



Votes are transported from a polling station to a counting centre during Zimbabwe's election. Photo: Kim Wilkie.

Federal parliamentarians watch Zimbabwe vote

Nine Australians, including five Federal parliamentarians, were among 302 international observers accredited to the Zimbabwe election held in June. The election, which was won by President Robert Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF party, was held against a backdrop of civil unrest. This included widespread violence and intimidation, particularly in rural areas, as well as the occupation of commercial farms by war veterans from Zimbabwe's war of independence.

In its post-election statement, the election observers from the Australian Parliament, led by Senator Alan Ferguson (South Australia), highlighted the important role that international observers had played in the Zimbabwe election. "While our role was simply to observe the conduct of the elections," the Australian delegation said, "we were told by virtually all the people we visited that the presence of international observers was welcome, and contributed to an improved environment in the days immediately before and during the weekend poll."

The Australian delegation also concluded "the violence and intimidation which so badly compromised the pre-election campaigning and voter education must have influenced the result in some constituencies".

The Australian observers spent almost a week in the field, visiting major population centres as well as more remote areas, where the worst violence was experienced. Australia's parliamentarians spoke with a wide range of people, including those who had been subjected to violence.

"We met with many opposition party candidates and workers who had been threatened and forced into hiding before the election," said Kim Wilkie (Member for Swan, Western Australia).

"I personally spoke to a party agent who had been physically assaulted two days before the start of voting. Our delegation heard harrowing first-hand accounts of violence and intimidation directed at farmers and their workers, including attempts to force farm workers to vote at particular polling stations where war veterans would be present."

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An opposition party agent who had been physically assaulted two days before the start of voting. Photo: Kim Wilkie.

According to Julie Bishop (Member for Curtin, Western Australia), Commonwealth observers had similar concerns about the nature, duration and scale of politically motivated violence and intimidation. "I certainly observed examples of this in varying degrees," Ms Bishop said. "One can only conclude that the incidents of violence did have an impact, as did the intimidation, which prevented open campaigning in some areas, notably by opposition parties."

'We were impressed by the determination of the people of Zimbabwe to have their say.'

The Australian delegation expressed concern about police inaction in preventing violence in the lead up to the election. The delegation indicated that this was in marked contrast to the visible police presence at polling stations, which generally helped to keep the peace during the polling and counting days.

In addition to its concerns over the pre-election violence, the Australian observers concluded that:

- non-government candidates had minimal access to both broadcast time and favourable reporting on Zimbabwe's (government-controlled) electronic media;
- the accuracy and availability of the electoral rolls were inadequate;
- the proportion of electors turned away at polling stations visited by the delegation was disturbingly high, ranging from 10 to 16 per cent; and
- the conduct of the voting was hampered by inconsistent procedures and the last-minute nature of many important election preparations. In particular, late accreditation meant that domestic election monitors and non-government party agents were absent from a number of polling stations visited by the delegation.

"Notwithstanding these problems," said Kim Wilkie, "we were impressed by the determination of the people of Zimbabwe to have their say and to create a functioning democracy." According to Mr Wilkie, the visit reinforced "the value of aspects of our political system which we sometimes take for granted".

With the main opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), securing 57 of the 120 parliamentary seats up for election, the Australian delegation expressed hope that the creation of a substantial parliamentary opposition in Zimbabwe would give the country a base on which to build a democratic future.

The Australian delegation's report will be presented to the Australian Parliament in the Spring sittings. For copies of the statement released by the delegation on 29 June and the transcript of the delegation's press conference, call Russell Chafer on (02) 6277 4588 or email: russell.chafer.reps@aph.gov.au

An advance copy of the Commonwealth Observer Group's report is available through the Commonwealth's web site at: www.thecommonwealth.org/htm/info/zimbabwe.doc

Australia's election observers to Zimbabwe

Delegation from the Australian Parliament

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 Senator Andrew Murray (Western Australia)
 Mr Kim Wilkie MP (Member for Swan, Western Australia)

Accompanied by:

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 Mr Bala Chettur (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)
 Mr Ross Mackay (Australian Electoral Commission)

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