

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A critical evaluation of thirty years of state-civil society relations in Zambia, 1991 - 2021**

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**This paper aimed to assess the relations between the state and civil society in Zambia in the last thirty years of the country's plural political dispensation. The study sought to establish the extent to which the state and civil society regard each other as genuine associates to the cause of national development. The areas of study focused on human rights protection, adherence to the rule of law, economic accountability, and transparency. In the wake of greater importance being attached to good governance practices globally, these relations are critical to the realization of human development of citizens. Data for this study were collected from secondary research sources through academic journals, scholarly books, reports, and online publications. The study showed that the relations between the state and civil society are not conducive to advance development. The study revealed that on one hand, cheerleaders of government see civil society as being dog-eared with a belligerent anti-establishment prejudice, while on the other hand, civil society argue that the state's abuse of power and lack of respect for human rights is retarding Zambia's quest for transformation into a modern state. The study concluded that the absence of strong political institutions has encouraged a continuation of bad governance practices by the state. Therefore, civil society needs to strengthen its agency by forging new and otherwise unconventional collaborations with other stake holders. It is only by expanding the network of synergies that civil society will be able to successfully champion the cause of the citizens.**

**Key words:** Advocacy, constitutionalism, donor support, human rights, trade unions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study aimed at evaluating the relations between the state and civil society in Zambia in the last thirty years. The key research question was to gauge the extent to which the state and civil society regard each other as worthy partners in national development. The focus areas of enquiry were on human rights protection, adherence

to the rule of law, economic accountability, and transparency. The thirty years period under study from 1991 to 2021 was chosen because before then, there was no civil society activism worth profiling due to the socialist authoritarian type of governance. Previous studies on this subject matter by scholars such as

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Mushingeh (1994), Bartlett (2000), Kaliba (2014) and Munalula et al. (2018) appear to have been framed within the context of Zambia as a relatively democratic state. However, this study - while building upon previous scholarship - took an extended line of argument in two ways: first, it covered a longer study period from 1991 to 2021, unearthing additional political and economic events, and second, the study is different in the sense that much of the happenings in Zambia today were captured from a prism of Zambia as a dictatorship rather than as a democracy (Institute for Security Studies, 2020). The country has witnessed a considerable erosion of democracy mainly from 2015 to date - events which previous studies could not have possibly captured. Political analysts such as Mpundu (2019) argue that Zambia at present is, except in designation, a dictatorship, an authoritarian state.

During the period leading to 1990, the political winds of change began to blow across Africa like a desert storm. Advocates of plural politics comprising of academics, businesspersons, independent thinkers, and influential citizens teamed up to form a pressure group that emerged with the force of a thunderclap and demanded multi-party-political reforms. The pressure that this group exerted took a considerable toll on the political fortunes of the sitting one-party regime (Mushingeh, 1994). In 1990, a bill was presented to parliament with provisions that sought to strengthen existing structures of the one-party state but was resoundingly defeated. In rejecting the bill, the Members of Parliament (MPs) contributed to the opening of political space in Zambia (Bartlett, 2000). This monumental development further weakened the government's attempts to resist demands for other reforms. During the rounds of multi-party talks with the government, several civil society actors were excluded from the transition negotiations (in preference for elitists). Mushingeh (1994) points out that this exclusion from the negotiating table meant that civil society suffered setbacks in two agonizing ways: (1) during the reign of the one-party state, their voice was severely curtailed - only elitist voices seemed to prevail; (2) when the 'golden opportunity' to engage in multi-party talks showed up in 1990, again they were not included in the talks. So, despite the civil society representing majority of ordinary voices, nevertheless they suffered a great deal from the way the negotiations were conducted, that is, from the top and from outside mainstream ordinary voices. Consequently, the internal grassroots societal grievances remained latent and excluded. This exclusion confirmed the frailty of civil society and laid the foundation for an authoritarian reawakening under the new multi-party state that would later emerge in 1991.

The one-party government fell in November 1991 and a new multi-party-political dispensation was ushered in. During this period, Zambia was celebrated as one of Africa's leading democracies, being one of the first African countries to have undergone a peaceful transition

from one-party rule to multi-party politics. Cheeseman and Fisher (2019) point out that despite the flaws that may have prevailed under a one-party socialist system, the socialist government deserves salutation because it respected the will of the people (pluralism) and gave up power in a continent where many regimes still refuse to leave office, preferring to hang on at all costs.

Unfortunately for Zambia, successive governments have not performed to the expectations of the population on good governance matters. So far, Zambia has had six different administrations since independence, yet the country has not seen a complete 'death' of the old socialist authoritarian habits. Once in power, Zambian politicians seem to change like chameleons and try to dig in (Munalula et al., 2018). Over the years, the state has seemed to be preoccupied with employing tactics of silencing civil society organizations for purposes of regime survival. This power struggle between the state and civil society has been the hallmark of the past 30 years of Zambia's plural politics (Open Zambia, 2017). In a country where political institutions are still feeble, the civil society has played a pivotal role as a barometer of social consciousness on governance issues. The vacuum created by weak institutions need to be harnessed by a well-ordered and collaborative civil society (*AFP News, 2017*). Despite Zambia's transformational challenges, the country has set some democratic precedencies for Africa: in 2001, members of the then ruling party, the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) joined forces with civil society to deny a sitting president (Fredrick Chiluba) an unconstitutional bid for a third term in office. In 2011, Zambia passed another milestone in democratic consolidation in one of the continent's few examples of post-transition election turnover where voters chose to remove a dominant ruling party, the MMD and put another party, the Patriotic Front (PF) in power (Cheeseman, 2017).

It can be argued that Zambia has neither been a clear democracy like Botswana or Mauritius, nor has it been a case of extreme authoritarianism such as Uganda and Cameroon. Instead, the country seems to have occupied a middle ground - but in the last few years (from 2015 to date), governance systems began to fall apart. Until recently, the country's progress on good governance practices has generally been steadfast and although corruption remains a challenge with several controversial elections in between, the people in collaboration with civil society have always pulled back from the brink when authoritarian tendencies showed up (Cheeseman, 2017). For instance, in 1995, Zambia's second President Fredrick Chiluba manipulated the constitution to prevent his predecessor Kenneth Kaunda from running against him in the 1996 presidential polls on flimsy grounds that alleged that Kaunda was not a 'real' Zambian citizen. This accusation made little sense considering that Kaunda had previously ruled the country for 27 years (*ibid*).

## BRIEF HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ZAMBIA

The post-colonial one-party socialist state of Zambia (from 1973 to 1991) had not been able to convincingly demonstrate that it could improve the economic welfare of citizens. In addition to the poor economic performance, the government had also failed to guarantee individual freedoms and protection of human rights. This failure to deliver real economic benefits and civil liberties began to create room for civil society activism for purposes of improving service delivery to the people (Mushingeh, 1994). Until 1991, the only viable civil society organization was the Zambia Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU), a powerful umbrella of all unions in the country. The salient feature of the ZCTU was its urban pro-political membership that was drawn largely from the copper mines. Due to its influence, the ZCTU was arguably the de facto opposition movement in the country (Bartlett, 2000). Therefore, civil society stemmed primarily from internal forces due to the economic failures of the government. However, civil society activism still could not fully blossom due to authoritarian tendencies of the one-party state; but the tipping point was getting closer. When communism fell in 1989, the stage seemed set for political change on a global scale towards democratization and opened the door for more civil society activism. The eventual democratization of the eastern European states seemed to have triggered an inevitable wind of change to start blowing towards Africa (Kaliba, 2014). While these international events were unfolding, the governing one-party state in Zambia faced internal rebellions. Several high-profile politicians within the government began to demand for reforms that could promote media freedoms, individual freedoms, and the rule of law. Ironically, the state-run newspapers such as the *Times of Zambia* also followed suit in questioning the viability of the one-party state (Bartlett, 2000).

So, a combination of local and international events opened the space for civil society organizations to spring up and democracy emerged as the new trend in town. It can be argued though that the birth of civil society in Zambia was largely influenced by local grievances that had been brewing for a long time until they were triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, due to limitations in their financial capacity, most civil society organizations were only able to operate effectively with the backing of Western donor agencies (Mushingeh, 1994).

## THEORY AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century global politics are grounded on the firm belief that civil society organizations are indispensable partners in national development and democratic consolidation. This study examined the extent to which

the state and civil society see each other as true partners in enhancing good governance practices. The focus areas were on human rights protection, respect for the rule of law, economic accountability, and transparency because these aspects are fundamental to growth. Somers (2008) and Alexander (2006) contend that civil society is a critical organizing concept in contemporary social, political, and economic theory. Adam Smith (1723-1790) argued from a growth perspective that the organized state is a potential impediment to the social symmetry and equitable economic growth of a polity. As such, the utility of civil society can only be viable in environments where a free-market flourishes as it possesses a greater ability to ward off the potential arm-twisting power of the state (Hills, 2010). Scholars such as Huber and Stephen (2001), and Korpi (2006) also opine that the success of civil society largely depends on the broader structure of alliances with other actors within the political economy such as the labor unions. In most hybrid - otherwise authoritarian regimes - such as Zambia today, scholarship on civil society from scholars such as Fernandez (2014) and Lewis (2013) shows how the structure of NGOs could easily be influenced by political elites through coercive ploys; whereby the expected strong relations between the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and democratic consolidation remain foible (Klein and Cheol-Sung, 2019).

This study identified the expansion of synergies by civil society as an imperative component of bridging the potential constrictions that may arise from powerful political elites. In enunciating the relations between civil society and the state in Zambia, this study built on secondary research sources through academic journals, scholarly books, and online publications. Additional information to strengthen the arguments of this study was obtained from reports linked to good governance practices in Zambia from the following reputable sources: the World Bank, the Financial Intelligence Centre of Zambia, Transparency International Zambia and the Zambia Statistics Agency. Data were analyzed by gauging the performances and attitudes of successive Zambian governments in relation to their collaborations with the civil society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the popularity of the 'Africa rising' narrative that has spread over the past ten years regarding Africa's pace for economic development, the continent continues to face significant challenges in unlocking the benefits of a human rights-based governance system. Successive Zambian governments seem to have failed to address the national question on inequalities and class struggle. The question arising from this is: how possible is it that after thirty years of plural politics, Zambia has found itself in a governance system where almost every institution seems

to be fundamentally broken? As Mills et al. (2019) has argued, one cannot break up systems overnight - but one can slowly chip away at the fundamentals, and if no organized groups of concerned citizens intervene to stop this, then very quickly all the traits of a democratic society begin to fall apart. Civil society organizations opine that politics must be built around values of human rights protection, constitutionalism, the rule of law and a sound social contract with the population. Currently, the government seems to be at sea on how to resolve the country's challenges due to the absence of issue-based politics.

### **Lack of cohesion and the problem of illiteracy**

For Zambia's challenges to be overcome, citizens will need an aggressive civil society that would ensure that political leaders set the right development priorities for the country. Munalula et al. (2018) observes that civil society can also be uncivil in the sense that they may be organized by a narrow base of elites or mere brief case organizations allied to surrogate state institutions. In general, the civil societies in Zambia appear to be disjointed and as such, their mobilization influence to champion the cause of the citizens is weak. Sishuwa (2019) points out that in addition to the fragmentation within the civil society, Zambian academics who are supposed to be in the vanguard of championing human rights issues have remained mute. At the centre of Zambia's institutional decline are gutless professionals in state institutions and disunited civil society organizations. In a country that is in frantic need of role models - a country full of corrupt state officials and cowardly technocrats in public institutions - many may have previously looked up to academics as inspiring examples in public life. Sishuwa (2019) adds that what academics have done by remaining tongue-tied on government misrule is the ultimate betrayal of public trust. Silence is violence. To remain silent in the face of abuse, injustice, inequality, and rampant corruption is to actively participate in sustaining the status quo. However, educational achievement is still the best predictor of popular commitment to democracy in Zambia. Today, the key opinion leaders are those with post-secondary education. Urban dwellers, a group that has been at the forefront of political change, usually takes the lead. Also, the use of social media nowadays has increased levels of awareness and socialization. Unlike in previous regimes, today, fewer people can access quality education because the current regime does not seem to have prioritized this sector (Afro Barometer Report, 2019). The less educated citizens are prone to underestimate the threats inherent in government takeover of independent bodies of restraint such as the legislature, judiciary, and the media. This suggests that the defense of human rights in Zambia depends critically on the active political

engagement by educated citizens (Afro Barometer Report, 2019). Politicians seem to profit from people's illiteracy and ignorance for them to continue abusing power.

### **Fallacy of democracy and elections**

To change the world, citizens need to change their illusions; the greatest risk to the development of human rights and democratization in Zambia is not the threat of a military coup d'état but from the gradual erosion of the hard-won political gains at the hands of an elected civilian regime bent on expanding its power. Due to lack of independence, most Electoral Commissions in African states have arguably become channels of the 'new coup d'états' by manipulating electoral votes in favor of the sitting authoritarian regimes (Mpundu, 2019). This underscores the need for citizens to re-evaluate their understanding of what citizenship is all about. Advocacy is an inescapable duty and responsibility of every citizen. The vibrancy of civil society depends on the active participation of the general citizenry. The rope after all, is only as strong as its weakest link (Fanon, 1952). Bizarrely, the increase in the number of elections taking place in Africa since 1990 has often been read as a positive indicator for the continent's prospects. However, elections in themselves are not enough to bring about good governance. While under previous regimes Zambia held elections that were generally peaceful, today the general elections (including bye-elections) have become increasingly bloody. In Zambia, electoral credibility has been eroded because elections are always disputed. For instance, apart from being petitioned in the Constitutional Court, the 2016 general elections were also the most violent in Zambia's history (Resnick, 2016). The major obstacle in the electoral mine field is state-sponsored violence and electoral skulduggery. These machinations occur because the country has not been able to move from the 'big man' syndrome to the big idea. Zambian politics have been dominated by 'strong men' instead of strong institutions. For this reason, civil society organizations have been encouraging citizens to move to the politics of big ideas so that the country follows ideas and not individuals because the demise and betrayal of individuals is always going to haunt the nation (Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020). Also, Zambian politics have tended to focus on personalities instead of focusing on political party ideas and national policies that would move the country forward in advancing transparency and accountability. It is, for instance, suspicious that ballot papers for the general elections are always printed from outside the country; fifty-six years after independence, Zambia is still unable to print its own ballots? It is no wonder then that the economy is in a wayward situation since the government cannot even fix basic requirements such as ballot papers. The ballot

paper printing issue has generated mistrust among stakeholders. Civil society have expressed fears that ballot papers coming from outside may be manipulated because it appears that representatives of the civil society are not genuinely invited to monitor the printing processes (Young, 2012). Citizens often adopt the convenient fallacy that by going through the motion of holding elections, a country will have gotten matters all right. This laissez-faire analysis of political events tends to overlook the extent to which elections themselves can become a smokescreen (Schaffer, 2007). The nullification of presidential poll results by the courts of law in September 2017 in Kenya, and in February 2020 in Malawi, testify to this election fallacy. The Malawi court decision is significant as it reinforces the precedent set in Kenya – it draws a line in the sand – and says elections must be credible (*The Guardian Newspaper, 3 February 2020*). The first few African cases that followed Kenya may have indicated that this would be a one-off, but now we have a trend. The next African court can cite Malawi and Kenya. The frequency of elections is much easier to observe and tick the box than adherence to the rule of law. It is in fact the rule of law that determines a country's ability to function properly (*ibid*).

## **Accountability challenges**

### ***Rule of law and endemic political corruption***

When the rule of law is undermined, a country can follow a downward spiral that may lead to state collapse. Political observers opine that currently, the rule of law in Zambia is almost non-existent (Mills et al., 2019). Unlike previous governments that generally exercised self-constraint, the current regime seems intent on destroying the thirty years of hard-won democracy by replicating actions that have been witnessed in failed states such as Zimbabwe - notably, the systematic harassment and intimidation of civil society and other strategic political institutions (Mills et al., 2019). While in the past Zambians have looked to the rule of law to protect their rights when under threat, today they find that there is little prospect for protection or redress. The people are not treated as citizens, but as subjects who have no constitutional rights and therefore, owe their allegiance to the regime in power. For instance, civil liberties have been severely curtailed and this trend shows a continuous downward spiral (Freedom House, 2020).

In Zambia, corruption, nepotism, and cronyism have found a haven. To give an example, a cabinet minister who served under the government of President Fredrick Chiluba (1991-2001), defended the practice of nepotism by arguing that 'if I do not appoint people from my region, who will' (Bartlett, 2000). In the judiciary, the courts are generally held in low esteem by most citizens due to apparent political interference in their operations. Consequently, the court's judgments are perceived to be

promoting impunity and immunity among political elites thereby perpetuating the domination of the society by a few privileged individuals. An average Zambian today believes that the process of justice is being intentionally obstructed by the authorities to achieve their own personal political ends - it is justice behind closed doors (Ndulo, 2017). The government's pronouncements that it is committed to fighting corruption are widely seen by the population as empty rhetoric. Civil society organizations have accused the Zambian Anti-Corruption Commission of deliberately keeping a blind eye on crimes perpetrated by political elites while only focusing on crimes of poor people. Arguably, justice is only available to the highest bidder. Justice has been turned into injustice and civil society organizations that are critical of these machinations are labeled as unpatriotic citizens (Financial Intelligence Centre Report, 2018).

Government is always quick to water-down condemnations from civil society when they expose abuses related to mismanagement of state resources by arguing that such abuses do not only happen in Zambia. A senior government minister was recently reported to have said, 'every country has got thieves', in an apparent attempt to divert people's attention from a string of unending corruption incidences (Lifuka, 2020). While in previous administrations corruption was also a challenge, graft today has become much more prevalent due to weak accountability and transparency mechanisms. Misappropriation of funds and a general lack of financial prudence have led to frequent donor freezes on aid (*BBC News, 18 September 2018*). For instance, the annual GDP growth has shrunk from 7.6% in 2010 to minus 2.7% in 2021, a result that shows poor fiscal management. Inflation rate has shot up from 7.9% in 2010 to over 22.7% in 2021 (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2021). These economic indicators demonstrate the absence of transparency and accountability in government operations particularly on monetary policies. This way of running a government translates into poor distribution of national resources. This further suggest diversion and misappropriation of funds which consequently prioritizes political leaders' personal survival at the expense of state survival (Clapham, 1996). Governments' explanations on how they utilize state resources are hardly convincing to the population. As a result of public mistrust, the regime(s) often 'sponsor' little lumpen political parties and individuals to operate as government mouth pieces in a bid to justify corrupt and illegal decisions. This ploy ensures that critical voices are diluted and eventually silenced (Schaffer, 2007).

### ***Non-adherence to human rights protocols***

Unlike in previous governments, the current regime has been found wanting for failing to respect the norms and values embedded in regional and international agreements such as the Harare Commonwealth

Declaration (1991). Under the auspices of the Commonwealth, the Harare Declaration (1991) reaffirmed the commitment of member states to the promotion and protection of human rights. Other agreements with similar commitments that the Zambian government has not fully honored include the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ACHPR (1981), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations UDHR, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966). While in previous regimes human rights were more respected, today the regime is more repressive, and police brutality is now commonplace. To shift attention from the regimes' atrocities, the authorities resort to exploiting religious and cultural dogmas. For instance, government's grand standing on homosexuality issues is a convenient tactic to divert attention from its perennial corruption scandals which donor agencies have exposed. In 2019, the US ambassador to Zambia, Daniel Foote denounced the regime's growing authoritarianism and lack of respect for the human rights of gay people. Ambassador Foote was swiftly expelled from the country (*The New York Times*, 24 December 2019). It is a documented historical fact that homosexuality has always existed in Zambia (and in Africa). Oral history of the middle 1800s about African lifestyles testify to this (Tendi, 2010). It is, therefore, hypocritical for the government to pretend that the gay issue is 'foreign' and was brought by Europeans. Tendi (2010) argues that what Europeans brought to Africa was not homosexuality, but homophobia clothed in religious doctrines. Homophobia, therefore, is more alien to Africa than homosexuality. Gays are not responsible for Zambia's economic malaise, neither are they responsible for the country's endemic corruption. So, why sacrifice them for the regimes' poor governance performances? In view of this, it is crucial that education for all is given priority to help debunk some long-held myths and conspiracy theories that are not supported by empirical evidence.

### ***The need to expand synergies***

Given the extent to which democracy has deteriorated under the current regime, the civil society collaborations have never been more crucial. Synergies with various associations at grassroots level need to be vigorously forged to ensure that these links actively highlight the lapses in governance to ensure transparency, accountability, and economic justice. The Diasporas must also be engaged. The Diasporas of today can be powerful actors who can influence political events such as wars, conflicts, peace, or the dissolution of states. Diasporas in other jurisdictions have played pivotal roles, for instance, in terms of funding to boost the agency of political programs back in their homelands – the case of

Eritrea and Ireland is testimony to the critical role that the Diasporas can play in shaping the political discourse of their homelands. In the case of Eritrea, the state was able to mitigate the negative effects of the United Nations (UN) sanctions through diaspora tax remittances (Hirt, 2015). In Northern Ireland, the past grievances, the repression, and other unresolved political issues occasioned by the British government's role in that territory served to radicalize the diasporas' approach to the Northern Ireland troubles: diaspora funds were channeled to Sinn Fein political party and to the republican paramilitary, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to support their families and sustain the war (Delaney, 2006).

Zambia can learn from other countries' strides. For instance, the former Ethiopian Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn has argued that active youth involvement and strong activism from civil society groups is essential to change any political discourse. Further, Desalegn posit that aggressive intellectual discourse, which is generally lacking in Africa, is an important ingredient that would positively alter the political path. By shying away from politics, African intellectuals have contributed to the perpetuation of mediocrity of service delivery by their governments. Majority of government officials lack superior logic and intellectual depth of understanding the basics of the national development agendas. Desalegn emphasizes the need for the youth to get involved, arguing that it was youth activism that brought political change to his country Ethiopia (*SABC News*, 24 May 2019). Youth participation in civic duties is critical for maintaining a strong civil society -for instance - Zambia's independence was fought mainly by the youth. The African Union (AU) through its periodicals, encourages African youths to rise to the occasion and influence decision making. The history of Africa itself shows that the youth are key to political change; from the days of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana in the 1950s to the Arab Spring of 2011, the power of youth activism cannot be underestimated. Good governance can only be sustained by a politically active society - this is the only way that the agency of civil society will be infused into political institutions (Institute for Security Studies, 2020).

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND CHALLENGES THEY FACE IN ZAMBIA**

Zambia is one of the poorest countries in the world with nearly 68% of the total population living below the UN poverty threshold. Predictably, the rural population makes up most of the poor (Munalula et al., 2018). Political analysts forecast that poverty levels are expected to increase due to poor fiscal management by the current government, making the vision of attaining the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) futile (Afro Barometer Report, 2019).

Civil society organizations' main objective is to provide avenues of promoting and influencing social change in the process of national development and sensitizing citizens so that people can link the services they access from government such as health, education, water, and sanitation to the way resources are being managed, that is, linking expectations with capacity. This is one of the ways of educating the masses so that they begin to see development as a framework of achieving other freedoms (Sen, 1999).

In Zambia's thirty years of multi-party trajectory, civil society organizations can mainly be categorized as Western donor-dominated who have played a seminal role in ensuring that excesses of the state such as abuse of power and poor fiscal discipline are exposed. Civil society has demonstrated their commitment to continue promoting quality education for all as well as being voices of the voiceless masses. This unwavering stance coupled with the fact that most civil society organizations are donor-funded has often led to clashes with government who usually accuse them of leaning on the ideological orientations of their donors, and hence operating as front organizations for the so-called 'imperialist forces' (Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020). Civil society organizations have been encouraging dialogue as an avenue of informing policy, that is, through engagements such as workshops, briefings, public meetings, and open debates. Media platforms that have a wider coverage such as community radio stations are particularly useful due to their availability in all districts of Zambia. Other platforms that have recently gained traction among citizens include social media such as Face Book, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Civil society has consistently preached non-violence as a tool to engage and democratize. As vital drivers of change, the civil society's work has enabled citizens to assess their governments' performance and hold those in power to account (Munalula et al., 2018).

This way, civil society has brought a rich epistemology to Zambian politics: a dynamic epistemology embedded in justification of political activities which help in countering false propositions that are often peddled by the state. Civil society have also invested in science diplomacy which seeks to bridge the world through science, that is, the use of scientific collaborations among organizations to address global commons. Key among these initiatives is to develop policies for sustainable development, mitigation mechanisms on climate change and an appreciation of the universality of science. Therefore, what unites civil society is a political inquiry with an explicit emancipatory purpose. The idea of this unity is to uncover the potential for a fairer system of class relations resulting from already existing practices that would expand the human rights discourse (Hinsch and Stepanians, 2006). Linklater (2007) explains that emancipation demands national as well as international interactions guided by open, inclusive, and non-coercive

dialogue about the ties that bind communities. Like post-colonialism, the critical theory agenda provides an instrument for the powerless masses to advance more equitable types of state relations. Most crucially for contemporary politics, critical theory combats the classical international relations theories, (realism and liberalism) and shines a light on how they feed the imbalances of an unjust global order by failing to question their foundational claims. Like science, critical theory is marked by the awareness that modernity is an unfinished project in its potential for accomplishing human freedoms. The dynamic nature of human development is like science which has no endpoint to its research; evolution of ideas and practices is an on-going project (Medawar, 1979).

### Key facet areas of the civil society in Zambia

The significance of civil society in Zambia can be summed up in five of the following ways. First, they are local and Zambian, that is, they are invested in and committed to the country. Since they are local, they are sensitive to the Zambian context and responsive to local people's needs and complexities. This way, they supplement government efforts in the provision of education, health, and social services though in a small way due to their limited capacity. However, standing up for the poor is not always viewed in good light by the state. While educating people is a good initiative on the part of the civil society, it may not always be so for the regime(s). Authoritarian regimes prefer to keep their population illiterate so that they could perpetuate their brutal rule over a docile population. Tyrants are usually not comfortable with an educated population because from their point of view, an educated and enlightened citizenry is difficult to govern (Sishuwa, 2019).

Second, civil society has developed collaborative approaches in terms of partnering with the government and other stake holders to improve policy and practice. By providing support, these partnerships make it possible for the civil society to bring about tangible change. For instance, civil society organizations contributed to the advocacy to demand for an expanded Bill of Rights in the Zambian constitution. Through their advocacy with partners, civil society organizations also contributed to Zambia's qualification for debt cancellation in 2005 under the category of Highly Indebted Poor Countries program, HIPC (NCA Strategy Paper, 2016). In 2020, civil society organizations led a fierce campaign against governments' maneuvers to pass an ill-fated constitution amendment *Bill number 10* through parliament. The 'evils' of the infamous *Bill 10* among others, included the vague but otherwise dubious clauses which sought to increase executive powers and subsequently reduce the powers of oversight institutions such as parliament and the judiciary. Civil society and other stake holders such as the Catholic Church of Zambia warned that if passed, *Bill*

10 would destroy the very fabric of democratic governance. Their campaigns were able to bear fruits as *Bill 10* was defeated in parliament. However, this influence that civil society yield, does not always sit well with the government who perceive their actions to be subversive (Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020).

Third, civil society have endeavored to build trust with the public by being credible, independent, and committed to the best interests of the population. Because of trust, they can successfully mobilize citizens to support or reject government programs. For instance, an NGO called, Alliance for Community Action (ACA) advocates for government accountability and is active in organizing and leading protests demanding for good governance. Another NGO called, Forum for African Women Educationalists of Zambia (FAWEZA) advocates for the protection of the rights of minorities and an improved quota system for women to enhance their participation in democratic discourse and governance. Affirmative action is also encouraged as an alternative method to redress the inequalities and injustices suffered by minorities. However, the trust that civil society enjoy from citizens is not usually a welcome development to the state who see this as a threat to their legitimacy (FAWEZA, 2020).

Fourth, civil society harness networks within the country as well as internationally to build connections and influence debates and decisions in a constructive manner. For instance, they get support from international donors to fund community-based projects with aid from Norwegian organizations and from British charities such as OXFAM. This way, they help the government to meet its obligations to provide services at grassroots level. However, these international connections do not usually sit well with governments due to paranoia about the real intentions of civil society networks overseas, that is, possible conspiracy with opposition political parties and 'imperialists' to undermine the regime (FAWEZA, 2020).

Fifth, civil society research responds to Zambia's priorities and therefore, relevant in informing policy and practice. It is argued that the best solutions for the country can only be defined when accurate information and critical analysis has been conducted. For instance, an NGO called, Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) provides periodic reports of the Rural Basket (household food research) to encourage structural change as part of the efforts to alleviate poverty. Another NGO, Transparency International Zambia (TIZ), provides annual updates to the population on corruption related matters. By highlighting these shortcomings, the civil society helps the government to see where developmental gaps lie so that necessary remedies could be provided. On the flip side of the coin, this same effort by civil society may be construed suspiciously by government as an attempt to discredit it to the international community in a bid to influence regime change (CPI Report, 2018).

## RESULTS

Munalula et al. (2018), explains that in terms of donor funding, it has been observed that much of the international aid goes through the government because donors prefer to channel their funds through the state. The main reason for this is that the state has a higher capacity and more mechanisms to reach out to areas of the country where NGOs may not access. Donors opine that it is much easier to hold government to account than the individual NGOs. The capacity issue is the biggest weakness of NGOs. Therefore, collaboration between the state and civil society is necessary because on one hand, the government does not have enough resources for the implementation of all its projects, while on the other hand, civil society organizations are usually too small and confined only to selected parts of the country.

As Munalula et al. (2018) has pointed out, an insufficient resource base from government means that the state needs support from NGOs to fill up that gap. It is this limitation from both sides that underscore the need for cooperation, after all, they all claim to be championing the cause of the Zambian population. These collaborations have become more relevant following the New Policy Agenda (NPA) that came into effect at the beginning of the new millennium. The NPA requires active stake holder participation if donor funding is to be sustained. For the donors, this is a critical evaluation threshold for further aid to continue flowing to Zambia (Kaliba, 2014).

This requirement by donors means that the state is left with no option but to use all necessary means to cooperate with civil society. In this vein, the government has set up platforms at district and provincial levels where state officials periodically meet with civil society and other stake holders such as the business community to provide appraisals on the donor-funded developmental projects. Analysts, however, argue that government's invitations of civil society for participation is purely cosmetic and meant only to fulfill the donor's criteria for continued funding. Political observers point out that government invitations of civil society are often done when major decisions have already been made, thereby rendering the contributions from NGOs merely as window dressing (Kaliba, 2014). From these deliberations, it can be argued that a major criticism of the government's higher-capacity mechanisms lies in its purported advantage: that it has greater capacity to reach out to the remotest areas of the country where civil society cannot reach - which also means that it has a higher capacity to engage in propaganda politics that would potentially ruin the reputation of civil society and thereby jeopardize their developmental agenda.

## DISCUSSION

Zambians recognize that unlike under previous



governments, political space under the current regime is rapidly closing. This poses an existential risk to the hard-won independence freedoms mainly due to a general lack of political will. Most people, however, are not prepared to sacrifice their rights of freedom of speech, but they are also wary of openly confronting the powers that be. Statistics by the Afro Barometer Report (2019) shows that at least 70% of the population believe that the current government is not forthright in handling the fight against corruption, while a similar proportion say that they fear retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidences of corruption. The World Bank Report (2018) indicates that Zambia's fiscal management practices do not favor an upward economic growth (World Bank Report, 2018). For instance, the annual economic performance indicators conducted by the Zambia Statistical Agency revealed an alarming increase in the national inflation rate from 15.7% in April 2020 to 22.7% in April 2021 (Zambia Statistical Agency, 2021). This means that fewer people are getting access to basic social services needed to sustain their daily lives. The gap between the rich and the poor is therefore, getting wider. The civil society argues that this 'manufactured poverty' by the regime is for purposes of exploiting economic problems to achieve political ends. In a climate of high inflation, acute poverty, and deprivation, it becomes much more convenient for the regime to engage in voting buying and bribery of citizens. This pattern of events makes the election triumph of the ruling party officials a foregone conclusion (Schaffer, 2007).

The Afro-Barometer Report (2019) shows that in democratization, ordinary people's satisfaction with the way democracy is working in the country has sunk from 68% in 2012 to a staggering 49% in 2017. Analysts have expressed fears that the country is fast sliding into a dictatorship. Statistics also indicate that there is a considerable decline in the freedom of speech and association. The Afro-Barometer Report (2019) indicates that a percentage of people expressing a need to be 'careful what you say about the government' has increased from 62% in 2012 to 72% in 2017. Only 36% of the population of Zambia feel free to criticize the government (*ibid*). In general, citizens seem inclined to judge the extent of the growth of democracy according to the quality of elections. Data also shows that incompetent regimes generally dissent the work of the civil society compared to regimes that are more accountable and transparent (Mills, 2019).

Part of the other challenge in Zambia seems to be that most of the population is trapped into cultural dogmas and orthodoxy. The population is consumed with state-backed Christian theologizing, religious obsessions and intoxication leading to religious fanaticism - all at the expense of economic development. A strong belief in superstitions, witchcraft and magic has taken a new twist: politicians promise miracles to an impoverished population and so do the false priests, false evangelists,

and prophets. Religious indoctrinations and illusions have implicitly encouraged laziness among the citizens due to the naïve belief that their poverty will cease with divine intervention (Mills, 2010). Due to high levels of illiteracy and poverty, some bogus prophets and crooked church leaders have been riding on a culture of Christian fanfare to exploit vulnerable souls. These self-styled prophets have found a fertile ground among the passive population whom they use as easy prey to swindle their money in the name of the church and prayers, under the guise of providing so-called 'anointing holy oil'. In Zambia, the church which was traditionally considered as the pylon of civil society organizations has apparently sold out. The reputation of the church nowadays seems to be in tatters: the church is highly perceived to be full of religious morons - conmen and women purporting to be priests, bishops, and prophets. The Zambian church today, or the religious fraternity, has lost much respect from ordinary citizens due to the perception that religion is now a conduit of 'get-rich-quick' scammers. It can be argued that the church appears to be learning the craft of crookedness from the current regime in power, a regime that is notoriously known by a cross section of citizens to be an uncharitable entity of elites - a den of thieves masquerading as a government (News diggers Newspaper, 25 January 2020).

Could it just be a coincidence that most polities that are deeply embedded in cultural dogmas are also the least in achieving world literacy levels? Could it also just be a coincidence that most communities that believe in superstitions, witchcraft, magic, and who claim to be highly religious are also the poorest in the world? These are fundamental questions that need to be explored if the narrative on Zambia's growth is to gain traction. Education is a necessary tool that would bring in the freshness of ideas to reform outmoded and otherwise primitive cultural and religious dogmas. Political theorist, Frantz Fanon offers a challenge when he points out that each generation must, out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it (Fanon, 1952).

In Zambia, everything seems to rise and fall with leadership. When citizens get their leadership right, they get everything right. The shortage in Zambia is not a shortage of resources but a shortage of sound leadership which is manifesting itself in a shortage of other things as well. When one sees disease (such as cholera) in Zambia, one is not seeing a disease, but seeing a death of leadership and that is the first thing that needs to be cured. How do we cure this? It is by ensuring that Zambia is put on a path to free and fair elections, through electoral reforms, so that a trajectory to new elections produces poll results that are beyond contestation. That is why civil society counts on international observers - for instance, in Africa through the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and in the wider world, the European Union (EU), and the UN. The civil society counts on these bodies to put a case for

good governance and for free and fair elections (Mills, 2019).

## Conclusion

Zambia is at a crossroads in terms of its measure on good governance. The country faces a choice of futures between democratic deepening and authoritarian backsliding. The study revealed the roller coaster relationship that has existed between the state and the civil society in the last thirty years but also showed some areas of their collaboration. Successive governments do not seem to have realized that the historical links that exist between the state and civil society need to be harnessed and harvested. This can only be possible by restoring good relations so that they can mutually build the state. The acrimony has continued largely because the governments have failed to live up to their billing. In particular, the current regime which took office in 2015 has performed worse than any previous regime across all governance thresholds. Unlike previous governments, the current regime has failed to demonstrate that it is genuinely committed to respecting human rights, honoring the rule of law and being accountable. More concerning is the fact that the regime threatens to undo the democratic progress that previous regimes steadfastly built upon. A convergence of troubling trends seems evident. For instance, the quality of elections has deteriorated since 2015, while institutions such as the police service, the electoral commission and the judiciary have seemingly lost their independence. Political space for free expression has shrunk considerably. The hesitance by the population to challenge the authorities has been taken as a blank cheque by the regime to step by step, deconstruct the rule of law. Government often labels critical voices from civil society as people with ulterior motives bent on destabilizing the state. The study showed that incompetent regimes generally dissent the work of the civil society compared to regimes that are more accountable and transparent. The study also found that consolidation of democracy goes beyond the civil society – it requires the active participation of the general citizenry. Critically, education for all is a vital component of the development agenda, and yet currently, the country has very low literacy levels compared to world literacy averages. Also noted in the study, was the fact that civil society needs to forge more collaborations with other stakeholders if they are to successfully champion the cause of the population.

The international community also has a responsibility to come to Zambia's aid when democratic tenets are being trampled upon by the regime, particularly in the case of the current authoritarian regime. While national sovereignty must be respected, it must be borne in mind that if the government itself is undermining the rule of law and the rights and safety of its own citizens, then it will

already have undermined the grounds for sovereignty in a democratic dispensation. The more we have states that can continue down this path unchallenged, the fewer voices there will be left to speak out against such infractions, and the more leaders elsewhere will be motivated to preserve their stay in office through illicit means. The study also revealed that the active participation by civil society in highlighting bad governance traits has worked as a deterrence for further entrenchment of regime authoritarianism. For instance, civil society organizations have noted with concern that the 2016 presidential polls were the most violent in Zambia's history and forecast rising political instability if this trend is not reversed. Rather than heed this warning, the government appears determined to put this prophecy to the test.

Furthermore, the study found that in the absence of genuine and honest political leadership, people will find refuge in conmen of all hues purporting to be religious clergymen and women given that political elites are too obsessed with personal aggrandizement. Regime survival interests have been placed above the interests of state survival. The attitude and disposition of the political ruling class in Zambia today resembles what Noam Chomsky would refer to as, 'a band of mafias' disguised as saviors of the population. The study further noted that the point of protest by civil society is to raise public awareness to put a spotlight on injustices, and to make the powers that be uncomfortable so that they are prompted to act. In fact, throughout the history of Zambia, it has often only been in response to protests and civil disobedience that the political system has even paid attention to marginalized communities. In this context, social media today is a powerful tool that has proved to be useful in information dissemination to challenge the political status quo. This way of creating awareness ensures that gradually, the aspirations of citizens translate into specific laws and institutional practices, and in a democracy, that only happens when citizens elect a government that is responsive to their demands. The challenge for Zambian citizens is to rise to the occasion by joining hands with civil society if the country is to achieve its lofty human rights and economic growth ambitions.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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