

BOOK REVIEWS

Behind the Smokescreen: The Politics of Zimbabwe's 1995 General Elections By John Makumbe and Daniel Compagnon, Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2000, 340 pp, ISBN 0-908307-83-7, ZW\$640

Behind the Smokescreen is a welcome addition to the growing literature on elections and democracy in Zimbabwe even though the book comes five years after the 1995 Zimbabwean general elections. The book offers an informed and critical analysis of the limitations of the electoral process in Zimbabwe. It documents the various factors and developments that preceded the elections and made the holding of democratic elections impossible. Among these were constitutional and legal impediments, the state's control of the media, the politics of fear and intimidation, corruption, patronage, and a weakened opposition which suffered from, among other problems, a lack of funds. Moreover, the elections were held in an unwholesome atmosphere characterised by escalating factionalism within the ruling party in Masvingo Province and Mutare, various problems in the Harare South constituency, lack of transparency and democratic values in the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) primary elections, and the boycott of the elections by some opposition parties. In their incisive Chapter on the media, the authors highlight how free and fair elections cannot be possible without a fair press.

Behind the Smokescreen also demonstrates clearly how authoritarianism and personalist rule were hidden behind a façade of a flawed parliamentary democracy. This dichotomy between appearance and reality is well captured in the book's title which suggests that, while the ruling party was speaking in the rhetoric of democracy and transparency, it was in fact more concerned with displaying the outward trappings of liberal democracy, such as regular elections, opposition parties, parliament, a "free" press, international actors and observers, rather than with the substance of democracy. The ruling party's project in the elections was the legitimisation and entrenchment of ZANU PF's hegemony and not conducting a true and fair test of the people's wishes, particularly given the undemocratic and unfair constitutional and legal framework over which it presided and under which the elections were held. Furthermore, the ruling party took advantage of and benefited from voter apathy, as most people turned their backs on the electoral process and only a few bothered to vote.

The book's major strength lies precisely in its ability to critically analyse the shortcomings of Zimbabwe's constitutional and legal framework which governed the conduct of the 1995 general elections and

the partisan nature of the country's institutions that is clearly highlighted in the handling of Margaret Dongo's charge of electoral fraud against the ruling party. It demonstrates clearly that the institutions for running elections were, in fact, structured specifically for a one party state. It is thus the book's critical and insightful analysis of the nature of the authoritarian state and the way it manipulates the electoral process in order to ensure its continued rule and dominance which distinguishes it from other existing studies of Zimbabwe's electoral politics.

The above notwithstanding, however, the book could have been enriched by an analysis of the Zimbabwean people's political culture and level of political consciousness both before and during the elections as this would have helped to explain both the voter apathy and the seeming willingness of the people either to ignore or tolerate the manipulation of the electoral structures and institutions by the ruling party. It would also have thrown some light on why the Zimbabwean people refrained from supporting the various opposition parties that were seeking to end ZANU PF's hegemony. An examination of these and other issues would have produced a more nuanced analysis of the forces at work in the 1995 and 1996 elections and would have provided an interesting backdrop to understanding the changes that appear to have occurred in the people's political culture after those elections. Clearly, the Zimbabwean people's political consciousness changed since 1995, as is evident in the June 2000 elections in which, despite all the shortcomings of the national constitution and the flawed electoral process that *Behind the Smokescreen* refers to, the opposition managed to win 58 parliamentary seats. Indeed, the levels of intimidation and violence were higher in the 2000 elections than in the elections examined in the book, yet this did not deter the Zimbabwean people from voting in large numbers and expressing their wishes. The book could also have been enriched by the authors spelling out more explicitly what theory/theories about elections and democracy in Africa informed their analysis rather than limiting themselves as they do to merely documenting events and political developments in the period leading to the elections that they examine.

The above weaknesses notwithstanding, Makumbe and Compagnon have produced a book that is strikingly detailed and insightful. *Behind the Smokescreen* will undoubtedly prove to be a very important contribution to the debate on constitutional and electoral reforms in Zimbabwe. It should appeal to all students of political science and members of civil society who are interested in Zimbabwe's electoral politics.