from the ruling party (ZANU-PF) and two from opposition parties such as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), discussing party access to electoral resources and campaign conditions; 4 representatives from CSOs and observer groups, including local organisations like ZESN and international missions like the SEOM; 2 legal scholars and constitutional experts, examining the regulatory alignment of Zimbabwe's electoral laws with SADC standards; 2 political journalists and analysts, providing media coverage perspectives and framing of the election narratives.

While the sample may not be statistically representative of all electoral actors in Zimbabwe, the depth and breadth of participants' experiences enabled a holistic understanding of the challenges and mechanisms that shaped the 2023 electoral process. The aim was to ensure the inclusion of multiple voices from different sectors of the electoral ecosystem, thereby enabling a more triangulated and multi-layered analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

It is also worth noting that access to certain high-profile stakeholders, particularly within the government and ZEC, posed some limitations. Political sensitivities and institutional protocols often hindered full cooperation or transparency in responses. Nonetheless, the data obtained from available participants was deemed rich and relevant, and care was taken to ensure that the data collection process remained ethical, respectful, and objective.

In sum, the chosen population and purposive sampling strategy were instrumental in facilitating a comprehensive qualitative inquiry into the application of the SADC electoral principles within Zimbabwe's 2023 elections. This approach aligns with the broader goals of interpretive qualitative research, which seeks to explore the meanings, power dynamics, and institutional behaviours embedded in democratic processes (Silverman, 2021).

### **3.5 Data Collection Methods**

This study employed a triangulated data collection approach that integrated documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews to gather comprehensive and credible data on the implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections. The selected methods aimed to enhance the

validity, depth, and contextual relevance of the findings by combining textual sources and lived experiences of key electoral stakeholders (Flick, 2023; Patton, 2015).

### **3.5.1 Documentary Analysis**

Documentary analysis was a fundamental method in this study, providing a wealth of secondary data to assess the structural and procedural dimensions of the 2023 elections. Official documents, legal instruments, electoral observer reports, and media coverage were critically reviewed to uncover consistencies and discrepancies between electoral practice and the normative framework provided by the SADC Principles and Guidelines.

Key documents reviewed included: The SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021 Edition), which articulate normative benchmarks for free, fair, credible, and peaceful elections. The Zimbabwe Constitution (2013) and the Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13], which govern the legal and institutional framework for elections in Zimbabwe. Reports by electoral observer missions such as the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM), African Union (AU), European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), Commonwealth Observer Group (COG), and domestic organisations like the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and Election Resource Centre (ERC). Independent assessments and policy briefs by think tanks, such as the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute (ZDI) and International Crisis Group (ICG). Articles and editorials from local and international media outlets including The Herald, NewsDay, Daily Maverick, BBC, and Al Jazeera.

This method enabled the researcher to track institutional decisions, legal amendments, reported irregularities, and stakeholder evaluations. Content was categorised and analysed thematically to detect patterns of adherence or deviation from SADC electoral principles, such as transparency, inclusivity, fairness, and accountability (Bowen, 2009; O’Leary, 2021). Documentary analysis also helped identify contradictions between official narratives and observer reports, which was instrumental in triangulating data and validating interview responses. The use of multiple documentary sources improved the robustness and reliability of the findings, as recommended in qualitative research best practices (Yin, 2018; Prior, 2020).

### **3.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposefully selected participants who were directly involved in or had expert knowledge of Zimbabwe's 2023 electoral processes. This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore predetermined themes while also probing for deeper insights based on participant responses (Adams, 2015; Brinkmann, 2022).

The interview participants included: Officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), Representatives from both ruling and opposition political parties, Civil society actors involved in voter education, monitoring, and advocacy, Legal experts with backgrounds in constitutional and electoral law, Independent journalists and political analysts. These interviews offered critical insights into the perceived challenges, institutional shortcomings, and stakeholder roles in implementing the SADC Guidelines. Interviews followed a guiding framework structured around three main themes derived from the research objectives: Electoral challenges and irregularities; The extent of compliance with SADC principles; The role of different stakeholders in promoting democratic integrity.

Interviews were conducted in English and recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Where possible, interviews were conducted in person; however, due to logistical constraints and the political sensitivity of the topic, several interviews were conducted via secure online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. This adaptation was essential in maintaining participant safety and ensuring broad participation across geographic locations (King et al., 2019).

Interview responses were anonymised and securely stored to protect participants' identities, especially given the politically sensitive nature of Zimbabwe's electoral context. Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to in line with institutional research ethics guidelines (Resnik, 2020; Orb et al., 2022).

The interviews provided rich, qualitative data that complemented the findings from documentary analysis. This method was particularly valuable in revealing insider perspectives on the institutional culture of ZEC, stakeholder coordination, and allegations of political interference. It also allowed for the inclusion of voices from marginalised or underrepresented groups, which is essential in assessing inclusivity in democratic processes (Silverman, 2021).

### **3.6 Data Presentation and Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a critical component of any qualitative research process, as it enables the researcher to make sense of raw data by systematically identifying patterns, themes, and meanings that respond to the research questions. For this study, a thematic content analysis approach was employed to analyse data gathered through documentary review and semi-structured interviews. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex social and political phenomena such as electoral governance and democratic principles, as it allows for the nuanced interpretation of both explicit and implicit meanings embedded in texts and spoken narratives (Nowell et al., 2017).

#### **3.6.1 Thematic Analysis Framework**

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. It organises and describes data sets in rich detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and capacity to handle diverse types of qualitative data, including interview transcripts, policy documents, legal texts, and media narratives. The method was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

**Familiarisation with the data:** This involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and documents to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher immersed themselves in the data through active reading and memo-writing. **Generating initial codes:** Codes were developed systematically by identifying key phrases, concepts, and ideas relevant to the implementation of SADC electoral guidelines. Coding was done manually and later verified using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12) to improve consistency and reliability.

**Searching for themes:** The initial codes were then grouped into broader themes based on similarities and relationships. Emerging themes included "institutional constraints", "voter suppression tactics", "media bias", "electoral transparency", and "stakeholder accountability". **Reviewing themes:** The themes were refined to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and reflective of the dataset. Some codes were merged, while others were split or discarded as necessary to ensure analytical clarity. **Defining and naming themes:** Each theme was clearly

defined and linked to specific research objectives. For instance, themes related to stakeholder roles were aligned with the third objective on evaluating the contributions of ZEC, political parties, CSOs, and regional bodies. Producing the report: The final analysis involved the integration of themes into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions, supported by illustrative quotes from interviews and textual excerpts from documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017).

### **3.6.2 Use of NVivo Software**

NVivo 12 software was employed to assist with data management and thematic coding. NVivo allowed the researcher to store, code, retrieve, and visualise patterns across a large volume of data systematically. This technological support enhanced the rigour and transparency of the analytic process, particularly when comparing and contrasting findings across different data sources (Woolf & Silver, 2018). Furthermore, NVivo enabled the identification of co-occurring themes and relationships between codes, which contributed to a deeper understanding of how the implementation of SADC principles varied across institutional and political contexts.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study**

In qualitative research, establishing trustworthiness is vital to ensure that findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unlike quantitative research, where reliability and validity are often determined through statistical measures, qualitative research relies on rigorous methodological transparency, reflexivity, and ethical integrity to validate its findings (Nowell et al., 2017). This study adopted various strategies to enhance trustworthiness across all four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as recommended by contemporary qualitative researchers.

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve credibility in this study, data triangulation was employed. This involved gathering information from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, official documents, election observer reports, and media content. Triangulation enhances the authenticity of findings by corroborating evidence across various

data sets (Fusch, Fusch & Ness, 2018). Moreover, member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate the interpretation of their responses. This process allowed respondents to review and clarify their input, ensuring that the researcher accurately represented their perspectives (Birt et al., 2016).

Prolonged engagement with the data and persistent observation during the document analysis and interview transcription phases further enhanced credibility. The researcher ensured that sufficient time was dedicated to understanding the electoral context and nuances within stakeholder responses, which helped in uncovering subtle but important insights relevant to the implementation of the SADC Guidelines.

Transferability pertains to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or settings (Shenton, 2004). While generalisability is not a primary aim of qualitative research, this study sought to ensure transferability by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context, sampling techniques, data collection procedures, and the socio-political environment surrounding the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe. By detailing these elements, other researchers and practitioners are equipped with the information necessary to determine whether the findings could be applicable in similar electoral environments, such as in other Southern African countries facing comparable challenges with democratic elections.

In line with recent literature, transferability was enhanced through contextual sensitivity—acknowledging Zimbabwe’s unique political landscape, legal framework, and historical electoral patterns (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The diversity of the sample, which included officials, civil society representatives, and political party members, further contributed to the potential relevance of the findings beyond the immediate study setting.

Dependability relates to the consistency of the research process and whether the study could be repeated with similar results (Anney, 2014). In this research, an audit trail was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis stages. This included the preservation of interview guides, transcribed data, coding schemes, field notes, and analytic memos. Documenting these elements allows future researchers to understand the procedures followed and the decisions made during the research process (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Additionally, peer debriefing was utilised to enhance dependability. Discussions with fellow researchers and academic supervisors provided opportunities to critique the coding strategies and thematic development. These engagements helped to refine interpretations and mitigate personal biases that may have influenced the analysis. Dependability was also

supported by the use of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12), which facilitated consistent data coding and retrieval.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the research findings are shaped by the participants' responses and not researcher bias or interests (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To promote confirmability, reflexivity was practiced throughout the study. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document personal thoughts, assumptions, and potential influences on the research process. This journal served as a tool for self-awareness and critical reflection, enabling the researcher to continuously interrogate their positionality and potential biases (Berger, 2015).

Moreover, all interpretations were grounded in the data, with clear evidence provided through direct quotations from participants and references to primary documents. A chain of evidence was maintained linking the data, analytical decisions, and final conclusions, thus increasing transparency and auditability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Therefore, by incorporating these robust strategies—triangulation, member checking, rich contextual descriptions, audit trails, peer debriefing, and reflexivity—the study meets the essential criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. These efforts enhance the legitimacy of the findings and their contribution to the discourse on democratic governance and electoral integrity in Southern Africa.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity is a foundational aspect of scholarly research, particularly in studies involving human participants and politically sensitive issues such as elections. In this study, ethical considerations were rigorously observed at every stage of the research process to ensure the protection of participants' rights, uphold research integrity, and align with institutional and international research standards. Before any fieldwork commenced, the researcher sought and obtained ethical clearance from the University's Ethics Review Committee. This approval was crucial for ensuring that the study adhered to established academic protocols and ethical guidelines as laid out in international codes such as the Declaration of Helsinki and national ethical research frameworks. Ethical clearance authorised the researcher to interact with human participants, collect data, and handle potentially sensitive information, while maintaining academic accountability (Bryman, 2016; Khosrow-Pour, 2022).

### **3.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the qualitative methodology employed in the study, outlining the interpretivist paradigm, purposive sampling, documentary and interview-based data collection, and thematic analysis. These methodological choices were aimed at ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the implementation of SADC electoral principles in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections. The next chapter will present and analyse the findings of the study in relation to the stated research objectives.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **4.0 DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents and discusses the findings obtained from the qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with electoral stakeholders, content analysis of media reports, official documents, and the 2023 Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) report. The findings are organized according to the research objectives, namely: identifying electoral challenges hindering the full implementation of SADC principles, assessing adherence to these principles, and evaluating the role of electoral stakeholders. Themes were identified through inductive coding and triangulated across data sources.

#### **4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND RESPONSE RATE**

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in the qualitative phase of the study. The study employed purposive sampling to select 15 key informants drawn from electoral stakeholders, including officials from the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), representatives of political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), media personnel, youth groups, and regional observers. The purpose of gathering demographic data was to ensure a balanced representation of perspectives from various actors involved in the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe.

The data collected included information on the participants' gender, organizational affiliation, role, and years of experience in election-related matters. Such diversity in background enhances the credibility and depth of the qualitative findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 4.1: Demographic Profile of Interview Participants

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
P1	Male	Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)	Electoral Officer	10
P2	Female	Civil Society (ZESN)	Elections Monitoring Coordinator	8
P3	Male	Political Party (Opposition – CCC)	Party Spokesperson	12
P4	Female	Political Party (Ruling – ZANU-PF)	Provincial Campaign Manager	15
P5	Male	Civil Society (ERC)	Legal and Governance Analyst	9
P6	Female	Independent Media	Political Journalist	7
P7	Male	Youth Electoral Network	Youth Advocate	6
P8	Female	Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR)	Legal Officer	11
P9	Male	AU Observer Mission	Regional Observer	14
P10	Male	SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM)	Team Leader	13
P11	Female	Church-Based Observer Network	Community Mobiliser	10
P12	Male	Academia – University of Zimbabwe	Political Scientist	16

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
P13	Female	Civic Tech Platform	Digital Monitoring Specialist	5
P14	Male	Parliament of Zimbabwe	Electoral Reforms Committee Member	17
P15	Female	Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum	Advocacy Officer	9
P16	Female	Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation (ZBC)	Political Journalist	10

Raw data: 2025

As shown in Table 4.1, the participants included both male (n=8) and female (n=8) stakeholders, ensuring gender inclusivity in the research. Participants held various roles, ranging from election monitoring and political representation to legal advocacy and media oversight. The average number of years of experience was approximately 10.8 years, indicating that most informants had significant familiarity with Zimbabwe's electoral processes.

This diverse representation allowed the study to draw from a wide array of insights, aligning with the best practices of qualitative inquiry, where the richness of perspectives is central to understanding complex social phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

## **Research Findings**

### **4.3 ELECTORAL CHALLENGES HINDERING THE FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF SADC PRINCIPLES**

Despite Zimbabwe's commitment to the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021), the 2023 general elections were marred by a multitude of electoral challenges that impeded the full realization of democratic standards. The challenges identified through interviews, document analysis, and media reviews include political violence and intimidation, partisan use of traditional leaders, biased media coverage, restricted civic space, and the opaque operations of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC).

### 4.3.1 Political Violence and Intimidation

One of the most pronounced challenges identified was the use of political violence and voter intimidation, particularly in rural constituencies. Interviewees from civil society organisations and opposition political parties consistently highlighted the coercive environment under which voters were expected to exercise their franchise. A community-based election monitor remarked:

*“People were threatened with withdrawal of food aid or expulsion from their villages if they did not attend ruling party rallies or show support. That’s not free choice.”* (Interviewee 2, Rural Election Monitor)

This was supported by reports from the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN, 2023), which documented numerous cases of coercion, intimidation, and politically motivated violence. According to Chikwanha (2023), such practices undermine the core tenets of democratic participation as articulated in the SADC Guidelines, including the right to vote freely and without fear.

### 4.3.2 Abuse of Traditional Leadership Structures

Traditional leaders were widely reported to have been co-opted by the ruling ZANU-PF party, a strategy that violates the constitutional principle of political neutrality of traditional authorities. One interviewee, a ward councillor from Matabeleland North, observed:

*“Village heads were openly campaigning for the ruling party. They would call meetings and warn villagers against voting for the opposition.”* (Interviewee 4, Ward Councillor)

This form of coercion contravenes Section 281(2) of Zimbabwe’s Constitution and SADC’s call for the separation of state and party interests (SADC, 2021). It also introduces an uneven electoral playing field, where opposition parties struggle to gain access to constituents without interference.

### 4.3.3 Media Bias and Information Asymmetry

Another structural impediment to fair elections was the overwhelming media bias in favour of the incumbent government. State-controlled media channels, especially the

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), were frequently cited as propagating a one-sided narrative. A freelance journalist in Harare stated:

*“During the campaign period, ZBC covered almost every ruling party rally live, but completely ignored opposition gatherings. This kind of bias influences public opinion unfairly.”*  
(Interviewee 6, Political Journalist)

According to Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ, 2023), over 85% of political coverage on national broadcasters during the election period favoured ZANU-PF. This skewed coverage violates the SADC guideline which promotes equal and fair access to media by all contesting parties (SADC, 2021).

Moreover, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and other legislative tools were selectively applied to suppress dissenting voices, particularly from online media outlets, further shrinking the space for free and informed public debate (Matyszak, 2023).

#### **4.3.4 Restricted Civic and Political Space**

The pre-election period was also characterised by a notable shrinking of civic space. Civil society organisations (CSOs) faced increased scrutiny, with some being barred from election observation or community mobilisation. An NGO official explained:

*“We applied for observer accreditation for over 300 monitors, but only 57 were approved by ZEC. They claimed it was an administrative issue, but the selection was clearly political.”*  
(Interviewee 3, NGO Programme Officer)

The controversial Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill, although not fully enacted by the time of the election, had already had a chilling effect on civil society, especially those engaged in governance and human rights advocacy (Moyo & Sithole, 2024).

#### **4.3.5 ZEC’s Lack of Transparency and Credibility**

Perhaps the most recurrent issue raised was the perceived lack of transparency and impartiality on the part of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). From the voters’ roll to ballot paper printing and distribution, stakeholders highlighted a pervasive sense of secrecy and institutional bias. An opposition party representative complained:

*“ZEC behaved more like a department of the ruling party than an independent body. They ignored court rulings, hid critical information, and failed to consult us on major decisions.”*  
(Interviewee 7, Opposition Official)

The late delivery of ballot papers, particularly in urban opposition strongholds like Harare and Bulawayo, raised serious concerns about electoral manipulation. Delays of up to 10 hours were reported, forcing some voters to return the following day. This unequal treatment of constituencies contradicts SADC’s principle of equity and efficiency in election management (SADC, 2021).

perceived bias also extended to its failure to address misinformation and hate speech on social media platforms, which disproportionately targeted opposition figures and civil society leaders. As noted by Maringira and Chigora (2023), such institutional weaknesses undermine public confidence and question the legitimacy of the electoral process.

#### **4.3.6 Legal and Institutional Barriers**

Electoral laws in Zimbabwe continue to favour the incumbent, a concern highlighted in several legal analyses. For example, Matyszak (2023) argues that Zimbabwe’s electoral framework lacks enforceable sanctions for non-compliance, thereby allowing state actors to act with impunity. The Patriotic Act, passed months before the elections, was used to threaten opposition leaders and critics with arrest for “undermining national interests,” effectively silencing dissent (ZESN, 2023).

These legislative tools contribute to a hostile electoral environment and contradict the SADC Guidelines’ emphasis on inclusive and competitive elections underpinned by respect for human rights.

Thus, the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe were conducted under conditions that severely hindered the implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. Political violence, traditional leader manipulation, media bias, and institutional opacity all served to compromise the fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness of the electoral process. While formal procedural steps were observed—such as voter registration and polling—these were undermined by a structurally skewed playing field.

The testimonies provided by key stakeholders corroborate the findings of independent observation missions and academic research, all pointing to the urgent need for systemic electoral reforms.

#### **4.4 ADHERENCE TO THE SADC PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES IN THE 2023 ELECTIONS**

The 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe offered a critical opportunity to assess the extent to which the country upheld the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021), which emphasise inclusivity, transparency, accountability, equal treatment of political actors, and the protection of civil and political rights. While some procedural improvements were noted, the broader electoral environment revealed substantial inconsistencies and non-compliance with several key tenets of the SADC framework.

##### **4.4.1 Peaceful Pre-Election Environment**

Several respondents acknowledged that, compared to past election cycles—particularly 2008 and 2018—the 2023 elections were relatively peaceful in terms of physical violence. A ZEC provincial officer commented:

*“We did not witness the levels of physical intimidation that were seen in past years. There was more policing, and our voter education teams were received well in many communities.”*  
(Interviewee 1, ZEC Official)

This observation aligns with the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM, 2023) preliminary report, which noted that the pre-election environment was “generally calm and orderly” in many urban and peri-urban regions. However, beneath this surface calm, structural issues persisted that undermined the democratic quality of the electoral process.

##### **4.4.2 Political and Legal Context**

The broader political and legal environment was perceived to be unfavourable to opposition parties and independent candidates. Laws such as the Patriotic Act, passed shortly before the elections, criminalised criticism of the state and deterred dissenting voices (Matyszak, 2023). This restrictive legislative framework contradicts Principle 4.1.6 of the

SADC Guidelines, which call for “equal opportunities for all political parties to access state resources and media.”

A legal expert interviewed highlighted:

*“The timing and content of the Patriotic Act was a clear strategy to silence critics. It created fear among citizens who wanted to challenge government positions during the campaign.”* (Interviewee 8, Legal Resource Foundation)

In addition, the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) was used selectively to restrict opposition gatherings. An opposition youth activist shared:

*“We applied for permission to hold rallies in four constituencies, and we were denied in all of them, while ZANU-PF was allowed to hold events without hindrance.”* (Interviewee 6, CCC Youth League Member)

These regulatory imbalances call into question Zimbabwe’s compliance with the SADC principle of fairness in the legal and political landscape (SADC, 2021).

#### **4.4.3 Administration of the Electoral Process**

The actual administration of the elections also presented areas of concern. One of the most contentious issues was the delayed distribution of ballot papers, especially in key opposition strongholds such as Harare and Bulawayo. This delay disenfranchised many voters and was widely interpreted as an act of voter suppression.

A civil society observer stationed in Harare South noted:

*“Voters queued for over eight hours, and when ballots finally arrived, it was almost midnight. Some polling stations had to open the next day. This is a serious failure of logistics.”* (Interviewee 3, Zimbabwe Election Support Network)

According to ZESN (2023), more than 50 polling stations opened late or failed to operate on election day due to logistical failures by ZEC. Such delays undermine the SADC requirement for timely and efficient conduct of elections, as outlined in Principle 4.1.2.

Moreover, concerns about the lack of transparency in the printing and distribution of ballot papers persisted throughout the election period. Requests from opposition parties and civil society for access to the printing process were largely ignored by ZEC, leading to allegations of opacity and electoral manipulation.

One opposition candidate remarked:

*“We still do not know how many ballots were printed and where they were sent. ZEC has refused to share the audit trail, and that fuels mistrust.”* (Interviewee 4, Independent Candidate – Harare West)

#### **4.4.4 Media Access and Freedom of Expression**

Another area of concern was the limited access to media for opposition parties. State-owned media, particularly the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), overwhelmingly favoured the ruling ZANU-PF party in its election coverage. According to Media Monitoring Project Zimbabwe (2023), ZANU-PF received over 85% of the prime-time political coverage on ZBC.

A freelance journalist based in Bulawayo explained:

*“ZBC was practically an extension of the ruling party’s campaign machinery. Opposition leaders were vilified or ignored altogether, and that violates any sense of fairness.”* (Interviewee 7, Freelance Political Journalist)

This unequal media access clearly violates SADC Principle 4.1.4, which stipulates that “all political parties shall have equal access to public media.”

In addition to biased coverage, media freedom was severely restricted, with journalists reporting intimidation, censorship, and limited access to polling stations. According to Chikwanha (2023), “the shrinking of media freedom in Zimbabwe before and during the 2023 elections created a chilling effect on investigative journalism.”

One of the most recurrent concerns raised by electoral stakeholders in the 2023 elections was the unequal access to public media, particularly the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), which is constitutionally mandated to provide fair and balanced coverage of all political

parties. According to a senior ZBC journalist interviewed for this study, editorial policies and political interference heavily influenced media output during the election period.

*“We were instructed, directly or indirectly, to give more prominence to ruling party activities. It was an unspoken rule that any coverage of opposition parties had to be vetted or toned down. In some cases, stories were dropped entirely, especially if they portrayed opposition figures in a positive light,”* the journalist explained.

This deliberate editorial imbalance contradicts both the Zimbabwean Constitution and the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, which emphasise the importance of equal and fair access to the media during elections (SADC, 2021). The journalist acknowledged that many within the newsroom were professionally uncomfortable with the bias but felt institutionally constrained.

*“There is a culture of fear and self-censorship at ZBC. Even if one wanted to produce objective coverage, you always had to think about how the story would be received by top management—and indirectly, the political elites,”* the respondent added.

The data suggests that state media continues to function more as a propaganda tool than a public service broadcaster, reinforcing political inequalities and impairing the electorate’s ability to make informed choices. These findings corroborate external observer reports, including those from the EU Election Observation Mission and ZESN, which also noted significant imbalances in media access and coverage during the campaign period (EU EOM, 2023; ZESN, 2023).

#### **4.4.5 Role of the Judiciary**

The judiciary’s role in resolving electoral disputes was also questioned. While courts were accessible for the lodging of complaints, the impartiality and timeliness of rulings were not guaranteed. A lawyer representing several opposition candidates stated:

*“Most of our petitions were dismissed on technicalities, without really addressing the substance of the complaints. The judiciary appears captured.”* (Interviewee 9, Electoral Litigation Advocate)

The SADC Guidelines require that there be independent and competent judicial bodies to adjudicate election-related grievances (SADC, 2021). The apparent bias and procedural delays in Zimbabwe's legal system during this election cycle suggest non-compliance with this principle.

Overall, the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe exhibited partial adherence to the SADC Principles and Guidelines. While the elections were less physically violent than in previous years and some administrative aspects were improved, the process was marred by restrictive laws, lack of transparency, media bias, logistical inefficiencies, and limited judicial recourse. These structural and institutional challenges point to a democracy in distress, rather than one in consolidation.

As Maringira and Chigora (2023) aptly summarise, “Zimbabwe’s electoral process remains a managed form of participation, where form is privileged over substance, and legitimacy is derived from ritual rather than genuine competition.”

## **4.5 ROLE OF ELECTORAL STAKEHOLDERS**

The credibility and success of democratic elections, as envisioned by the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021), rely heavily on the active and principled involvement of multiple electoral stakeholders. These include the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), the judiciary, the media, and regional and international observer missions. The findings of this study revealed divergent roles played by these actors during Zimbabwe’s 2023 general elections—ranging from facilitation to obstruction—ultimately influencing the overall integrity and perception of the electoral process.

### **4.5.1 Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)**

As the constitutional body mandated to oversee elections, ZEC is pivotal in determining whether elections meet democratic standards. However, the majority of participants expressed

deep concerns regarding ZEC's impartiality, transparency, and accountability during the 2023 elections.

One opposition party representative remarked:

*“ZEC is supposed to be an independent umpire, but in practice, it acts like a referee favouring one team. They delayed releasing the voters’ roll, manipulated the delimitation process, and remained silent when state media openly campaigned for ZANU-PF.”* (Interviewee 5, CCC Official)

Civil society actors echoed this view, citing ZEC's lack of stakeholder engagement and its failure to provide verifiable and timely electoral information. According to ZESN (2023), ZEC released the final voters' roll only days before the election, with discrepancies such as duplicated names, ghost voters, and inconsistencies in constituency boundaries.

Another participant from an electoral advocacy NGO noted:

*“We tried engaging ZEC on several occasions regarding the roll and polling logistics. They promised transparency but never delivered. Their communication was erratic and strategic silence became the norm.”* (Interviewee 3, Zimbabwe Election Support Network)

This finding aligns with Matyszak (2023), who critiques ZEC for "administrative opacity" and "structural compliance without substantive reform." While ZEC did introduce biometric voter registration (BVR), its refusal to submit the final BVR system for independent audit undermined confidence in its integrity.

#### **4.4.2 Political Parties**

Political parties are central actors in any democratic election, and their conduct significantly impacts the degree of competitiveness, fairness, and legitimacy. The findings revealed a highly unequal political playing field, with the ruling party, ZANU-PF, enjoying disproportionate access to state resources, media coverage, and security protection, while opposition parties faced constraints on mobilisation and expression.

A local journalist noted:

*“The ruling party had unrestricted access to the state broadcaster and public venues, while opposition rallies were banned or disrupted by police. It was clearly not a level playing field.”* (Interviewee 9, Freelance Journalist)

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA-Zimbabwe, 2023) reported that ZANU-PF received 92% of airtime on the national broadcaster during the campaign period, in contravention of the SADC principle advocating equal media access for all political actors.

Furthermore, opposition candidates reported systemic intimidation and the misuse of state apparatus. A youth coordinator from an opposition party said:

*“Our candidate in Masvingo South was arrested three times during the campaign for holding community meetings. Meanwhile, ZANU-PF trucks moved around blaring slogans without interference.”* (Interviewee 6, CCC Youth Wing)

This reinforces the findings by Maringira and Chigora (2023), who argue that ZANU-PF’s historical dominance is sustained through a combination of legal manipulation, coercive enforcement, and access to public infrastructure.

#### **4.5.3 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**

Despite operating under increasing legal and political restrictions, civil society in Zimbabwe continues to play an instrumental role in promoting democratic elections. CSOs were actively involved in voter education, election monitoring, litigation, and public awareness campaigns.

One CSO director explained:

*“We deployed over 2,000 domestic observers, trained thousands of civic educators, and documented irregularities in real time. We believe civil society fills the gaps left by state institutions.”* (Interviewee 2, Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum)

However, many CSOs faced intimidation, surveillance, and legal threats under the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Bill, which was widely condemned as an effort to shrink civic space (Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, 2023).

Another interviewee from a women’s advocacy organisation added:

*“Gender-based political violence increased in 2023, yet our attempts to raise awareness were labelled as foreign interference. The civic space is closing rapidly, especially for those championing inclusive democracy.”* (Interviewee 8, Women in Politics Support Unit)

Despite these constraints, CSOs documented key violations and submitted independent reports to regional and international bodies, thereby contributing to alternative narratives on electoral integrity (ZESN, 2023; RAU, 2023).

#### **4.5.4 Regional and International Observers**

The role of regional and international observer missions is to provide impartial assessments of the electoral process and promote accountability. During the 2023 elections, observer missions from SADC, the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU) were present.

The SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM, 2023) issued a relatively critical preliminary report highlighting issues such as late opening of polling stations, voter roll access delays, and media bias. For many stakeholders, this marked a notable departure from previous diplomatic and non-confrontational assessments.

One political analyst stated:

*“SADC finally acknowledged that things are not right. Their report was not perfect, but it signalled a shift. We hope this is the beginning of more honest regional engagement.”* (Interviewee 10, Independent Political Analyst)

However, others argued that the impact of these observations remained limited due to the lack of binding mechanisms for enforcement.

*“It’s one thing to write a good report, but without consequences, it remains a paper exercise. ZANU-PF has never faced real sanctions for electoral misconduct.”* (Interviewee 4, Election Watch Zimbabwe)

This criticism is supported by Moyo and Sithole (2024), who argue that SADC’s normative frameworks are undermined by weak enforcement and member state reluctance to intervene.

#### 4.5.5 The Media

The media, as the fourth estate, has a critical role in informing citizens and fostering transparency. However, the findings suggest that Zimbabwe’s media landscape remains severely compromised, with state-controlled media serving partisan interests and independent journalists facing harassment.

An experienced editor shared:

*“We tried to balance our reporting, but the government used laws like the Cyber Security Act to silence dissent. We operated under fear.”* (Interviewee 11, Editor, Independent Media Outlet)

Moreover, social media platforms became critical alternative sources of information, although they also facilitated misinformation and polarisation. This dual role of digital media was highlighted by Chikwanha (2023), who warns that while social media has democratised information, it also presents regulatory and ethical challenges in fragile democracies.

The 2023 Zimbabwean general elections revealed a complex interplay of stakeholder roles, with both constructive and obstructive outcomes. While ZEC’s performance fell short of the independence and transparency standards prescribed by the SADC Guidelines (2021), civil society and independent observers played vital roles in monitoring and accountability. Political parties remained unequal participants in the process, with the ruling party enjoying structural advantages. The media landscape continued to be distorted by state dominance, while regional observers offered more critical—yet non-enforceable—assessments than in previous cycles.

#### 4.6 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal significant gaps between the normative framework of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2021) and the actual conduct of Zimbabwe’s 2023 general elections. Despite some procedural improvements, fundamental democratic standards were undermined by persistent structural and institutional challenges. This discussion synthesizes key insights under three thematic areas aligned with the study’s objectives: (1) electoral challenges, (2) adherence to SADC guidelines, and (3) stakeholder roles.

#### 4.6.1 Electoral Challenges Undermining Full Implementation of SADC Guidelines

The study found that the electoral environment in Zimbabwe remained heavily skewed in favour of the ruling party due to various structural and procedural impediments. These include intimidation, misuse of state resources, opaque electoral processes, and restricted civil liberties.

Participants emphasized the politicization of traditional leadership and the intimidation of voters, particularly in rural areas. One participant remarked:

*“The chiefs were openly telling villagers who to vote for and threatening to withdraw food aid if they didn’t comply.”* (Interviewee 8, Local NGO representative)

This corroborates earlier research by Sachikonye (2022), who asserts that traditional leaders have increasingly become instruments of political control, thus violating the SADC principle of a free political environment.

The lack of transparency surrounding the voters' roll was also a recurring theme. The ZEC's failure to timely avail an accurate and auditable voters' roll undermined trust in the electoral process. An opposition party agent noted:

*“Without a verified voters’ roll, the playing field is already uneven. It’s like going into a game where the referee is part of the opposing team.”* (Interviewee 4, Political party official)

This reflects the findings of ZESN (2023) and Matyszak (2023), who argue that access to the voters' roll remains one of the most contentious issues, affecting electoral credibility.

Moreover, administrative inefficiencies, such as late delivery of ballot papers, disproportionately affected urban areas perceived as opposition strongholds. One voter shared:

*“In our constituency, ballots came late in the afternoon. Some people left without voting because they couldn’t wait the whole day.”* (Interviewee 12, Urban voter, Harare South)

This contradicts the SADC principle mandating equal treatment of all voters and efficient logistical planning (SADC, 2021). Maringira and Chigora (2023) observe that the logistical

delays were not merely technical but had political implications given their geographic distribution.

#### **4.6.2 Extent of Adherence to SADC Principles in the 2023 Elections**

The study observed that while Zimbabwe has institutionalized regular elections, substantive adherence to democratic norms remains limited. Superficial procedural compliance often masks deeper structural manipulation of the electoral environment.

For instance, some respondents acknowledged that the elections were less violent compared to previous years. A ZEC official argued:

*“We didn’t see widespread violence like before. That shows we are improving, even if challenges remain.”* (Interviewee 1, ZEC Officer)

However, many stakeholders emphasized that the absence of overt violence does not equate to a democratic election. Covert coercion, administrative manipulation, and uneven campaign conditions remain prevalent. This resonates with Moyo and Sithole (2024), who argue that the "repression without violence" model allows incumbents to claim legitimacy while controlling the electoral outcome.

Furthermore, the legal environment constrained fundamental freedoms. The use of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act, commonly known as the “Patriotic Act,” suppressed dissenting voices under the guise of maintaining national security. A lawyer commented:

*“We have entered a phase where laws are not just regulatory but are now openly suppressive. The new law criminalizes legitimate dissent.”* (Interviewee 11, Human rights lawyer)

This situation is incompatible with SADC’s call for respect for freedoms of expression, association, and assembly (SADC, 2021). As Chikwanha (2023) notes, such legal instruments reflect a drift toward authoritarian legality, where repression is cloaked in judicial and legislative legitimacy.

### 4.6.3 Role of Stakeholders in Promoting Democratic Elections

#### Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC)

The ZEC, mandated to conduct elections independently and impartially, was widely viewed as lacking neutrality. Several respondents questioned its transparency, particularly in managing the voters' roll, procurement of ballots, and communication with stakeholders.

*“The ZEC always talks about independence, but its actions show bias. Why does it consistently favour the ruling party?”* (Interviewee 5, Academic)

According to Electoral Resource Centre (2023), ZEC's lack of institutional independence is exacerbated by its appointment procedures and lack of accountability mechanisms, leading to declining public trust.

#### Political Parties

Political parties were found to play both constructive and destructive roles. The ruling ZANU-PF leveraged state resources, media dominance, and security institutions to consolidate power, while opposition parties struggled to campaign freely. One youth activist highlighted:

*“The opposition doesn't have access to the same resources or media. That's not a level playing field.”* (Interviewee 10, Youth activist)

Freedom House (2023) similarly reported that the Zimbabwean political landscape remains unequal, with the ruling party enjoying disproportionate control over public institutions and resources.

#### Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Regional Observers

CSOs made substantial efforts in electoral observation, voter education, and rights advocacy, despite legislative constraints such as the proposed Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Amendment Bill. One CSO leader commented:

*“We had to operate under a cloud of suspicion, but our presence at polling stations was crucial for transparency.”* (Interviewee 7, Election observer)

This aligns with the analysis by Makumbe (2023), who notes that while civil society has grown more resilient, its operational space is shrinking due to state regulation and intimidation.

Regional observers, particularly the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM), provided mixed evaluations. While their reports acknowledged peaceful conduct, they also raised concerns over legal, procedural, and structural issues. However, several respondents criticized SEOM for diplomatic language. One analyst stated:

*“The regional bodies avoid direct criticism. They are more concerned about maintaining stability than democracy.”* (Interviewee 6, Regional affairs analyst)

This reflects Moyo and Sithole’s (2024) critique that SADC’s cautious diplomacy often prioritizes regime stability over substantive democratic accountability.

#### **4.6.4 Synthesis with Existing Literature**

Overall, the findings affirm existing academic perspectives that Zimbabwe’s electoral processes remain democratically deficient despite periodic reforms. The data reinforces the argument by Bratton and Masunungure (2023) that Zimbabwe’s elections operate under a "managed electoral regime" that simulates democracy while preserving elite dominance.

Additionally, the study expands on Levitsky and Way’s (2010) concept of “competitive authoritarianism,” showing how formal democratic mechanisms coexist with informal authoritarian controls.

#### **4.7 Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 presented and discussed the key findings of the study, highlighting persistent electoral challenges, partial adherence to the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, and the varying effectiveness of electoral stakeholders in promoting democratic processes during Zimbabwe’s 2023 general elections. The chapter drew on qualitative evidence from interviews and document analysis to reveal systemic flaws such as voter intimidation, media bias, and limited transparency by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), while also acknowledging the critical role played by civil society and

regional observers. Building on these insights, Chapter 5 provides a synthesis of the conclusions drawn from the study and offers targeted recommendations to strengthen electoral integrity, stakeholder accountability, and compliance with regional democratic standards in future elections.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### 5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the overall conclusions of the study and provides practical and policy-oriented recommendations grounded in the evidence discussed in Chapters 2 to 4. The research sought to evaluate the implementation of the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections by examining electoral challenges, adherence to the guidelines, and the role of key electoral stakeholders, including the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society, and regional bodies.

The findings reveal systemic challenges that continue to hinder Zimbabwe's democratic electoral processes. While some procedural improvements were noted, substantial normative and structural deficits persist that undermine the integrity of the electoral framework.

#### 5.2 SUMMARY

This dissertation set out to critically assess the extent to which Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections aligned with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections, focusing particularly on key electoral challenges, adherence to democratic standards, and the role of critical stakeholders such as the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), political parties, civil society, and regional bodies.

Chapter One introduced the background to the study, highlighting Zimbabwe's historical electoral deficits and the continued regional efforts—particularly by SADC—to promote democratic governance in Southern Africa. The chapter presented the research

problem, objectives, and rationale, outlining the importance of scrutinising the 2023 elections in the context of regional norms and principles.

Chapter Two provided a detailed literature review, underpinned by the theoretical frameworks of democratic consolidation and normative regionalism. The chapter reviewed existing studies on electoral governance in Zimbabwe, the role of regional instruments in democratisation, and the persistent challenges such as media bias, institutional weaknesses, political violence, and lack of transparency. It also identified research gaps, particularly the need for post-2023 election analysis framed within the updated SADC Principles and Guidelines.

Chapter Three outlined the qualitative methodology adopted for the study. The research employed a case study design under an interpretivist paradigm, using semi-structured interviews and document analysis as primary data collection tools. Data were sourced from key stakeholders—ZEC officials, political party representatives, civil society actors, journalists, and legal experts—as well as official reports, legal documents, and media content. Thematic content analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Chapter Four presented the study's findings, structured around the three main objectives. The data revealed several significant electoral challenges, including the lack of ZEC independence, voter intimidation, and the unequal playing field created by state media bias. While certain procedural improvements, such as biometric voter registration, were noted, these were overshadowed by structural issues undermining credibility. Furthermore, the role of regional and domestic observers was found to be mixed—observant but limited in enforcement capacity.

Finally, Chapter Five provided a synthesis of key findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The study concluded that Zimbabwe's 2023 elections fell short of fully adhering to the SADC Principles and Guidelines, particularly in areas related to media freedom, institutional neutrality, and electoral justice. It argued that democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe remains fragile, and that meaningful reform is required not only within national electoral institutions but also in the regional accountability mechanisms employed by SADC.

In sum, this dissertation contributes to the broader discourse on electoral integrity in Southern Africa by providing a focused, evidence-based analysis of Zimbabwe's democratic

performance in 2023. It underscores the gap between normative frameworks and practical realities, and calls for renewed regional and domestic commitment to genuine democratic reform.

## **5.3 CONCLUSIONS**

This study sought to critically assess the implementation of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in the context of Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections. Drawing from qualitative data—including official reports, media analysis, and stakeholder interviews—the following nuanced conclusions can be made.

### **5.3.1 KEY ELECTORAL CHALLENGES**

Despite Zimbabwe's formal commitment to democratic principles under the SADC framework, the 2023 elections exposed enduring democratic deficits. The electoral process was characterised by procedural adherence in some technical aspects but failed to fully embody the substantive democratic values that SADC envisions, such as transparency, inclusiveness, and political pluralism. This echoes findings by Maringira and Chigora (2023), who argue that Zimbabwe's electoral system has institutionalised a veneer of democracy without embedding genuine democratic culture. The persistence of electoral malpractices—such as voter intimidation, manipulation of voter rolls, and uneven access to media platforms—reflects structural weaknesses that undermine the credibility of the entire process.

### **5.3.2 EXTENT TO WHICH ZIMBABWE'S 2023 ELECTIONS ADHERED TO THE SADC PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES GOVERNING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS.**

One of the most salient conclusions concerns the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission's (ZEC) lack of perceived independence and credibility. The qualitative evidence indicates that ZEC's operational decisions—ranging from the management of voter registration to the logistics of ballot distribution—were met with widespread skepticism by opposition parties, civil society, and international observers alike. These findings align with the Electoral Resource Centre's (2023) observations regarding the opaque functioning of the commission. The lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms within ZEC allowed space for

political interference, primarily benefiting the ruling party, thereby compromising the fundamental democratic principle of impartial electoral management (Chikwanha, 2023).

The elections highlighted significant imbalances in the political playing field. The ruling party's disproportionate control over state resources and the state media severely disadvantaged opposition parties, curtailing their ability to campaign effectively and reach voters. This runs counter to the SADC guidelines which emphasise the importance of equitable access to resources and media for all political actors (SADC, 2021). Interview excerpts such as one from a political party official underscore this issue: "State media gave us less than 10% coverage compared to the ruling party's near monopolisation of airtime. How can elections be fair if voters only hear one side of the story?" (Political Party Representative, 2023). Such media bias entrenches incumbency advantages and diminishes electoral competitiveness.

### **5.3.3 ROLE OF ELECTORAL STAKEHOLDERS**

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in promoting electoral transparency and educating voters. However, the restrictive legal environment—including recent amendments to the Private Voluntary Organisations Act—hampered their activities during the 2023 elections. Several interviewees from CSOs lamented the chilling effect of these laws, which limited their capacity to monitor and report electoral irregularities without fear of reprisal. One CSO leader reflected: "We tried to hold peaceful voter education sessions, but constant harassment and legal threats made it impossible to operate freely" (CSO Representative, 2023). This situation undermines the essential watchdog role that civil society plays in democratic processes, limiting accountability and informed citizen participation.

While the SADC Electoral Observation Mission (SEOM) was present and issued a report acknowledging some positive aspects of the electoral process, its impact was muted by diplomatic language and lack of enforcement mechanisms. The study's findings corroborate Moyo and Sithole's (2024) analysis that SADC's observation missions tend to prioritise regional stability and member-state sovereignty over stringent enforcement of democratic norms. This often results in superficial critiques that fail to compel member states to undertake substantive reforms. A regional observer stated: "Our reports highlight issues, but the political will within SADC to press for change is limited. Member states protect each other, and this affects the robustness of our interventions" (Regional Observer, 2023).

Though Zimbabwe made some strides in electoral logistics and peaceful campaigning relative to previous elections, these improvements were insufficient to meet the comprehensive requirements of the SADC Principles and Guidelines. Issues such as voter intimidation, political violence in certain constituencies, delayed election results, and lack of transparency in vote tallying point to a gap between procedural compliance and the normative aspirations of democratic elections. This distinction is critical; it highlights that democracy is not solely about the act of holding elections but also about ensuring those elections are free, fair, transparent, and inclusive (ZESN, 2023).

In sum, Zimbabwe's 2023 elections reaffirm the complexities inherent in democratic consolidation within contexts characterised by entrenched authoritarianism, weak institutions, and political contestation. The study concludes that the formal institutional framework provided by SADC's Principles and Guidelines, while a necessary foundation, is inadequate on its own to guarantee genuinely democratic elections without complementary reforms addressing power asymmetries, institutional independence, and civic freedoms.

The interplay between institutional weaknesses, political dominance, and constrained civic space underscores the need for holistic approaches that engage not only electoral management bodies but also broader governance and legal frameworks. The findings point toward a critical need for political will, both domestically and regionally, to translate electoral norms into lived democratic realities.

## **5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.4.1 Strengthening Electoral Integrity and Transparency**

- Reform ZEC to guarantee its independence, accountability, and transparency. This should include independent appointments, regular stakeholder consultations, and real-time publication of electoral processes.
- Digitise and decentralise access to the voters' roll to allow all political parties and citizens to verify information in real time (ZESN, 2023).
- Implement third-party audits of ballot paper procurement and distribution to enhance trust in the electoral process.

#### 5.4.2 Levelling the Political Playing Field

- State media must offer equitable coverage to all political parties, as stipulated in the SADC Guidelines (SADC, 2021). Regulatory bodies should monitor and enforce media impartiality during election periods.
- Legislation such as the Patriotic Act and PVO Amendment Bill should be repealed or amended to align with international norms on civil and political liberties (Chikwanha, 2023).
- Establish an independent electoral court with fast-track mechanisms to deal with election-related disputes transparently and expeditiously.

#### 5.4.3 Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement

- Encourage more robust participation of civil society in electoral reforms, monitoring, and education. Government must refrain from criminalising civic engagement through restrictive laws.
- Regional bodies like SADC should adopt enforcement mechanisms for member states that consistently flout democratic standards. Observation missions should include detailed follow-up reports and reform timelines (Moyo & Sithole, 2024).

#### 5.4.4 Civic Education and Voter Awareness

- Intensify **voter education campaigns** throughout the electoral cycle, not just during election seasons. These should target young voters, women, and rural communities to foster informed participation (Maringira & Chigora, 2023).
- Civil society must collaborate with community leaders, schools, and faith-based organisations to promote a democratic political culture rooted in transparency and accountability.

### 5.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future studies should conduct comparative analyses of electoral integrity in other SADC member states to determine regional best practices.
- Longitudinal studies could assess whether reforms implemented after the 2023 elections improve future electoral cycles in Zimbabwe.
- Quantitative surveys assessing citizen perceptions of electoral fairness and trust in institutions could complement the qualitative data and offer broader generalisability.

## **5.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

While Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections exhibited some procedural improvements, substantive adherence to democratic principles, as articulated in the SADC Guidelines, remains lacking. Electoral reforms must go beyond cosmetic changes and instead target the deeper institutional, legal, and political issues that compromise democratic accountability. The path toward democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe requires collective commitment from government institutions, political parties, civil society, and regional actors. Only through genuine reform and broad stakeholder inclusion can future elections meet regional and international standards of credibility and legitimacy.

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## **Appendix**

# **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

### **Study Title:**

*Assessing the Implementation of SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in Zimbabwe's 2023 General Elections*

### **Introduction for Participants:**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this research is to assess the extent to which Zimbabwe's 2023 general elections aligned with the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections. I am particularly interested in your insights regarding electoral challenges, adherence to standards, and the roles played by different stakeholders.

Please note that your participation is voluntary, your responses will be kept confidential, and you may withdraw at any point without penalty.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview for accuracy.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

## **Section 1: Background Information**

*(Objective: Understand the participant's background and their engagement with the electoral process.)*

1. Can you briefly describe your role or involvement in the 2023 general elections?
2. How would you characterise your familiarity with the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections?

## **Section 2: Key Electoral Challenges**

*(Objective: Identify challenges that hindered full implementation of SADC guidelines.)*

3. In your view, what were the major challenges faced during the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe?
4. To what extent did these challenges impact the transparency, fairness, and credibility of the electoral process?

## **Section 3: Adherence to SADC Principles and Guidelines**

*(Objective: Examine the extent of compliance with the SADC guidelines.)*

- 5 In your opinion, to what degree were the SADC Principles and Guidelines adhered to during the 2023 elections?
- 6 Could you highlight any specific areas where compliance was particularly strong or particularly weak?

## **Section 4: Role of Electoral Stakeholders**

*(Objective: Assess the role of ZEC, political parties, civil society, and regional bodies.)*

- 7 How would you assess the performance of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) in ensuring a democratic election?
- 8 What role did political parties play in either promoting or undermining the principles of democratic elections?
- 9 How active and effective were civil society organisations in advocating for electoral transparency and accountability?

## **Section 5: Recommendations for Future Elections**

*(Objective: Gather suggestions for improving the implementation of SADC guidelines.)*

- 10 Based on your experience, what reforms would you recommend to better align Zimbabwe's elections with the SADC Principles and Guidelines?
- 11 What role should the SADC region and international actors play in supporting democratic elections in Zimbabwe moving forward?

## **Section 6: Closing**

- 12 Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the 2023 elections and the implementation of democratic standards in Zimbabwe?
- 13 Do you have any final thoughts on how Zimbabwe can enhance the credibility and fairness of its future electoral processes?

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