

greater transparency on electoral preparations and making electoral information easily accessible, enhancement of the voter registration in ‘under-registered’ districts, support to a credible boundary delimitation process, access to the media by all political parties, more coherent and fully explained results management, alignment of the electoral act as well as making multi party liaison committees a continuous feature.

The action will complement the ongoing support to the electoral cycle implemented by civil society that focuses on advocacy, voter education, monitoring and electoral litigation. Other synergies will be created with the support provided to the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission which encompasses an electoral monitoring component as well as support women and youth voices and participation in Zimbabwe that will focus on political empowerment. The latter is also a key element in the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) on Gender Equality through Women Empowerment, to which Sweden, Netherlands and Ireland are contributing through supporting specific projects.

## 2. RATIONALE

### 2.1. Context

Since the early 2000s, Zimbabwe has seen political instability, increased poverty, economic deterioration and frequent droughts. In 2002, the EU agreed on a set of restrictive and appropriate measures on Zimbabwe as a consequence of severe human rights violations. Since 2009 (and the formation of Government of National Unity), the EU has taken successive steps towards normalising its relations with Zimbabwe in response to improvements in the political and human rights situation, such as the adoption of a globally progressive Constitution in 2013 with an elaborate bill of rights. On 1 November 2014, the appropriate measures, based on Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement were lifted, enabling the resumption of multi-year cooperation under the 11<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund.

On 30 July, 2018 harmonised elections were held against the backdrop of the events of November 2017 which saw a dynamic political transition from the 37-year rule of President Robert Mugabe to President Emmerson Manangagwa. Upon assuming office, the new president took some important steps to restore civil liberties and put the country back on the path of democratic consolidation. In the run up to the 2018 elections, the political environment in Zimbabwe remained fluid and unpredictable. The Government of Zimbabwe extended an invitation to the EU to observe the 2018 harmonised elections, as well as to other regional and international missions.

Most of the past elections held in Zimbabwe, at least since 2000, had been heavily contested and characterised by violence. According to national and international observers, the pre-election phase and the conduct of the 2018 harmonised elections were largely peaceful. Despite improvements in the legal framework, more comprehensive civic and voter education initiatives and the establishment of a new biometric voter register that included close to 80 % of the eligible population, shortcomings were still noted that impacted the expression of free will by the voters. Finally, the restrictions on political freedoms and the excessive use of force by security forces in the aftermath of the election period undermined the corresponding positive aspects before the elections. As a result, the EU EOM concluded that ‘many aspects of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe failed to meet international standards’.

ZEC launched a new strategic plan 2020 – 2024, which takes into account several technical recommendations from the different election observer missions as well as the recommendations of the April 2019 national multi-stakeholder post-election review. However, moving from strategy to effective implementation remains lagging.

#### *Public policy assessment and EU policy framework*

Zimbabwe acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Zimbabwe also signed the South African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines on Democratic Elections and, in November 2021, ratified the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. The fundamental civil and political rights necessary for democratic elections are set out in the 2013 Constitution. Finally, the electoral Act was initially adopted in 2004 and has since undergone a series of amendments, the last revision being passed in 2018.

This action is aligned with the European Consensus on Development (2017), the joint communication ‘Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa’, the EU Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan 2020-2024, the Gender Action Plan III and will contribute to SDG targets 5 and 16.

As there is no short-term method to support a democratic transition, effective electoral assistance primarily means long-term institutional strengthening and capacity development. Therefore, the EU should remain an active and credible player in the electoral field, building and consolidating the acquis of the earlier support. Furthermore,