

PERSONAL VIEW

Voters' rights strangled by ID books in hands of moneylenders

Many rural people in the Eastern Cape who tried to register to vote last weekend had to be turned away because they did not have barcoded ID books. This was another setback for the Eastern Cape registration process.

The low registration of voters in the Eastern Cape in December (about 1.7 million of the 3.8 million eligible voters) arose from various factors.

The most significant reason was that many potential voters had left their ID books in the hands of moneylenders, to whom they had applied for loans to tide them over the festive season.

Moneylenders, unlike micro-financing institutions, are notorious for retaining borrowers' ID books or ATM cards as security until their loans are paid.

A Black Sash office based in the Eastern Cape says there are about 50 000 moneylenders in the province. Each makes an average of 300 loans a month to low-income borrowers, and

much more than this during December.

It can reasonably be assumed that many debts incurred over the Christmas period are still being paid off, and that many ID books are still in the hands of moneylenders.

IDs, even barcoded ones, that are not in the hands of their owners must surely have played a role, along with many other factors, in last weekend's poor registration turnout.

That is why, as many have pointed out, the timing of electoral registration dates is an important element in voter turnout.

Another interesting factor in the voter registration process is the proportion of women to men.

Election analysts have been puzzled to find that relatively more women than men have turned out to register so far.

"Election Update 99" says this must be the result of the hard work to mobilise women voters undertaken by non-government organisations (NGOs) like the Women's Founda-

tion and the Gender Advocacy Programme.

Of the 5 491 967 women who registered nationally in December, 3 319 887 were from urban areas and 2 161 510 from rural areas.

Of the 4 176 619 men who registered, 2 782 931 were urban and 1 394 288 were rural.

These gender gaps are proportionally much larger than the urban and rural gender gaps in South Africa's eligible voter population as a whole.

Marking's "Opinion 99" survey found that over 87 percent of its rural respondents had obtained their political information from radio and 46.8 percent from television.

Asked which source they considered to be the most important for political knowledge, 68.5 percent of rural respondents rated radio as the most significant, 20 percent mentioned television, and only 2 percent took traditional leaders as their



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main authoritative source.

This finding is relevant to the government's goal of identifying sustainable ways for disadvantaged communities, especially in rural areas, to access the information they need for their own development.

Asked how much attention they paid to radio programmes about the government, public affairs and politics, 65 percent of the rural respondents indicated "a great deal" and another 16 percent "some".

This suggests that the government's goal of making information universally accessible would be advanced by systems that combine cheap media like radio with telecommunications.

The pilot telecentres being set up across the country under the government-created Universal Service Agency would benefit from such combined systems. The Universal Service Agency is

supported by local and international governments, donors and NGOs such as South Africa's National Information Technology Forum, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.

It incorporates telecommunications facilities like telephone, fax and e-mail.

Panos, an international NGO, has successfully used radio stations in other parts of Africa to relay computer-based information such as current prices of agricultural produce to rural communities.

Some stations announce this type of up-to-the-minute information on a regular slot. Others provide listeners with a phone-in line, somewhat like Telkom's up-to-date weather reports or time numbers.

This approach speeds up development as well as democracy by providing even illiterate people with up-to-the-minute information. It must be emulated in South Africa.