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The National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) is a Public Trust that was registered on 14th March, 2012 under the Trustee Incorporation Act of the Laws of Malawi. It was initially established in 1999 as a Malawi Government project with bilateral support from the European Union with a mandate to contribute towards democratic governance through civic and voter education. The overall objective of NICE is therefore to contribute to the strengthening of the democratic process, increase citizens' participation and promote good governance in Malawi.

NICE is one of the key institutions that has been accredited by the Malawi Electoral Commission to conduct civic and voter education in the run up to the May 20, 2014 Tripartite Elections. As such, NICE has been engaged in voter education and monitoring the electoral processes through its structures nationwide. In the same breath, NICE would like to commend the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) for its efforts towards ensuring that electoral process remains on course.

Particularly, NICE lauds MEC on:

- 1) the manner in which the registration exercise was carried out;
- 2) the MEC's publication of voter registration process across the country through the local dailies;
- 3) the MEC's use of various platforms to encourage members of the public to register to vote;
- 4) the conduct of its registration officials who have been open and transparent concerning the Voters' Roll Verification exercise process including the challenges experienced;
- 5) The response of MEC to the various concerns raised by civil society and other actors concerning the electoral process.

However, NICE is concerned about the low numbers of people that turned out for the voters' roll verification process and has noted the following issues that need to be urgently addressed by the relevant state and non-state actors:

- Postponements and suspension of the exercise: The twin postponements generated confusion and negative attitude to an extent that even very local people who only rely on "Common Sense" believed that MEC did not esteem the exercise with due regard as compared to the registration exercise.

We noted that the verification exercise was expected to commence on 24 March, but deferred to 1 April and finally to 9 April 2014. Likewise, the suspension of the exercise in both the northern and central regions left a good number of people suspicious if not skeptical. This led to an unnecessary and avoidable waste of resources to civic and voter education providers who had to visit communities more than once to provide them with the latest information coming from MEC on this crucial exercise.

While it is commendable that MEC released information on the location of the registration centres, it was also of concern that this information was piece-meal and at times inconsistent. There is therefore, need for MEC to consult and provide advance information to accredited CSOs (civic and voter education providers) before embarking on such an exercise to allow the said institutions prepare and participate adequately.

NICE wishes to highlight the following, among others:

Lessons Learnt

- i. Misconceptions and Unwillingness to verify names: Most people are unwilling to undergo the voters' roll verification believing that it is a ploy to rig the elections as they believe the voters' card serial numbers will be used to duplicate the same for different people who will vote while they will be disenfranchised as their cards will be declared fake on the polling day. This belief among most communities comes against the background that MEC is appointed by the ruling party and that the Commission "cannot bite the hand that feeds it" much as it is touted to be independent;
- ii. Satisfaction of having Voters' card as identification cards: Most people believe that there is no need to verify their names because they have the voters' card and as far as they can use it for other purposes, e.g. identification at local level for a variety of safety-net programs, e.g. banking services, then, they need not worry about the verification;

- iii. Need for continuous and full messages on the electoral processes: People need continuous civic education on the importance of the electoral process and specifically the voters' roll verification. This problem arises as a result of MEC releasing information on piece-meal basis leaving accredited CSOs with less time to sensitize on the importance of each and every stage of the electoral process.

Challenges

- i. Postponements and Suspension of the exercise: The twin postponements made most people (even those who only rely on "village wisdom") believe that MEC does not regard the verification of the voters' roll as an important exercise as compared with the registration and other stages. As indicated earlier, the verification was expected to commence on 24 March, but deferred to 1 April and finally to 9 April 2014. Likewise, the suspension of the exercise in both the northern and central regions left a good number of people suspicious if not sceptical;
- ii. Poor Weather: The wet weather that engulfed many parts of the southern and Northern region was a challenge to continuous mobilisation as well as to the voters visiting the polling centres for verification. This can be noted from the fact that even MEC failed to deliver staff, materials and equipment for the exercise, e.g. in Thyolo South (Thekerani side);
- iii. Insensitive Timing: Poor timing was key to people shunning the exercise. It turned out that in some parts of the region, the maize in the fields was dry and ready for harvest so people opted for harvest as opposed to an exercise that was seemingly impractical due to the twin postponements and suspensions in the northern and central districts;
- iv. Rigging Fears: Negative media coverage and propaganda generated fears in some people that in actual sense MEC was trying to rig the elections through this exercise with the help of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC). The media had come up with several stories including the involvement of ZEC from which MEC was borrowing gas lamps and getting other types of suspicious support with regard to elections considering that Zimbabwe's elections have always been disputed. These stories were of concern to many people including the elite who strongly believed that there was something fishy about the whole exercise;
- v. Limited Duration: Five days were believed not to be enough for those centres that registered a lot of people, e.g. Golati in Thyolo East and many in Blantyre Urban like Chirimba School in Blantyre Kabula;
- vi. Poorly Oriented Staff: Some MEC staff in verification centres did not know their job very well. For example at Moroyo centre in Nsanje South in Nyachitenda ward a registrant went for the process his name was found in the voters roll while the photo was missing. The centre had a camera and equipment that was functional but the clerks said they would not take his picture but just his details. It took the intervention of NICE Trust Monitor to inform DCEO who in turn referred the matter to Regional Elections Officer for the South who was in Nsanje then. After her advice and DCEO gave feed back to the monitor the individual concerned was assisted;
- vii. Missing names, incorrect spellings and dates of birth: The following anomalies were noted:
 - a) Missing names: Some of the registered voters missed from the voters' roll as will be seen from the detailed statistical analysis. For example, at Nangukutiche School in Matindi Ward, the registrants were 1,140 however, the voters' roll had only 1,041 names meaning there was a deficit of 99 names. The monitors confirmed three incidents. In other centres, the figures were much smaller, e.g. at Limbe Primary School in Limbe Ward in Blantyre City East Constituency;
 - b) Wrongly spelt names: This was also common, e.g. at Limbe Primary School where Kanonji was spelt as Kandji; Chatonda was spelt as Chakonda; Bennie was given as surname when it was a middle-name for one Enoch Bennie Mangani;
 - c) Wrong dates of Birth: 8 November 1913 instead of 8 November

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1971; 13 April 1994 instead of 4 April 1994; 4 February 1964 instead of 6 February 1974. These were noted in the corrections forms at Limbe Primary School on 9 April 2014.

viii. Higher numbers in Voters' Roll than registered: Some centres had abnormally more names than those registered e.g. Nkhadzli in Lalanje Ward in Nsanje Lalanje Constituency with an access of 344 names.

ix. Misplacement of OMR Forms Part A: OMR forms part A bearing numbers . 003579, 003580, 0032277 having a total of 99 voters from Chiradzulu, Mhasuwa CDSS centre were found in Chikwawa at Nsingano Centre

Possible Causes for the Low Turn-out

From the interaction that NICE Trust has had with community members in different districts, the following are some of the causes for the low turn-out for the voters' roll verification exercise conducted in the region?

i. Postponement and suspension of the exercise: The verification exercise had been postponed twice from 24-28 March to 1 - 4 April, 2014. In addition to this, MEC had decided to start with the Northern Region and some parts of the Central Region before finally suspending the whole exercise due to what had been described as logistical challenges. People's reasoning is that these postponements seem to indicate the fact that MEC does not take this exercise seriously and communities should not be forced to believe that it is important when the electoral management body itself seems to exude a spirit that does not show that it is indeed important.

ii. Insensitive scheduling: Most people interviewed while busy with their own chores, especially harvesting of maize in their fields, indicated that MEC has shown that it is not concerned and does not respect people's economic and livelihood activities in the way this exercise had been scheduled right from the time it was being postponed. Some people interviewed around Blantyre Rural, Nsanje and some areas of Chikwawa visited by the regional office, indicated that MEC takes people for granted.

iii. Registration for the sake of getting IDs: Some sections of the people indicated that they did not see the need for verification as they openly said that they only needed identity documents to enable them access other services, including banking as well as benefit from safety-net programs, like the FISP, and others.

iv. Inadequate information/posters: IEC materials produced by MEC came very late and the concerned institutions, including NICE Trust, were too overwhelmed to come up with a workable distribution strategy. Additionally, the leaflets had the wrong dates (24 to 28 March, 2014) and all had altered. Where the offices had distributed with the changed dates, it was confusing to the public as it was reported that some people turned up at some centres on 1 April only to be told that the exercise had been postponed. The change did not help since a second change had to be done following the postponement to 9 April.

v. Limited understanding of the importance of the voters' roll verification: Some people did not and still do not understand the importance of the exercise. They are suspicious that it might be a ploy by the ruling party to rig the elections through tampering with their cards following some media reports and rumours on linkage to Zimbabwe. Some even went further to mention the linkage with Israel rigging experts. Hence, people feel that it is a waste of their time as the vote had already been rigged.

vi. MEC's lack of Consultation with critical partners on the exercise: The announcement of the verification exercise was so abrupt (took place in the afternoon of Friday, 4 April, 2014). Critical stakeholders, including DCs, Traditional Leaders and accredited CSOs were caught unawares and there was very little time to mobilise people whatever creatively might have been employed.

vii. Poor Weather: The wet weather that engulfed many parts of the region made it difficult to continue with mobilisation as well as for the people to

go to the centres for verification of their details. This can be noted from the fact that even MEC failed to deliver staff, materials and equipment for the exercise in time, e.g. in Thyolo South (Thekerani side), in Mwanza and other districts.

viii. Long distances to centres: Some people complained about long distances to verification centres, a feeling that has been there since the registration period.

ix. Lack of ownership by Political Leaders: Being the primary beneficiaries of the elections, most parties did not make much or any effort to take up the sensitisation roles and left it to CSOs. Instead, they chose to concentrate on campaigning.

x. Poor or inadequate Training of MEC Clerks: There were clear signs that most of the clerks were not conversant with their tasks and had serious difficulties in making simple decisions that may have frustrated some people going for the verification.

xi. Limited capacity and lack of funding for CSOs: There was a limited number of civic and voter education providers to disseminate the information about the voters' roll verification. In addition to this, the few service providers including MEC CCVEAs and district clerks were not clearly strategic and visible as they tended to take main roads neglecting the hard-to-reach areas.

xii. Procrastination: This also played a negative role in the low turn-out as some felt that they still had time. The regional office's survey at selected places including Lunzu Trading Centre, Zalewa Road Block and some parts of Machinjiri in Blantyre City indicated that procrastination must have prevented some people from verifying their names in the voters' roll.

Recommendations

NICE would like to propose the following:

- i. **To MEC:**
 - Need for MEC to consult and provide advance information to accredited CSOs: MEC should ensure proper consultation with civic and voter education providers before embarking on such important exercises so that the concerned institutions should prepare adequately.
 - Need for MEC to timely provide verification information (IEC Materials): MEC should come up with a complete calendar/schedule for the verification process in order for civic and voter education service providers to properly plan and execute their mobilization campaigns effectively.
 - Need for MEC to consultant stakeholders when making postponement or cancellation of the verification exercise: MEC should adequately consult critical partners such as civic and voter education service providers when it is either postponing the process or setting up new schedules for their effective voter mobilization planning.

- ii. **To Collaborating Civic and Voter Education Service Providers:**

There is need for proper planning and co-ordination of civic education activities at district and community level in order to effectively disseminate electoral information and reach out to as many people as possible including the hard to reach areas and marginalised groups.

- iii. **To Employers:**

NICE calls upon all employers in the formal and informal sectors to allow employees leave for the strict purpose of voters' roll verification in light of the importance of the upcoming electoral process.

- iv. **To National Security Agencies:**

To highlight to the public all security measures being taken to ensure a free, fair and peaceful electoral process in May 2014 both during and after the elections.

- v. **To Youth and Women:**

NICE also calls upon the youth as well as all women to turn out and verify

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their names in the voter's roll in order to be able to vote if they are to influence the governance of the country;

vi. To the Registered Voters:

There is need for any registered voter to take verification process seriously and act in a responsible manner by verifying their names if they appear in voter roll in order to ensure that: their names are appearing in the voters roll; photos are intact and not blurred or missing ; photos corresponds with their personal data; spellings of their names and dates of birth and other pieces of information are correct and be able to get a duplicate card if it is lost; and get a transfer if they moved to a new place.

Remember, After the verification exercise is over, no voter will be allowed to transfer or get a duplicate card hence take this exercise seriously.

vii. Political Parties:

NICE calls upon party leaders at presidential, parliamentary and ward councillor level to encourage their supporters to go and verify their names in the voters roll during the campaign period as they are direct beneficiary of the outcome of the electoral process.

viii. Chiefs:

NICE calls upon the chiefs to mobilize their subjects to go to the centres to check their names as they have a duty under the Chiefs Act to mobilise their subjects for development initiatives such as the elections.

ix. Mobile Phone Service Providers and the electronic media owners:

NICE calls upon the mobile phone service providers and the electronic media to provide some free airtime for publicizing the verification exercise as a social responsible since business can only be best conducted in a good democratic environment.

x. Faith-based organisations

Since they have large audiences during their player days and they command a great deal of authority, NICE calls upon religious leaders to take an active part in publicizing the voter verification process in all their events to their followers.

Conclusion

In light of these challenges, that faced the verification process and the need to secure legitimacy of the electoral process in May 2014 through genuine and popular elections, NICE calls upon the relevant state agencies and the MEC to apply all measures possible to sensitize the voters.

NICE implores all Malawians to exercise their patriotic conscience by participating in the upcoming electoral process and selecting such persons as will serve the sovereign men, women and children of this country and honour the Constitution of this republic.

For more information please contact NICE secretariat through the following contact details.

Ollen Mwalubunju
Executive Director
NICE Trust Secretariat, Lilongwe
Cell: 0 996 617 765
Email: ollenmw@gmail.com

With Funding from European Union (EU)

