

# Christianity and Citizens' Participation in the Electoral Process: A Case of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Southern Province of Zambia

## ABSTRACT

This article assesses the influence that the Christian religious beliefs and practices of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (hereinafter SDA) in Zambia's nascent democracy. By employing a comparative theoretical approach, it highlights religious motivations that are meant to drive the levels of participation of members of the SDA in the electoral process such as campaigns and voting. Furthermore, it identifies secular factors that influence their civic participation as well as the emergent trends that have become characteristic of SDA political involvement. In this light, the article argues that secular factors have increasingly become more predominant than Christian motivations in SDA members' political involvement. This trend was evidenced by electoral results in Southern province of Zambia, which holds the stronghold of the Church's membership. Thus, the article recommends, among other things, that leaders of the SDA Church should offer clear teachings and consistent guidance on members' participation in politics. This will require, at least in the Zambian context, recalibrating the Church's religious education on civic matters.

**Keywords:** *Seventh Day Adventist Church, Electoral Process, Common Good, Ethnicity*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Zambia is as democratic country whose system of governance and transfer of power is anchored upon the electoral process. Every five years, since the reintroduction of multi-party politics in 1991, citizens go to the polls for both presidential and general elections. The latter elections are the mode by which parliamentarians and local government leaders are chosen by the people whereas the former deals with the presidential office holders.

However, recent experience has demonstrated that there has emerged a regional pattern of voting in the Southern province of Zambia where, incidentally, the populace largely belongs to the Seventh Day Adventist Church (hereinafter, SDA). In the face of this, the question that has been worth considering revolves around the extent to which religious affiliations and beliefs have contributed to this development. In other words, it has not been clear as to the forces that have led to this form of regional voting.

Thus, the objective of this article is to interrogate the aforementioned absence of clarity by assessing the influence that the Christian religious beliefs and practices of the SDA members in Zambia have had on its nascent democracy. To this end, the article treats the place of the SDA Church in Zambia's political context, gives a general overview on the nature of democratic electoral processes, highlights the

Christian theological underpinnings of SDA political participation, and, finally, discusses political engagement of SDA members in Zambia.

By employing a comparative theoretical approach, the article highlights religious influences that have driven the levels of participation of the SDA members in the electoral process, especially electoral campaigns and voting exercises of recent times. Furthermore, it identifies secular factors that have emerged as formidable drivers of their political participation as well as the trends that have become characteristic of this involvement. Ultimately, it advances the argument that though ethnicity has not been the sole factor in creating the voting pattern, it has increasingly superseded religious motivations.

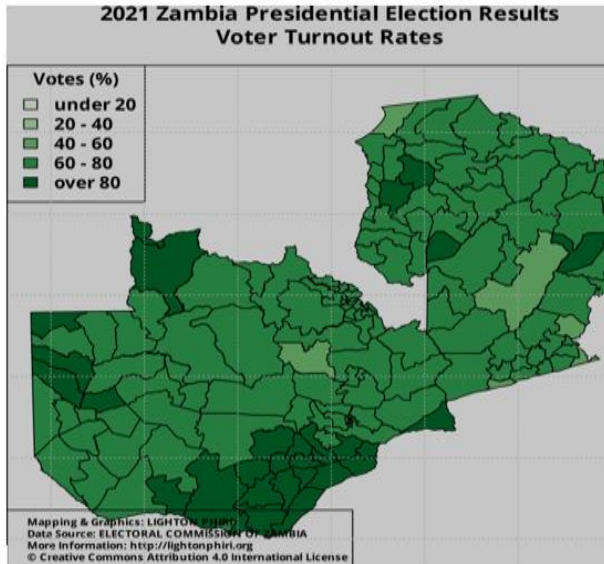
## 2. ZAMBIAN POLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE SDA CHURCH

Traditionally, members of the SDA Church in Zambia have been reserved in their engagement in national politics. They have had negative attitude towards participating in political elections. In their stronghold, which is the Southern province of the Zambia, voting has been one of the undervalued civic activities, and the most pretentious are the senior citizens and a large population above 30 years of age ([www.elections.org.zm](http://www.elections.org.zm)). The directive, that was given by the North Zambia Union Conference president, Samuel Sinyangwe, during to the run-up to the 2016 presidential and general election, that congregations should instantly remove leaders engaging in partisan politics from their positions because it was against the SDA policy typified this kind of attitude. Incidentally, the Conference consisted of 517,000 members and over 1,000 congregations at that time (Zambia Daily Mail, 2016).

At any rate, the ambiguity of the SDA's position on politics was evidenced by what Pastor Sinyangwe reportedly said in the aforementioned address. According to the newspaper article, he said that the SDA Church did not stop its members from voting during elections because it was their civic duty as well as a human right, which had biblical justification. However, he was also quoted *verbatim* to have further counselled members to this effect: "The position of the church as far as political engagement is concerned remains unchanged. It is that the children of God should separate themselves from politics. If we take sides, we will fail to reach some souls that desperately need Christ. This is what we believe in; this is what defines us" (Zambia Daily Mail, 2016). This counsel, on the whole, betrayed inconsistency in the Church's position or at least in the pastor's interpretation of the same.

When Zambia recently went to the polls, on 14 August 2021, the results revealed a clear-cut stance in political preference in the SDA stronghold of Southern province, a predominantly Tonga-speaking region. On this front, it is worthwhile to note that these elections, like the immediate previous ones, were largely between two political parties, the Patriotic Front (PF), the ruling party, and the United Party for National Development (UPND), the major opposition party.

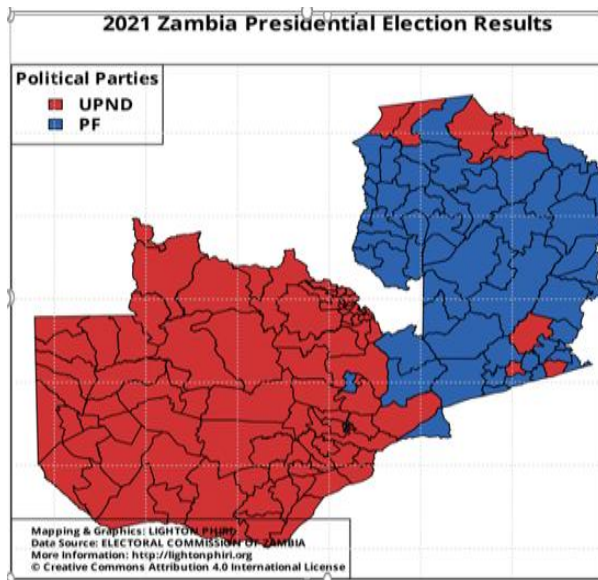
Below is the mapping of the results, from the 150 constituencies in the 10 provinces of the country, which depicts the demographic turnout during voting in the general elections (Phiri and Ndine, 2021):



**Source:** Phiri and Ndine

Figure 1 : 2021 Zambia presidential Election Results Voter turnout Rates

The map below shows the overall presidential results margins by constituencies:



**Source:** Phiri and Ndine

Figure 2 : 2021 Zambia Presidential Election Results

In the final count of the 2021 total votes, the President of the UPND Party, Hakainde Hichilema, managed to secure 59% of the vote in with President Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front trailing in distant second with 39% ([www.elections.org.zm](http://www.elections.org.zm)). In this respect, a presidential candidate and his or her running mate

who garnered more than 50 percent of the valid votes cast (50 percent plus 1), won the polls as in the case of Hakainde Hichilema (Article 47 of Constitutional Amendment Act of 2016).

In any case, according to the Electoral Commission of Zambia, this outcome marked the biggest electoral victory margin and the highest voter turnout since 2006 standing at 72.41% (www.elections.org.zm). The UPND secured 81 parliamentary seats while the PF got 63 seats. As for the parliamentary seats, the UPND scooped all the 18 Constituencies in Southern province of Zambia. Below is the map of the voting results in Southern Province:



Source: <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2021/09/10/335155/>

Figure 3 : 2021 Zambia presidential election results southern province

### 3. OVERVIEW ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Politically, citizens' participation in national affairs constitutes a critical element in democratic dispensations. It serves as a conduit through which citizens' collective ideas, desires and aspirations are channeled into the various processes of governance. Integral to this governance system is the electoral exercise by which citizen either usher in leaders into public office or replace them through the ballot. As such, decisions that are made by democratically elected government leaders, on behalf of the citizenry, tend to be influenced by the rules that their societies set out to define the purposes and functions of their

offices. These are principally enshrined in the constitution of states. Besides, though political parties and interest groups play a significant role in such pluralistic systems, general citizens' participation remains the bedrock upon which democratic principles thrive and are translated into reality.

According to Davis (2004), an electoral process is the means through which the whole governance selection is enshrined. This includes the registration of voters, selection of candidates, and the voting procedures, which may differ across the world. Notwithstanding, each state has the power to establish its own laws regarding voter requirements and the frequency of statewide elections. Furthermore, Abraham (2003) pointed out that the electoral process involves political parties. These are in turn made up of groups of voters who share similar political views or philosophies that further establish different ministries' and constituencies' representation and in the end stand to represent the nation at large through a well-established procedure.

In most elections, major political parties normally support their preferred candidates with campaign finances, advice, and publicity. Political campaigns increasingly use fliers, road shows, and media advertisements to present the candidates' views to the electorate. In other words, campaigns enable the electorate to know the candidates' stance on the public issues of their concern. As such, Mwanawande (2012) has asserted that an election is ideally the actual process of voting in leaders after a critical analysis of their capabilities.

Elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated. Elections may fill offices in the legislature, sometimes in the executive, and offices in regional and local government. "The very essence of representative democracy lies in the fact that the will of the people is fulfilled through representative bodies directly elected by the citizens themselves" (<https://dj.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/AUDJ/article/view/1253/1447>).

#### **4. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SDA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The theological foundations of the Adventists' faith perspectives on political engagement can be considered on two fronts: Christian general principles and the existential ramifications of these theological tenets for Christians, with a slant towards the SDA members. This is the approach that has been taken in this article.

##### **4.1 General Christian Perspectives on Political Involvement**

For Adventists, like other Christians who draw upon the divine revelation, political engagement is permissible as far as it does not conflict God's word and the testimony of believers. According to the SDA Church Manual (2016: 170), "[t]he Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration... In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation". At the heart of this revelation is the call on humanity to love God, and this love necessarily

encompasses love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 10:18f, Matthew 5:44-48; Luke 6:32-36; John 4:9-11). This love finds concrete expression in works of justice.

Justice, which was required of every member of the Jewish community, as depicted in the precepts of the Old Testament (Exodus 23:6-8; Deuteronomy 25:13-15) entails respect for other people's rights. Hence, prophets could continually condemn the injustice of judges and kings in their oppression of the poor (Amos 5:7; 16:12; Ezekiel 45:9; Jeremiah 22:13-18). The New Testament, particularly in the sermon on Mount, Jesus adds a significant dimension to the spirit of justice as something that consists in showing true concern for the welfare of other people (Matthew 5:20; 23:23). He makes justice to become the yardstick that should regulate human actions towards others. Besides, he identifies it as an element that is useful for the attainment and maintenance of the social good.

As argued by Peschke (1987, 78), it is "God's will that man cooperates in the work of creation and brings it to perfection; that he subjects the earth and harnesses its potentialities; that he promotes solidarity, justice and the union of love among mankind". Similarly, the Council of Interchurch/Interfaith Faith Relations of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (2002) observed that "[i]n our own church history, Adventists have joined with other religious and secular organizations to exert influence over civil authorities to cease slavery and to advance the cause of religious freedom" ([https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church relations](https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church%20relations)). As such, Christians should take a position in favor of justice as opposed to remaining neutral in the face of social evil (White 1948).

#### 4.1.1 Role of Government

From the standpoint of Christianity, governments are established for serving the needs of the governed or the common good (Romans 13:14). Leaders in government are called to offer their abilities in the service of the common welfare by creating "favorable conditions for development and progress in all realms of human life" (Peschke 1987: 230). This entails safeguarding and promoting the citizens' fundamental human rights, including freedom of conscience. "The state must...endeavor to build communities with public order, public health, a clean environment, and an atmosphere that does not unduly inhibit its citizen's ability to raise families and freely explore the facets of their humanity" ([https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church relations](https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church%20relations)).

In the above light, it is plausible to deduce that there is an intimate link between religion and politics. Though pursuing different goals, they both "contribute to either the fulfilment or the impoverishment of the human person as integrally or adequately conceived...Politics helps us to organise the conditions within which this task is performed, for good or worse. On this score, religion gives meaning to human activities in this pursuit, politics inclusively" (Chilufya: 2021, 169).

#### 4.1.2 Role of the SDA Church Members

As for the role of members of the SDA Church with regard to political participation, the Church's guidelines affirm this. Accordingly, they are required to participate, in good conscience, in the voting process as well as to share in the responsibility of building their communities ([https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church relations](https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church-relations)). As also asserted by Peschke (1987, 221), “[c]oncern for society is concern for one’s own welfare, concern for one’s neighbor, and ultimately concern for that final goal which everyman, every community, and all mankind is called to serve and bring about: God’s kingdom and glory.” On the same note, White (1930, 329) has contended that a “correct view of our duty to God leads to clear perceptions of our duty to fellow man.”

On the participation in voting, Adventists are counselled further against becoming “preoccupied with politics, or utilize the pulpit or our publications to advance political theories” ([https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church relations](https://Adventist.org/documents/state-church-relations)). Similarly, White (1958, 2: 336-337) has counselled to this end: “We are not as a people to become mixed up with political question. . . . Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers in political strife. . . . Keep your voting to yourself. Do not feel it your duty to urge everyone to do as you do.” This entails that Christian Adventists are supposed to keep their vote to themselves; the decision to participate in voting should be purely personal.

Additionally, in the guidelines on Adventists’ participation in politics in Africa, which were issued by the Biblical Research Committee in 2012, members are required to be wary of various manipulative hegemonies. “These may include particular ideological stances, dominant religious formations and resultant intolerance, group affiliations such as tribal or ethnic collectives, marginalization and persecution of minorities, the use of sex as an instrument of coercion and subjection, marginalization, deprivation of socio-material opportunities, deliberate systematic infrastructural underdevelopment” (<https://www.adventistarchives.org>).

Christians have a duty to recognize the legitimate role of organized government in society. “Without organization, no institution or movement can prosper. A nation without organized government would be chaos” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016:30). As such, White observes that “[c]itizens of heaven will make the best citizens on earth” (1930, 329). Nonetheless, obedience to God is of paramount importance, and should be respected above all human laws (White, 1948). In both the Old Testament and New Testament, authority primarily belongs to God and denotes his absolute authority (Jeremiah 27:6; Romans 13:1).

The SDA Church, as an institution, refrains from getting involved in politics (<https://www.adventist.org/documents/church-state-relations>). However, it neither recommends nor hinders its members from taking up social and civic responsibilities. Besides, it advises those who wish to

take part in politics to be aware of both the positive and negative aspects of such involvement (Guidelines on Adventist's Involvement in Politics in Africa, 2012).

#### **4.2 Existential Ramifications of Theological Tenets of Faith**

Members of the SDA Church are required to live out the theological teachings of their Church. In this light, O'Barr (2005) has observed that Adventists have every right to be involved in politics, just as they do in other professions. However, they become guilty if they vote candidates into office solely because they agree with their religious persuasion. Such practice would be akin to tribalism. Furthermore, McFarland (2007) contends that since the introduction of the 1954 Revenue Internal Code, in the United States, SDA Church members are prohibited from contributing to political campaigns, placing yard signs on Church property, or bumper stickers on Church vehicles. For him, the Church can speak out on issues but not on particular election candidates. Whereas casting one's vote in favor of specific issues or platforms is acceptable, partisan alignment is not (Taylor 2012). Taylor (2012) also adds that engagements on social justice issues would rightfully involve nonviolent activism, advocacy, mediation, and conciliation.

Nevertheless, due to the close link between politics and religion, religious leaders may influence the mobilization of religious identities for political goals in many parts of the world (Chhibber and Sekhon, 2016). Hull (2012) has noted that there are various circumstances that may make religious leaders to become entangled in electoral and political conflict and violence. Factors that are likely to drive them into instigating violence include close relations between political leaders and themselves, existing group inequalities and different forms of marginalization (including the marginalization of religious leaders themselves); and personal convictions opposed to secularism and tolerance of other faiths (Basedou and Koos, 2015). However, there are also times when the goals of the Church and State may be incompatible, causing the church to receive blows (Satelmajer 2007).

Hill (1982) believes that Christians, especially those with the high likelihood of indoctrination, view politics as having greater negative impact on believers. They consider involvement in politics as an interference to reaching heaven. This is because activities involved in the electoral process, especially electoral campaigns, involve violence, hatred and insults, which according to their doctrines, should not be entertained as they are not good things. The SDA Church Manual (2016) underscore this position by stipulating that members who choose to actively involve themselves in politics opt to be of the world, a world that they evidently had renounced at baptism. In the Manual's perspective, no political party has ever satisfied every human being; they offer false promises that they never fulfill. As a result, it is important to wait for the coming kingdom, which is not human made, but God-made. Anyhow, Taylor (2012, 10) is of the view that if Christians "will not compromise biblical principles, the Christian candidate can hold political office, if elected, in order to better address injustices or enhance the well-being of others".

## **5. DISCUSSION ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE SDA CHURCH IN ZAMBIA**

As noted from the foregoing discussion, the SDA Church has bountiful resources from scripture, theological teachings, testimony of prophetic voices and scholarly literature. All these are sources that its members can draw upon for guidance about their involvement in political affairs. However, it is also evident that members are faced with ambivalence about how this engagement should be undertaken exactly and the extent to which they can go; clarity is opaque and at worst confused on this matter.

Whereas there is scriptural justification for taking part in democratic voting and vying for political offices, theological insights and counsels of prophetic voices appear to be half-hearted and sometimes contradictory. As was observed about SDA Church Manual (2016), members who choose to actively involve themselves in politics depart from the spiritual world and renegade on their duty to wait upon God's Kingdom. At the same time, scripture and the same Manual extol the nobility of government in as far as it is established to bring about the common good of the governed. Furthermore, theological authors, such as Tylor, justify aspiring for political offices on condition that one adheres to biblical principles. Besides, it appears impractical for one to simply vote on the basis of prevailing issues of concern while ignoring who the candidate is. On this score, the Zambian 2021 elections, in which all parliamentary seats in the Southern province, the mainstay of the SDA Church, were won by the UPND makes it hard to assume that the SDA electorate did not take either a partisan or tribal position, contrary to the counsel of the Church.

Evidently, other factors had led to the PF loss to the UPND. According to the Congressional Research Service report (2021), "factors cited included a sharp drop in growth rates, high unemployment and public debt, public service delivery shortcomings, corruption, and growing opposition to the government's alleged use of authoritarian tactic" (<https://crsreports.congress.gov>). In the midst of these ills, the UPND had offered an attractive alternative. "Hichilema's stated priorities [were] to promote good governance and economic growth, foster fiscal and debt sustainability, and reduce poverty, notably through efforts to create jobs and socioeconomic equity and inclusion" (Congressional Research Service report, 2021).

The factors that had made the PF unpopular affected the entire country. However, there was no resounding defeat by the UPND in other regions of the country, save for the Southern province. As such, the landslide victory of the UPND party, in the Church's dominant region of the Southern province, where both the young and old voted *en masse*, makes it untenable to parry off the ethnic and partisan factors, which became manifest in the election results.

As was argued by Erdmann (2007, 6), "[c]itizens of specific districts or regions which are populated (predominantly) by a particular ethnic group vote for one party one election after the other. Often this is also related to a general local wisdom that claims a close relationship between a particular party and ethnic group, for example, being a 'Tonga-party' in Zambia or an 'Akan-party' in Ghana". In this sense,

ethnicity is “understood not as a primordial or essentialist attribute but as a historically and socially constructed identity and one that is multifaceted, and has multiple meanings” (Erdmann 2007, 9). This was arguably true of the 2021 elections in the Southern province of Zambia.

According to the so-called conventional ethnic proposition, the electorates do not mind very much about the candidate; all that matters is whether a party is identified with the voter’s own ethnic group, no matter who the individual candidates happen to be (Horowitz 1985: 319-20). Literature on voter alignment in Zambia suggests that the affiliation of a candidate is more important than their past or expected behaviour (Molteno and Posner 2005: 228-232). Barkan (1979: 84) argued that where tribal loyalty is rife, especially in rural areas such as Southern province of Zambia, the first criteria for voting for a candidate is ethnic belonging, and the second is expected performance of the candidates.

Historically, many political scientists have conceded that voting behavior and party-affiliation are complex matters (Roth 1998: 23). However, several authors have identified ethnicity as one crucial aspect of Zambian politics (Molteno 1974; Sichone and Simutanyi 1996; Osei-Howedie 1998; Burnell 2001: 249-50; 2005: 113-115; Posner 2005). It is thus reasonable to accept the argument that since 2001, when the UPND and the PF parties came into existence, Zambian politics began to take a tribal path (Lusanso 2016). As contended by Lusanso (2016), this development had been fueled by the perception of “some political and traditional leaders that it was time now that their own from certain regions now should ascend to the presidency and maybe time for them to rule Zambia (<http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/genesis-of-regional-and-tribal-voting-in-zambia>)”.

The tribal inclination of members of the SDA, in their political engagement as evident in the counsel of Pastor Sinyangwe, may hinge upon a lack of clarity about biblical and theological teachings concerning such civic exercises. This incoherence, as earlier noted, was also implied in the counsel of White (1958).

Generally, as observed by Tuima, *et al* (2017, 61), “[m]ore often than not, members instinctively engage in national politics without proper grounding in church policies and guidelines”. These authors further explain that this causes uncertainty in members when confronted with political situations such as voting. Besides, latent ethnic political feelings surface during the times of political crisis. Consequently, by comparing Adventist members in Fiji and those in Africa, Tuima *et al* contend that “[i]n spite of their core beliefs, Adventist members of both communities hold on to their indigenous, ethnic, and/or tribal ideologies which exert themselves when issues of indigenous concerns arise. At such times, there is an apparent tendency to suppress religious principles and convictions” (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342563965>).

According to the study that was done by Erdmann (2007, 24), no ethno-political group in Zambia has had “a clear preference for one party, that is to say, more than half of the respondents of one particular group would vote for one party. Ignoring marginal difference below or above an average as well as smaller

groups and parties, it is only the Tonga for UPND, the Nyanja and Lunda-Luvale for MMD that suggests a broader support for one party”. Though the political situation in the country has been dynamic, the 2021 election outcome in Southern province proved that the *status quo* has remained the same. Furthermore, the 2021 elections results demonstrated “that compared with other social factors, ethnicity provides a major variable for explaining voting decisions for UPND” (Erdmann: 2007, 30).

## **CONCLUSION**

As noted, many factors played into the 2021 UPND’s overwhelming electoral victory in the predominantly Tonga-speaking Southern province of Zambia. This success occurred in a region where religious beliefs of the SDA Church have a stronghold in the country. On the one hand, these beliefs are unfavorable to political partisanship, group affiliations such as ethnic collectivities, preoccupation with politics, vote campaigns as opposed to keeping the vote personal. On the other hand, they require that members should take a position in favor of justice (that is, voting on matters) as opposed to particular candidates. However, in the face of this electoral victory, it became plausible to assume that there has been a mismatch between the religious beliefs and practical adherence to them. On this basis, we can reasonably argue that secular factors, chiefly the covert ethnic bigotry, became more predominant than Christian motivations with regard to the SDA members’ political involvement in the 2021 elections. This development has created a palpable need to ensure that all personal, ethnic, tribal, cultural, and traditional beliefs and loyalties are made subservient to God’s will as theologically guided by the SDA Church. To this end, all political participation should be accompanied by prayerful consideration of conscience and conformity to the Christian principles elucidated in the Church Manuals.

## **Recommendations**

- Church pastors should ensure that they are very knowledgeable about updated SDA Church Manuals and supplementary Church documents to ensure that their teachings are consistently correct to foster the unity of faith-practice as opposed to misguiding members on issues such as involvement in national electoral processes.
- Religious education of SDA members, both young and old, should emphasize the importance of resisting being used for political purposes and voting for candidates who will lead the country in both governance and Godly ways.
- SDA members, both young and old, must be continually educated on voting to ensure that they cast their votes in favor of specific governance issues rather than being dictated by sheer partisan alignment.
- SDA members should be made to understand that the Church’s stance on campaigns is based on its need to uphold the value of separation between Church and State, on the one hand, and the integrity of the freedom of conscience for all, on the other hand.
- Religious education of SDA should help members understand that apart from voting, activism that is nonviolent and involve advocacy, mediation, and conciliation is permissible for them.

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