



Reassessing Zambian Democracy: Social Forces and the 2016 Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Government Elections

Prof. Jonathan Kangwa

Zambia

***Corresponding Author:** Prof. Jonathan Kangwa, Zambia.

Abstract: *This study investigates the rise of a new social force in Zambia, as evidenced by the events surrounding the 2016 Presidential, Parliamentary and Local government elections, with particular attention to increasing public discontent toward traditional leadership and governance structures. Employing a qualitative analysis of electoral processes, public protests, and key political developments, the research applies Steven Hood's (2004) theoretical framework, which conceptualizes democracy as a combination of rights and virtues, to explore the underlying causes and broader implications of social unrest before, during, and after the elections. The findings indicate that the Patriotic Front government's failure to address economic deterioration and democratic shortcomings significantly undermined public trust in both political and social elites. This erosion of confidence gave rise to a spontaneous, leaderless social movement, expressed through protests, episodes of violence, and innovative forms of civic participation. Major contributing factors included worsening economic conditions, unaccountable governance, and deepening social divisions. The study argues that to rebuild public trust and counter the rise of destabilizing social forces, the Zambian government needed to prioritize restoring democratic norms, strengthening public institutions, and promoting inclusive dialogue to enhance accountability and improve service delivery.*

Keywords: *Democracy, Zambia, Social force, Elections, Politics, Development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Democratic transitions across Africa have often been shaped by dynamic social forces, and Zambia is frequently celebrated as a model of relative stability. However, the 2016 presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections marked a pivotal moment of social and political upheaval. This paper examines the emergence of new social forces in Zambia during this period, focusing on rising public discontent with entrenched leadership and traditional governance structures. Employing Steven Hood's (2004) theoretical framework, which conceptualizes democracy as a fusion of rights and virtues, the analysis explores the processes and consequences of social unrest before, during, and after elections.

According to Afrobarometer, only a third of Africans believe that votes are counted fairly in elections (Rupiah 2017:19). This skepticism is a major concern, as disputed polls can spark violent protests and erode public faith in democracy, leading to lower participation (Rupiah 2017:19). Research by Afrobarometer – a pan-African, non-partisan research network surveying more than 30 countries – indicates that most citizens in many African countries have lost confidence in the credibility of elections. Despite this, politicians often insist that elections that brought them to power were credible (Kisitu 2016). Disputed election results are increasingly common: in 2016, incumbents such as Edgar Chagwa Lungu (Zambia), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), and Ali Bongo Ondimba (Gabon) retained office despite contested outcomes, while Gambia's Yahya Jammeh first conceded defeat and later rejected the results (Rupiah 2017:19).

In Zambia, Edgar Lungu was inaugurated as the sixth president despite the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) contesting the results in court (Lusaka Times 2016I). The elections left Zambia deeply divided between UPND and the ruling Patriotic Front (PF). This loss of trust in elected leaders and the electoral process has become a driving "social force" (Gumede 2016), manifesting as a loose movement by ordinary citizens protesting government failures to improve living conditions. As William Gumede (2016) observes, this social force is often expressed through xenophobic attacks, violence, looting, tribalism, and religious fundamentalism.

This paper analyzes the 2016 tripartite elections in Zambia, with special attention to the underlying causes and expressions of social force in Zambian democracy. It argues that xenophobia and political violence are forms of protest against political oppression and economic exploitation. The paper demonstrates how the 2016 elections revealed the emergence of a powerful social force in Zambian society.

The paper employs Steven Hood's (2004) theory of Democracy as a combination of rights and virtues. Steven Hood's framework posits that democracy is not merely a set of procedural rights - such as free and fair elections - but also a constellation of civic virtues: trust, accountability, and public engagement. This dual perspective enables a nuanced understanding of Zambia's experience, highlighting both institutional weaknesses and the evolving democratic consciousness among citizens.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine Zambia's electoral processes, media coverage, public protests, and significant political events between 2015 and 2017. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena as it emphasizes subjective opinions, lived experiences, and the interpretation of meaning from participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth 2018). Data for this research is drawn from a diverse set of sources, including official electoral reports, newspaper articles, protest documentation, and relevant political analyses published during the period under review.

The qualitative analysis process involves identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring themes and patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke 2006). By focusing on emergent themes, the study seeks to understand how various actors perceived and responded to key political events, and how the media framed these developments (Guest et al. 2012). This thematic approach provides nuanced insights into the dynamics of Zambia's political landscape during a period marked by heightened tensions. Building on this thematic approach, it is important to first understand the historical context that shaped Zambia's political environment. Zambia's journey toward independence and its early political developments set the stage for the dynamics explored in this analysis.

3. ZAMBIA'S POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Zambia achieved independence from British colonial rule on 24th October 1964, with the United National Independence Party (UNIP) under the leadership of Kenneth Kaunda playing a central role in the liberation movement. Following independence, UNIP, led by Kaunda, established a one-party political system that governed the nation until 1991 (Mwanakatwe 1994). In that year, Zambia underwent a landmark transition to multiparty democracy: Frederick Chiluba of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) defeated incumbent Kaunda, ending nearly three decades of single-party rule (Mwanakatwe 1994:224).

The 1991 elections were characterized by a strong desire for political change, with voters focusing more on reform than on tribal affiliations. However, as multiparty politics took root, tribal considerations increasingly influenced voting behavior. This trend became especially apparent in the 2001 presidential election, when the MMD was weakened by internal strife over Chiluba's attempt at a third term, resulting in party fragmentation. The main contenders – Levy Mwanawasa (MMD, Lenje) and Anderson Mazoka (UPND, Tonga) – performed best in their respective regions of origin. Mwanawasa narrowly won with 28.69% of the vote, while Mazoka received 26.76%. Despite Mwanawasa's victory, both local and international observers criticized the elections for alleged irregularities and MMD vote-rigging.

The 2006 elections saw Mwanawasa re-elected, with voting patterns once again reflecting pronounced regional and tribal loyalties. After Mwanawasa's death in 2008, the presidential by-election featured Rupiah Banda (MMD), Michael Sata (PF), and Hakainde Hichilema (UPND) as the main candidates. Voters continued to favor candidates from familiar or tribal backgrounds, and Banda's victory triggered allegations of electoral fraud and protests, particularly in Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces.

A significant shift occurred in 2011 when Michael Sata (PF) defeated the incumbent Banda (MMD). Sata's populist message resonated with poorer voters, but the results still showed voting patterns deeply rooted in tribal and regional affiliations (Kuchebeba 2016). After Sata's death in 2014, the 2015 by-election saw Edgar Lungu (PF) and Hichilema (UPND) as leading contenders, each performing strongly

in their respective home regions. By the 2016 general elections, tribal voting had become even more entrenched: Lungu failed to win any constituencies in Hichilema's Southern Province stronghold, while Hichilema lost all constituencies in Lungu's Eastern Province base.

This growing trend since 2001 illustrates how Zambians, like people elsewhere, often organize politically along socially constructed lines such as ethnicity and tribe. Many voters believe that leaders are more likely to support members of their own group, and political campaigns frequently exploit social, religious, or tribal identities rather than focusing on policy issues. In rural areas, where illiteracy rates are high, traditional leaders and social networks wield significant influence over voter behavior, often outweighing party manifestos.

While tribal voting patterns dominate much of Zambia, urban and industrialized provinces like the Copperbelt and Lusaka present a more complex political landscape. Here, higher levels of education, greater ethnic diversity, and intermarriage contribute to voting patterns shaped by a broader range of factors, including government policy, economic concerns, and political messaging. In contrast, rural voters tend to adhere to traditional norms and often follow the guidance of local chiefs, reinforcing tribal voting as seen in the 2016 elections (Kuchebeba 2016).

By 2016, Zambia's political environment was defined by mounting socioeconomic pressures, persistent governance challenges, and a deepening pattern of tribal voting. Transitioning from the broader context to the specific findings, it is evident that these factors not only shaped the outcomes of the 2016 elections but also continue to influence Zambia's democratic trajectory.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study highlights several key findings:

4.1. The Rise of a New Social Force

The 2016 Zambian elections were marked by unprecedented public mobilization and widespread discontent (Lusaka Times 2916a, Lusaka Times 2016b, Lusaka Times 2016c, Lusaka Times 2016d). This surge in civic engagement represented a significant shift in the political landscape, signaling the emergence of a powerful new social force that continues to shape Zambia's democratic processes. The Patriotic Front (PF) government's failure to address economic decline and democratic deficits severely eroded public trust. This loss of confidence sparked a spontaneous, leaderless social movement characterized by:

- Widespread protests before and after the elections, organized primarily through social media and informal networks
- Episodes of violence, particularly in urban centers, reflecting frustration with systemic exclusion and inadequate public services
- Innovative civic engagement, such as community dialogues and grassroots advocacy, aimed at promoting accountability and transparency

Three major factors underpinned the emergence and intensity of this new social force. The first was economic deterioration: a sharp decline in commodity prices, currency devaluation, and a rising cost of living disproportionately affected low- and middle-income Zambians, intensifying economic grievances (Lusaka Times 2016b, Lusaka Times 2016c, Lusaka Times 2016e). The second was unaccountable governance. Perceived impunity among political elites, a lack of judicial independence, and widespread corruption fostered deep mistrust and cynicism (Lusaka Times 2016c, Lusaka Times 2016e). The third factor was deepening social divisions. Political polarization and ethnic tensions were exacerbated by divisive electoral rhetoric and exclusionary practices by the ruling party (Lusaka Times 2916e, Lusaka Times 2016f).

4.2. Manifestations of Discontent

The study found that violence erupted in many parts of the country in the lead-up to the elections (Lusaka Times 2016a, Lusaka Times 2016b, Lusaka Times 2016c, Lusaka Times 2016d). Brutal clashes between supporters of the UPND and PF prompted the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) to suspend campaigns in Lusaka, Namwala, and Gweembe in July 2016. The violence extended beyond political rivalry, as incidents of xenophobia and ritual killings – especially in Lusaka – further

destabilized the social fabric. Riots targeting foreign nationals led to the looting of Rwandan-owned shops after rumors linked them to ritual killings. These acts drew condemnation from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society organizations, who urged the government to take decisive action.

4.3. Government and Opposition Responses

The study found that the government sought to downplay xenophobic violence as mere opposition agitation (Lusaka Times 2016b, BBC News 2016, Kuchebeba 2016). Nevertheless, the attacks generated national and international concern. Opposition parties accused the government of failing to condemn the violence and of condoning police brutality. Notably, police in Lusaka shot and wounded several opposition supporters in July 2016. In response, President Lungu declared a national day of prayer for peaceful elections, a move the opposition criticized as inadequate. While Election Day itself was relatively peaceful, unrest quickly followed the ECZ's declaration of Lungu as president. Protests erupted across Southern, Western, and Northwestern provinces, with UPND supporters targeting perceived PF loyalists and engaging in arson and violence. Hundreds of families were displaced, and more than 150 protesters were arrested. Both major parties accused each other of instigating the violence, while the UPND claimed that the ECZ had colluded with the PF to rig the election. However, the ECZ, along with the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), maintained that the official results matched independent tabulations, despite acknowledging concerns about electoral violence and media bias.

4.4. Election Observation and Legitimacy

The study revealed that the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM) and other observers recognized that, while voting was well-administered on Election Day, the campaign period was marred by systematic state media bias, misuse of state resources, and restrictions on freedom of assembly – all of which undermined the fairness of the process. The EU-EOM (2016) report noted:

- The ECZ prepared for the election professionally but did not address public media bias.
- Both major parties engaged in rhetoric that inflamed tensions and harmed public confidence.
- The Public Order Act was used to restrict assembly, disproportionately disadvantaging opposition and smaller parties.
- The PF benefited from incumbency and blurred the lines between state and party.

Despite these irregularities, the ECZ declared the elections free and fair. This reflects a broader trend in Africa, where the concept of “free and fair” elections is often politicized. As seen in Uganda’s 2016 and Zimbabwe’s 2013 elections, observer missions sometimes validated election outcomes despite acknowledging violence and irregularities, raising questions about the true integrity of the process.

4.5. Voting Trends

The study noted that Zambian voting patterns since 2001 have revealed that poor economic conditions often drive voters to support familiar or tribal candidates in hopes of economic salvation (Kuchebeba 2016, Lusaka Times 2016e, Lusaka Times 2017). When elected leaders fail to deliver, citizens increasingly turn to protest and alternative forms of civic engagement.

Understanding the rise of this new social force and the factors surrounding the 2016 election is, therefore, crucial to analyzing the evolution of Zambian democracy. Building on this context, the following section discusses the study's key findings and explores their broader implications.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

By systematically examining the patterns and trends that emerged from the research, this discussion provides a coherent account of how the study’s objectives were addressed and offers deeper insight into the changing dynamics of Zambia’s democratic landscape.

5.1. Social Force as a Catalyst of Change

The 2016 elections in Zambia witnessed the rise of a powerful new social force, driven by mounting economic hardship, governance failures, and widening social divisions. This movement was characterized by leaderless, grassroots mobilization and creative forms of civic engagement (Sikazwe

2016). Protests organized through social media and informal networks signaled widespread dissatisfaction with political and social elites, whose failure to address economic decline and uphold democratic norms led to a profound erosion of public trust (Sikazwe 2016, Lusaka Times 2016a).

Political analysts argue that the frequency of protests in Zambia is a direct consequence of the government's inability to deliver essential services such as education, affordable food, and healthcare (Tembo 2016, Sikazwe 2016). In response, disillusioned citizens have organized demonstrations against the government and those perceived to benefit disproportionately from current economic policies. The violence that marred the 2016 general elections stands as a stark manifestation of this burgeoning social force and merits close scrutiny. As Tembo (2016) notes, the pre-election period was marked by simmering grievances and inflammatory rhetoric, which could have been triggered to escalate into widespread violence. The resulting unrest saw blame-shifting among political actors, while law enforcement often appeared powerless and political leaders hesitated to condemn or accept responsibility for the violence and associated fatalities.

Emerging signs of this social force included both political violence and civic disenchantment (Sikazwe 2016). Political violence, rooted in socio-political exclusion and the monopolization of state power, has become a clear indicator of public frustration with government performance. Student protests at major public universities such as Copperbelt University and the University of Zambia, particularly over bursaries and meal allowances, further exemplify citizens' growing discontent. Together, these protests and acts of violence underscore a widespread loss of hope and confidence in government, as the promised dividends of democracy remain unrealized for the majority.

A further indication of this social force is the rise in xenophobic attacks and ritual killings. These acts are often justified by myths that foreign nationals steal jobs or perpetrate ritual murders (Witness 2015, Kangwa 2016). However, evidence suggests that foreign nationals frequently contribute positively to the economy, and investigations into ritual killings in Lusaka revealed that Zambian military personnel, not foreigners, were responsible (BBC News 2016). Nevertheless, competition for scarce resources has driven citizens to scapegoat outsiders rather than demand accountability from their leaders.

5.2. Police-Citizen Clashes and Democratic Failure

Frequent confrontations between citizens and police are symptomatic of democratic failure. In April 2016, the police proved unable to contain riots in Lusaka, forcing the government to deploy the military (Lusaka Times 2016f). The suspension of political campaigns in Lusaka, Namwala, and Gweembe due to violent clashes between PF and UPND supporters exposed the depth of political polarization and the state institutions' incapacity to mediate conflict effectively (Sikazwe 2016). Xenophobic attacks and ritual killings—particularly targeting Rwandan nationals in Lusaka—not only highlighted social and ethnic tensions but also attracted international scrutiny (Lusaka Times 2016a, Lusaka Times 2016b, Lusaka Times 2016f).

The state's response, which ranged from police brutality to the downplaying of xenophobic incidents, revealed a lack of accountability and further alienated significant portions of the population. Opposition parties accused the government of reluctance to condemn violence and address police abuses, fueling perceptions of widespread impunity (Lusaka Times 2016c).

Since independence from British colonial rule in 1964, Zambians have aspired to improved living standards. However, post-colonial governments have largely served the interests of a political elite, leaving most citizens in poverty (Kangwa 2016). Under Kaunda's one-party system, protests erupted over food shortages and economic decline. The advent of multi-party democracy in 1991 brought hope, but two decades of MMD rule led to privatization and further economic collapse (Mumba 2012). The PF's 2011 electoral victory came with promises of jobs and prosperity, yet the economy has continued to deteriorate, with the kwacha sharply depreciating in 2015.

Against this backdrop, protests represent acts of resistance against both the hardships of neo-capitalist policies and the stagnation of Zambia's democracy. Widespread frustration, driven by unemployment, inadequate services, and economic distress, continues to fuel civic unrest.

5.3. Tribalism and Regionalism

Tribalism and regionalism play a pivotal role in shaping electoral dynamics and voting behavior in Zambia. Strategic alliances, such as those between the Patriotic Front (PF) and the Movement for Multi-

Party Democracy (MMD), have deliberately targeted Bemba- and Nyanja-speaking populations, while the United Party for National Development (UPND) has consistently drawn support from Tonga and Lozi communities. These patterns of political mobilization have fueled perceptions that government resources disproportionately favor certain regions and ethnic groups, thereby entrenching divisions and perpetuating grievances.

The aftermath of the 2016 presidential election offers a salient example of these dynamics. Protests erupted in the Southern Province, where demonstrators burned property and voiced their sense of exclusion from both national leadership and developmental opportunities. As Tembo (2016) observes, tribalism – though fundamentally a social construct – has been instrumentalized as a channel through which citizens express dissatisfaction with government performance. This has heightened the salience of ethnic identity in electoral contests, often overshadowing policy considerations and national interests.

Electoral trends over the past two decades underscore a persistent disconnect between popular will and electoral outcomes in Zambia. Widespread disillusionment has arisen from the failure of elected officials to fulfill campaign promises, prompting many citizens to seek representation within their own ethnic communities to secure better access to social services. The 2016 general elections starkly illustrated this phenomenon, with voting patterns largely reflecting tribal allegiances (Kuchebeba 2016). Observers identified a strong correlation between presidential candidates and the dominant tribes in their respective regions, mirroring international trends, such as increased minority voter turnout in the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

The 2016 Zambian elections, held on 11 August, mirror tribalism and regionalism. According to the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), out of 6,698,372 registered voters, 3,781,505 ballots were cast. Of these, 85,795 votes were rejected, resulting in 3,695,710 valid votes and a voter turnout of 56.45%. The presidential contest featured nine candidates, with Edgar Lungu of the PF securing 1,860,877 votes and Hakainde Hichilema of the UPND receiving 1,760,347 votes. The remaining candidates garnered significantly fewer votes: Edith Nawakwi (FDD) with 24,149; Andyford Banda (PAC) with 15,791; Winter Kambimba (Rainbow Party) with 9,504; Saviour Chishimba (UPP) with 9,221; Tilyenji Kaunda (UNIP) with 8,928; Peter Sinkamba (Greens Party) with 4,515; and Mwamba Maxwell (DA) with 2,378 (ECZ 2016).

The principal contest was between incumbent President Edgar Lungu (PF) and Hakainde Hichilema (UPND). The ECZ declared Lungu the winner with 50.35% of the vote – just surpassing the constitutional majority threshold – while Hichilema obtained 47%. The PF also captured a parliamentary majority with 85 seats, compared to the UPND's 55 (ECZ 2016, Sikazwe 2016). Regionally, Lungu prevailed in Copperbelt, Lusaka, Luapula, Northern, Muchinga, Eastern, and Central provinces, whereas Hichilema dominated in Southern, Western, and North-Western provinces.

Following the announcement of results, Hichilema and his running mate, Geoffrey Bwalya Mwamba, petitioned the Constitutional Court to contest Lungu's victory, alleging widespread electoral violence and violations of the electoral code (Lusaka Times 2016I, Sikazwe 2016). They accused the PF of electoral malpractice, including rigging. In accordance with the Zambian constitution, the court was mandated to deliver its verdict within 14 days (Sikazwe 2016). However, the Constitutional Court ultimately dismissed the petition on the ground that the 14-day requirement for hearing and determining it was not met. As a result, the allegations of electoral malpractice were not substantively adjudicated, and Lungu's victory was upheld by default. The ruling of the Constitutional Court fueled further tension between Southern Province – which was the stronghold of Hakainde Hichilema's UPND – and other regions that supported the PF.

This evidence demonstrates that tribalism and regionalism remain deeply embedded in Zambia's electoral politics, shaping not only voter preferences but also perceptions of legitimacy and inclusion in the political process.

5.4. Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism, particularly in the form of Christian nationalism, constitutes a significant dimension of Zambian democracy. The formal declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation by President Frederick Chiluba in 1991 marked a pivotal shift in the nation's political landscape, embedding religious identity within the framework of state governance (Phiri 2003, Smith 1999). This institutionalization of

Christianity has facilitated the proliferation of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, which have increasingly shaped both public discourse and political engagement.

Political leaders in Zambia have strategically aligned themselves with religious institutions, leveraging faith-based rhetoric to garner public support and legitimize their authority (Lusaka Times 2016g, Lusaka Times 2016h). This symbiotic relationship has enabled successive presidents to use religious platforms to consolidate political power. Furthermore, periods of economic hardship and public health crises have heightened the populace's reliance on religious leaders for guidance and solutions, thereby amplifying the influence of religious institutions in sociopolitical affairs.

The intertwining of religion and politics has often served to insulate political leaders from accountability, as the invocation of devout Christian identity can deflect criticism regarding governance shortcomings. Nevertheless, recent developments indicate a growing shift in public attitudes. The emergence of a politically active younger generation has introduced a new dynamic into Zambian democracy, where demands for transparency and effective governance increasingly supersede religious rhetoric. Incidents of post-election violence reflect a broader societal insistence on substantive leadership, with citizens prioritizing policy delivery and accountability over claims of divine endorsement.

5.5. Politicization of the Phrase “Free and Fair” in Elections

The concept of “free and fair” elections has become highly politicized, particularly within the African context, where its usage often fails to prevent systemic rigging and electoral malpractice. The ambiguity inherent in the phrase “free and fair” complicates the assessment of electoral legitimacy, as seen in Zambia and other African countries. Kisitu (2016) contends that such terminology is frequently appropriated for political purposes, thereby obscuring acts of violence and irregularities embedded within the electoral process. This politicization is evident in both Zambian and Ugandan elections, where international observer missions and domestic stakeholders have produced conflicting evaluations regarding the justice and fairness of electoral outcomes (Kisitu 2016).

A salient example is the 2016 Zambian elections. While the voting process on Election Day was largely peaceful, the aftermath was marked by significant unrest, especially in regions aligned with the opposition. The UPND rejected the results, alleging widespread electoral fraud; this stance sharply contrasted with the findings of the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG) and the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM), both of which offered more favorable assessments of the process (Reuters 2016, EU-EOM 2016). However, even these observer missions, despite acknowledging certain procedural strengths, identified substantial flaws, including media partisanship, the abuse of state resources, and the restrictive enforcement of the Public Order Act. These deficiencies critically undermined the overall credibility of the electoral process (EU-EOM 2016, Sikazwe 2016b).

Thus, the politicization and ambiguous application of the phrase “free and fair” serve to mask and perpetuate structural deficiencies in electoral systems, ultimately eroding public trust and the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

5.6. Embracing Democracy as an Application of Rights and Virtues

Democracy is often defined as “a system of government in which people vote in elections to choose the people who will govern them” (Mayor et al. 2002:369), or more broadly as government by the people, for the people (Kangwa 2016:536). However, this procedural definition fails to capture democracy's deeper normative dimensions. As Hood (2004:142) argues, democracy is not merely about voting; it is a political culture grounded in both rights and virtues. While rights may be regarded as instinctual, virtues must be cultivated through education and civic engagement. Genuine citizenship thus requires advancing fundamental rights alongside the development of civic virtues.

In the Zambian context, Frederick Chiluba articulates key pillars of democracy: recognition of individuals as rational and moral agents, the supremacy of the people, government by consent, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law (Chiluba 1995:4-5). Both Hood and Chiluba underscore the significance of a robust bill of rights and the protection of human dignity as prerequisites for free and fair elections. Yet in many African countries, including Zambia, the right to vote is often the only political right fully realized during elections. Other essential rights – such as freedom of speech,

assembly, and dissent – are frequently curtailed. This selective recognition of rights not only undermines the integrity of elections but also erodes the very foundation of democratic governance.

Hood (2004:143) identifies three essential features of democratic rights:

- Rights presume that individuals are autonomous agents, not beholden to custom or claims of moral or political superiority.
- The establishment of rights empowers citizens to challenge political authority and scrutinize public claims without fear of reprisal.
- Rights guarantee the vote, free speech, freedom of assembly, and personal autonomy within democratic limits, fostering justice and equality.

In a functional democracy, rights are protected by law, while the separation of powers ensures effective checks and balances (Chiluba 1995:8, Kangwa 2016:536). Nonetheless, as evidenced by recent protests in Zambia and other African nations, the realization of a rights-protecting democracy remains fraught. The erosion of democratic values that safeguard human rights and dignity has provoked public discontent and civic unrest among those excluded from meaningful participation and benefit.

However, the mere protection of rights is not sufficient. Democratic virtues must also flourish. Rights empower citizens to challenge abuses of power, but only civic virtues equip them to do so responsibly and constructively. Hood identifies republican virtues essential to democracy, including:

- Accountability and the recognition that individual actions affect collective well-being
- Tolerance, self-restraint, frugality, courage, and moderation as civic values
- High moral standards and integrity among political leaders

In robust democracies, leaders are expected to exemplify moral conduct and integrity, setting standards for society at large. Civil society organizations, including religious groups, play an indispensable role in nurturing these virtues and holding leaders accountable. Authentic democratic practice rejects corruption, nepotism, tribalism, racism, sexism, injustice, and violence. Thus, the success of democracy is measured not merely by the presence of periodic elections, but by the capacity of citizens to govern their collective affairs with self-discipline and mutual respect (Hood 2004:144).

The spontaneous emergence of social movements – often leaderless – during Zambia’s 2016 elections illustrates both the promise and peril of civic mobilization. On one hand, grassroots demands for accountability can revitalize democratic institutions. On the other hand, persistent unrest and violence can threaten political stability and undermine public trust in democracy. Upholding both democratic rights and virtues is therefore imperative.

As Chitala (2015) argues, democracy must yield tangible benefits, such as food, housing, education, and healthcare. Political independence, he contends, must be accompanied by a steadfast commitment to civil and political rights as well as economic justice. True democracy demands the protection of human dignity and the adoption of an intersectional approach to social justice – one that combats all forms of oppression and exclusion (Omar 2016). To move from these principles to actionable steps, it is essential to translate the commitment to true democracy and intersectional justice into concrete policies.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations present actionable steps the Zambian government can implement to address the challenges previously discussed:

- Reinforce Democratic Principles: Restore and uphold democratic norms, protect civic freedoms, and guarantee genuinely free and fair elections.
- Enhance Institutional Integrity: Strengthen public institutions to promote greater transparency, accountability, and inclusivity at all levels of governance.
- Foster Inclusive Engagement: Encourage open and constructive dialogue with civil society, opposition parties, and marginalized groups to ensure diverse perspectives are represented in policy-making.
- Upgrade Service Delivery: Prioritize improvements in public service delivery, particularly in the critical sectors of health, education, and employment, to better meet the needs of all citizens.

7. CONCLUSION

The 2016 Zambian elections offer a compelling case study of the profound influence social forces exert on a nation's democratic trajectory. The spontaneous civic mobilization that arose in response to governance shortcomings highlighted the necessity for democracy in Zambia to extend beyond procedural formalities, emphasizing the development of civic virtues and active citizenship. Enduring democracy requires not only genuine governmental reform but also inclusive dialogue and a renewed social contract between the state and its people.

Social movements, as demonstrated during the elections, serve as powerful vehicles for both dissent and transformative change. The research underscores that public protests and episodes of political violence stem largely from pervasive dissatisfaction with inadequate service delivery and limited employment prospects. These grievances, if left unaddressed, risk deepening tribal, ethnic, and national divisions and can expose vulnerable groups to acts of violence. Thus, social forces not only articulate discontent but also actively challenge entrenched political and socio-economic inequalities.

The outbreaks of political and xenophobic violence in 2016 were symptomatic of broader structural grievances rather than isolated incidents. When the government is unable or unwilling to meet its citizens' needs, frustration inevitably mounts, sometimes culminating in violent expression. In a resilient democracy, it is imperative for political leaders to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to peace and justice, safeguarding the rights of all individuals regardless of identity or affiliation. Where democratic norms are undermined, the risks of discrimination and violence rise correspondingly.

The sustainability of Zambian democracy hinges on the dual pillars of institutional reform and the nurturing of a civic culture grounded in inclusivity and equality. The cyclical pattern observed in Zambian electoral politics – where economic hardship drives voters towards familiar or tribal loyalties, only for hopes of improvement to be dashed and frustration to spill into protest – highlights the urgent need to address the substantive dimensions of democracy. Justice, accountability, and genuine social inclusion must be at the forefront of any democratic consolidation. Only by confronting these core issues can Zambia hope to build a democracy that is both resilient and truly representative of its people.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Prof. Jonathan Kangwa is the Vice Chancellor of the United Church of Zambia University. Previously, he held the positions of Deputy Vice Chancellor and Registrar at the same institution. His current research focuses on the impact of colonial legacies on religion, politics, and governance in Africa.

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