



Preliminary Statement

ESN-SA Observation and Learning Mission

Zambia 2026 General Elections

Issued: 15 August 2026

1. Introduction

Following an invitation from the Government of the Republic of Zambia, the Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) deployed an accredited Observation and Learning Mission during the period leading up to the 13 August 2026 General Elections. The Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) accredited the Mission to observe polling-day procedures and processes at the National Results Centre. The nine-member Mission comprised observers drawn from ESN-SA member organisations across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, partner organisations and the ESN-SA Secretariat.

The Zambia 2026 General elections were conducted to choose the President, Members of the National Assembly, mayor/chairperson and local government representatives. The presidential ballot featured 14 candidates, though one candidate resigned on election eve.

The elections were the first to be held following major constitutional and legal electoral reforms that increased the number of constituency-based seats in the National Assembly from 156 to 226 and introduced a mixed electoral system comprising first-past-the-post constituency seats and 40 proportional-representation seats reserved for historically under-represented groups, 20 for women, 15 for youth and 5 for persons with disabilities. These reserved seats are to be allocated to qualifying political parties in proportion to the valid votes received by their presidential candidates, making their final distribution dependent on the presidential results.

At the time of issuing this preliminary statement, the collation and verification of results were ongoing, and the ECZ had not announced the final presidential and parliamentary results. Furthermore, at approximately 13:00 on 14 August, the ECZ issued a statement suspending the counting and announcement of election results in certain districts and, consequently, across the country, pursuant to Section 67(3) of the Electoral Process Act No. 35 of 2016. The suspension was subsequently lifted at approximately 18:00 on the same day. During the period of suspension, however, the United Party for National Development (UPND) candidate declared himself the winner of the election, notwithstanding that ECZ is the constitutionally and legally mandated institution responsible for the official verification and declaration of presidential election results.

Accordingly, ESN-SA makes no pronouncement on the outcome and calls on all stakeholders to allow the legally mandated results-management process to proceed transparently and peacefully.

2. The ESN-SA Approach and Methodology

The observation Mission combined a desk review of Zambia's constitutional, legal and institutional framework with structured briefings and consultations involving domestic monitoring groups, women's rights organisations, election and legal experts, academics and media specialists. The consultations provided the ESN-SA team with complementary institutional, technical and citizen perspectives on electoral preparedness, inclusion, public information, the media and online environment, political competition and risks to peaceful participation.

Further, the assessment was also guided by the Constitution of Zambia and the laws governing the conduct of elections, including the Electoral Process Act (2016), the Electoral Commission of Zambia Act (2016), applicable regulations and the ECZ Electoral Code of Conduct. It was also informed by the SADC Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections; Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring (GNDEM) by Citizen Organisations, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG); the OAU/AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa; and other relevant regional and international obligations, principles and standards governing democratic elections.

3. Legal and Administrative Framework

The Mission observed that the 2026 elections were conducted under a revised constitutional and electoral framework, representing one of the most significant changes to Zambia's electoral architecture in the period preceding the election. The Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2025 introduced important changes to the electoral system, which were subsequently operationalised through the Electoral Process (Amendment) Act No. 12 of 2026.

The ESN-SA observers noted that these reforms created both opportunities and implementation challenges. The observer team further noted that amendments to the Constitution and the Electoral Process Act were enacted in April and May 2026, respectively. While these legal reforms are a welcome step towards strengthening the electoral framework and enhancing the integrity of the electoral process, their introduction so close to the election presented implementation challenges. In particular, the limited timeframe constrained the effective rollout of Civic and Voter Education (CVE), reducing opportunities for voters and stakeholders to fully understand and adapt to the new legal and procedural requirements.

Below are additional **legal and administrative** changes that were adopted in the 2026 Zambia General Elections:

- Further, amendments also introduced requirements for publication of electoral information and provided for electronic inspection of the Provisional Register of Voters, while mandating the ECZ to provide voter education.
- The constitutional amendments increased the number of parliamentary constituencies from 156 to 226, creating 70 additional constituencies and requiring a delimitation process. Changes of this scale have important consequences for voter information, candidate and party preparedness, election administration and public understanding of constituency boundaries.
- The revised framework introduced a proportional-representation component alongside the first-past-the-post system. Forty National Assembly seats are reserved for women, youth

and persons with disabilities: 20 for women, 15 for youth and 5 for persons with disabilities. The introduction of proportional representation could broaden representation and improve the inclusion of historically under-represented groups. However, the ESN-SA team noted that there are no provisions to guide the distribution of youth seats in a fair or proportional manner.

- Further, under the amended law, the distribution of seats is in proportion to valid votes received by their presidential candidates, followed by the submission and publication of party lists. While access to the proportional-representation system is linked to presidential candidacy and presidential vote share, the design may limit benefits for smaller parties and exclude independent candidates from this allocation pathway. Transparent seat calculations, publication of party lists and inclusive internal party-selection procedures will therefore be critical to enhance public confidence.
- The new amendments further revised the nomination and party-list requirements and introduced new procedures for challenging nominations. These procedures are commended, as they enhance clarity and accountability in the nomination process by requiring candidates to provide supporting affidavits and establishing clearer mechanisms for challenging candidates' eligibility or nominations.
- The 2026 amendments allow registered voters to inspect the Provisional Register of Voters electronically during a period which the ECZ determined. This modernisation can improve convenience and access, particularly where it complements accessible in-person options.
- The 2026 amendments further strengthened the functions of Returning Officers in the management, collation and declaration of election results. This amendment provided for clarity on the functions of the returning officers and enhanced their mandate
- The amendment also reduces from 90 days to 14 days the period within which registration errors or concerns may be raised with the Commission. A shorter period places greater responsibility on the ECZ and other stakeholders to provide early notice, clear instructions, accessible platforms and targeted outreach to rural voters, women, youth, persons with disabilities and citizens with limited digital access.
- The amended Act requires candidates sponsored by political parties to submit an adoption certificate signed by designated party office-bearers, while independent candidates are exempt from this requirement. It also requires publication of the particulars of validly nominated candidates through prescribed public channels and at nomination centres. These provisions clarify party sponsorship and improve public access to candidate information. Their credibility, however, depends on uniform application, clear administrative guidance, prompt publication and accessible remedies for nomination disputes.
- The amended framework now provides greater statutory clarity on the appointment and responsibilities of returning officers and presiding officers. Returning officers are placed in charge of electoral activities at the constituency, district or ward level, including nominations, collation and the announcement or declaration of specified results. Clear allocation of responsibility can strengthen accountability, provided officials are adequately trained and apply the law consistently.
- ESN-SA observed that these changes to the legal and administrative framework continue to enhance the electoral environment. It also notes that the 2026 General Elections offer an

opportunity to test the provisions as amended and engage on their efficiency and effectiveness, while continuing to enhance the confidence of the electorate.

4. Election Administration

While ESN-SA was not able to hold a direct consultation with the ECZ before the elections, the Mission reviewed the Commission's preparedness briefing for observers and obtained additional information through its engagements with various electoral stakeholders, which primarily informs this section of the report. Through these consultations, ESN-SA noted that:

- ECZ developed an electoral roadmap covering voter registration, inspection and certification of the voters' register, delimitation, nominations, voter education, accreditation, recruitment and training of election personnel, distribution of materials, conflict management and results management.
- The ECZ's certified register contained 8,786,300 voters, comprising 4,665,431 women (53.1 per cent) and 4,120,869 men (46.9 per cent). Young people aged between 18 and 34 constituted 4,066,423 voters, or 46.3 per cent of the register, while 20,162 registered voters were identified as persons with disabilities. The Mission recognises the publication of disaggregated voter-registration data as a positive contribution to transparency, planning and the assessment of electoral inclusion.
- The administration of the elections also required the ECZ to implement substantial constitutional and electoral reforms within a relatively compressed timeframe. Following the creation of additional constituencies, the Commission conducted district and provincial-level consultations between February and March 2026 and gazetted the new constituencies on 15 April 2026.
- The nominations were conducted in May 2026 for the presidential, National Assembly and local-government elections. Fourteen (14) presidential candidates were validly nominated: 13 men and one woman. However, the Liberal Democratic Party candidate resigned approximately 24 hours before polling.
- At the parliamentary level, 973 candidates contested the 226 constituency-based seats, including 122 women, representing 12.5 per cent of parliamentary candidates. Women also accounted for 48 of the 439 mayoral and council-chairperson candidates and 433 of the 5,099 councillor candidates.
- The Commission reported recruiting approximately 81,174 election officials, whose training was scheduled from 4 to 7 August 2026 and deployment from 10 to 12 August 2026.
- The Mission also noted the ECZ's "Count Me In" voter-education campaign, which was implemented from 1 June to 12 August 2026 through community outreach, educational institutions, faith-based organisations, markets, transport hubs, traditional and digital media, and partnerships with community leaders. These efforts are commendable in increasing voter turnout and increasing awareness of the elections and electoral processes.
- The mission observed that Conflict Management Committees (CMCs) were established at national and district levels to mediate minor electoral disputes, including the disruption of campaign meetings, defacement of campaign materials, hate speech and allegations of vote buying. The initiative should be commended for preventing, mitigating and managing electoral conflicts. The mission, however, noted a call from stakeholders encouraging the

ECZ to publish a comprehensive post-election report on the work of the CMCs. The report could provide appropriately anonymised and disaggregated information on the number and nature of complaints received, their geographical distribution, matters referred to other institutions and outstanding cases. Such publication would strengthen transparency and accountability, enable stakeholders to assess the accessibility, responsiveness and effectiveness of the conflict-management mechanism, and inform improvements ahead of future elections.

5. Election Day Observation

The ESN-SA team was divided into four (4) groups that observed 45 rural, peri-urban and urban polling stations in Lusaka, Kafue, Chongwe, and Chilanga. Throughout Election Day, the teams observed various aspects of the electoral process, including polling station setup, voting procedures, security arrangements, accessibility of polling stations for persons with disabilities, the presence of monitors, party/candidates' agents and observers, and the overall polling environment. This section, therefore, analyses the team's submissions collected from polling stations visited:

▪ Opening and Set-Up

Polling stations generally opened on time and were adequately prepared for voting. Voting commenced by 06:15hrs in 36 of the 45 observations (80%), while eight observations (17.8%) recorded starting times between 06:16hrs and 07:00hrs. One station, Ng'ombe PTA School-07 in Lusaka District, was reported as not having opened by 08:00hrs. Further, ECZ officials were confirmed to have been present by 05:30 in two of the four opening reports.

Directional signage was visible in 41 of 45 reported observations (93.2%), making polling stations easy for voters to locate. The three exceptions were UNZA Sports Hall-05, Kalingalinga Primary School-02 and Ng'ombe PTA School-07, all in Lusaka District. The separate opening dataset also recorded an absence of signage at NIPA Main Campus Hall-02 and NRDC College Hall-03. Necessary voting materials were available in 44 of the 45 observations (97.8%). The only reported exception involved the late arrival of voting-booth materials, which also delayed the start, at Mangrove Community School-01, in Munali Constituency, Lusaka District, Lusaka Province.

▪ Polling-Station Environment, Accessibility and Queue Management

The environment at the observed polling stations was generally calm and orderly, with a few isolated operational challenges. The polling stations observed were assessed as accessible to persons with disabilities, with 32 of 45 considered accessible, reflecting a generally positive effort to facilitate inclusive participation in the electoral process. Accessibility challenges included uneven terrain, steps without ramps, narrow entrances, and limited mobility support.

Furthermore, priority voting arrangements were not implemented consistently across all polling stations. Of the 45 polling stations, 31 indicated that priority access was provided to persons with disabilities, pregnant women and older voters, while 11 indicated that no such arrangements were in place. This highlights the need for more consistent implementation of inclusive queue-management procedures to ensure equitable access to the voting process for all eligible voters.

▪ Ballot secrecy, Inclusion and Gender

Ballot secrecy was generally respected. Forty of 45 observed stations reported arrangements to allow secrecy of votes. Women were also strongly represented in the administration and monitoring

of the election. Across the 45 polling stations' reports, ESN-SA observers recorded 261 electoral officials, of whom 170 were women, representing more than 50%. Women observers and monitors were further present in 36 of the 43 polling stations visited, while women party or independent-candidate agents were recorded in 38.

- **Assisted Voters and Voters Turned Away**

The ESN-SA noted that in the 43 polling stations visited, at least one case of voter assistance was observed in 19. Further, thirteen of the 45 polling stations, representing 31.0%, recorded at least one voter being turned away. Eight reports, representing 19.0%, recorded at least one woman being turned away. The most frequently reported reasons were that voters' names did not appear on the register for that polling station, voters did not possess a voter card or National Registration Card (NRC), or their identity details were considered unacceptable.

At Baptist Church Building-01 in Mulenje Constituency, Chongwe District, two voters were found to have names in the voters' register that differed from those on their NRCs. Similarly, at Kalundu Hill View Primary School-02 in Kafue Constituency, Kafue District, one woman was turned away due to a spelling discrepancy between her voter card and her identification documents. These cases highlight the challenges that discrepancies in voter registration records can pose to the exercise of voting rights.

- **Political Party and Independent Agents**

Party and independent candidate agents were present at most polling stations visited (41/43). Observer reports identified representatives of the United Party for National Development (UPND), National Reconciliation Party for Unity and Prosperity (NRPUP), Citizens First (CF), Socialist Party (SP), Zambia Republican Party (ZRP), Resolute Party (RP) and the Tonse Alliance. Independent candidates were also represented at several polling stations. The presence of party and candidate agents generally contributed to transparency and confidence in the electoral process.

- **Observers and Monitors**

Observers and monitors from a broad range of domestic, regional, and international organisations were present at the polling stations visited. These included the Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL), the Foundation for Democratic Process (FODEP), the Southern African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (SACCORD), the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), the Governance, Elections, Advocacy, Research Services Initiative (GEARS Initiative), Transparency International Zambia (TIZ), the Non-Governmental Gender Organisations' Coordinating Council (NGO CC), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Zambia Bus, Taxi and Truck Drivers Association (ZBTDDA), the Commonwealth Observer Group (COG), the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the African Union – Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa Election Observation Mission (AU-COMESA EOM) and the Electoral Commissions Forum Election Observation Mission (ECF EOM) among other various faith-based organisations, and several community-based initiatives.

The presence of these monitors and observer groups helped enhance transparency, accountability, and public confidence in the electoral process.

- **Security and Police Presence**

The 2026 Polling Station Handbook assigns uniformed staff responsibility for maintaining law and order both within and around polling stations and places them under the supervision of the Presiding Officer. However, its specific polling-station layout procedure directs that uniformed staff should ordinarily be positioned outside the polling stream to maintain order within and around the station.

None of the 45 polling stations visited reported an incident of violence or a suspension of voting; hence, the voting process at the observed polling stations was generally peaceful and uninterrupted. Uniformed police officers were present in all the polling stations visited.

▪ **Campaigning and Conduct Near Polling Stations**

In three of the 45 polling stations, ESN-SA observers noted campaign-related activities at or near polling stations. At Kabweza Primary School-01 in Kafue District, an ESN-SA observation team reported the presence of an individual whose conduct could potentially cause disturbance, influence voters or create intimidation. The police reportedly contained the situation promptly. At Estates Hall-01 in Kafue District, Team 3 observed a female candidate distributing water and snacks to people near the polling station. While the circumstances, including the candidate's intention, were not clear, such conduct may create a perception of campaigning or voter inducement. At Kamanga Primary School-07 in Chakunkula Constituency, Lusaka District, observers reported that a campaign billboard was positioned a few steps from the polling station.

▪ **Closing and Counting**

The four ESN-SA observer teams partially observed the closing and counting processes at the same polling stations where they had monitored opening and voting. While the process was generally described as slow, the limited scope of observation does not provide a sufficient basis for drawing broader conclusions regarding the transparency, consistency, or integrity of the closing and counting processes.

6. Good Practices and Lessons for Peer Learning Across the Region

- *Accessible Accreditation Process:* The use of online and hybrid accreditation, with no fees charged, enhanced accessibility, reduced administrative burdens, and facilitated broader stakeholder participation.
- *Timely polling preparations:* Early deployment of officials and materials enabled most observed polling stations to open on time.
- *Simultaneous Conduct of Multiple Elections:* Holding multiple elections on the same day improved operational efficiency, reduced costs, and minimised the time and resources required from both voters and election administrators.
- *Party-agent participation:* The presence of party and independent-candidate agents promoted scrutiny and confidence in polling procedures.
- *Access to voters' registers:* Providing copies of voters' registers to party and independent-candidate agents enhanced transparency and enabled them to verify voter eligibility and scrutinise the process.
- *Women's participation:* Women were strongly represented among polling officials, monitors and party agents.
- *Inclusive polling arrangements:* Most stations were accessible to persons with disabilities, with many providing priority voting for older persons, pregnant women and persons with disabilities.

- *Effective queue management:* Priority and separate queues for men and women helped reduce congestion and facilitate orderly voting.
- *Operational flexibility:* Polling officials used practical solutions, including temporary voting booths, to address logistical challenges while protecting ballot secrecy.
- *Professional election security:* Police generally maintained order without disrupting voting and were mostly stationed outside polling streams.
- *Stakeholder engagement:* Pre-election engagement by the ECZ helped political parties, candidates, monitors and observers understand polling procedures.
- *Transparent counting:* Where observed, party agents and observers were permitted to monitor closing and counting.
- *Use of Indoor Polling Facilities:* Conducting voting in enclosed facilities protected from adverse weather conditions enhanced voter comfort and helped ensure the smooth and orderly conduct of the polling process.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

ESN-SA commends Zambia's electoral stakeholders for their cooperation throughout the observation process. At the polling stations observed, voting was generally peaceful, orderly, and uninterrupted. Most stations opened on time, voting materials were available, observers and party agents had access, ballot secrecy was maintained, and women participated strongly as both voters and election officials. Transparency was enhanced by providing voters' registers to party and independent candidate agents, while polling officials effectively addressed operational challenges.

The Mission notes that while the ECZ temporarily suspended the counting and announcement of election results, the process was subsequently resumed later in the day. The ESN-SA urges the ECZ to uphold the highest standards of transparency, impartiality, and accountability in its engagement with all stakeholders. This is essential to preserving peace and stability, upholding the rule of law, safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms, and promoting restraint among all actors throughout the remainder of the electoral process.

To enhance future elections, the ESN-SA proffers the following recommendations;

To the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ):

- Provide pre-printed ballot box labels at all polling stations to ensure consistency, accuracy, and standardisation across polling stations.
- Intensify voter education programmes ahead of elections to address identified knowledge gaps and enhance informed voter participation.
- Streamline and expedite voter verification procedures to reduce delays and improve the overall efficiency of the voting process.
- Increase civic and voter education on the hybrid electoral system, with particular emphasis on the introduction and operation of the Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMP) system.
- Implement a standard register at all polling stations to record the attendance of party agents, monitors, observers, and other authorised visitors for accountability and future reference in the event of electoral disputes.

- Make it mandatory for all party agents and monitors to display official identification badges at all times to facilitate recognition and prevent the presence of unauthorised individuals at polling stations.
- Continue to strengthen and support Conflict Management Committees in the post-election period.

To Candidates:

- Desist from making premature and unlawful declaration of results.
- Continue to encourage their supporters to maintain a peaceful environment throughout the announcement of results and in the post-election period.

To the People of Zambia:

- Ensure that any electoral disputes are addressed through established legal and institutional mechanisms, while stakeholders should support transparent, credible, and lawful counting, tabulation, and announcement of election results.

To Parliament:

- Ensure that amendments to electoral laws are enacted well in advance of elections to allow sufficient time for civic and voter education, stakeholder awareness, and effective implementation.
- Review and strengthen legal provisions governing the withdrawal or resignation of candidates close to polling day to minimise administrative uncertainty and safeguard electoral transparency and predictability.
- Consider revising the quota determination framework under the Electoral Process Act to ensure that parliamentary and local government votes are also taken into account, rather than relying solely on presidential vote totals.

To Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):

- Strengthen coordination and deployment planning to ensure equitable and comprehensive observer coverage across all polling stations.
- Expand outreach and voter education initiatives to ensure citizens are adequately informed about the hybrid electoral system.

Zambia Police Service

- Ensure that all allegations of electoral violence and intimidation are promptly investigated, with outcomes communicated transparently to complainants and the public.

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About ESN-SA

The Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ESN-SA) is a regional network of civil society organisations dedicated to advancing credible, peaceful, inclusive, and democratic electoral processes across Southern Africa. Through citizen election observation, capacity building, peer learning, research, advocacy, and regional cooperation, ESN-SA works to strengthen electoral integrity and democratic governance. The Network promotes adherence to regional and international electoral standards, supports the participation of historically underrepresented groups, and facilitates the exchange of best practices among election observation organisations and other democratic stakeholders. ESN-SA collaborates with domestic observer groups, electoral management bodies, policymakers, and development partners to enhance transparency, accountability, public confidence, and citizen engagement throughout the electoral cycle. Through its regional solidarity and evidence-based approach, ESN-SA seeks to contribute to democratic institutions that are representative, responsive, and accountable to the people they serve.