

Zimbabwe has a new constitution - but the international community must take care it does not respond over hastily

Results have now been announced for the Zimbabwean Constitutional referendum which took place on Saturday (16 March 2013) in a process described as 'peaceful and credible' by the Head of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) observer mission, Bernard Kamillius. The vote in favour has come as no real surprise after all of the main political parties gave the draft constitution their backing.

The new measures will result in the following key changes: future Presidents will be limited to two five year terms (although this measure is not applied retrospectively); a degree of devolution to ten municipal authorities; a bill of rights to protect freedom of expression; an end to the President's power to veto legislation; and the seizure of farms under the land reform programme has been given constitutional cover.

Geoffrey Van Orden MEP, Chairman of the European Parliament 'Friends of Zimbabwe' group, who has long spearheaded the Parliament's campaign for freedom and democratic change in Zimbabwe, commented:

"The adoption of this new constitution - controversial as many of its elements were - is only a first step in implementing real reforms in Zimbabwe. The key test will be the elections that follow later this year and whether the Mugabe regime is really ready to relinquish power.

"While I applaud the relatively peaceful conduct of the referendum itself, I must state my deep concern about the recent pattern of incidents of harassment against civil society organisations, including searches, arrests, detentions and dubious charges brought against those seen to oppose the Mugabe regime. In recent days we have seen both the detention of Beatrice Mtetwa, a leading human rights lawyer and the arrest of senior aides to Prime Minister Tsvangirai.

"We urge Mugabe, Zanu-PF and those commanding Zimbabwe's security forces, to respect the will of the people and not to interfere in either the Constitution they have decided on or the 2013 electoral process."

"The international community must take care that it does not respond over hastily in terms of suspending restrictive measures imposed on the Mugabe regime. It remains to be seen whether peaceful and fair elections and a transition to real democracy backed by the rule of law will be the eventual outcome of today's announcement."

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