

# A SILENT REVOLUTION

## *Zambia's 2021 General Election*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses Zambia's 2021 election which was held in a context of democratic backsliding and poor economic performance. The election resulted in Zambia's third alternation of power between political parties since the democratic wave of the 1990s. The ruling Patriotic Front (PF) used its incumbent advantages to control institutions that were crucial for promoting democracy and ensuring a credible election. The election was also characterised by political violence which limited the ability for the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) to mobilise freely. Further, an Afrobarometer survey conducted in December 2020 showed that half of all citizens surveyed were unwilling to declare who they would vote for, thereby suppressing the extent of UPND's support. Yet, the UPND won 59% in the presidential election and won the most parliamentary seats in an election that had one of the highest voter-turnouts since the advent of Zambia's multi-party democracy. This paper argues that there was a 'silent revolution' in Zambia that resulted in the defeat of the PF. It also shows that Zambian citizens have not been complacent in the face of democratic backsliding.*

**Keywords:** alternation, authoritarianism, democracy, institutions, Patriotic Front, United Party for National Development, Zambia

### INTRODUCTION

On 12 August 2021, Zambia held elections to elect a president, members of parliament, council leaders<sup>1</sup>, and local government councillors. The elections were a two-horse race between the ruling Patriotic Front (PF) led by President Edgar

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<sup>1</sup> There are three types of councils in Zambia: city, municipal and district. City and municipal councils are led by mayors, while district councils are led by council chairpersons.

Lungu and the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) led by Hakainde Hichilema. The two candidates had competed against each other in the 2015 presidential by-election and the 2016 general election. Lungu won with a margin of 27 757 votes (or 1.7%) in 2015 and 100 530 votes (or 2.7%) in 2016 (Goldring & Wahman 2016, pp. 109-113).

The PF first came to power in 2011 under the leadership of President Michael Sata, after defeating the former ruling party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) by 183 100 votes in the presidential election, a margin of 6.6%. However, the PF's narrow victories in 2015 and 2016 showed that its hold on power was precarious. Aware of the party's electoral vulnerability, the PF under Lungu became increasingly authoritarian to thwart the challenge to its dominance (Siachiwena 2020, pp. 110-113).

The PF's authoritarianism attracted international attention, including from the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-dem) and Amnesty International – which reported that Zambia was 'on the brink of a human rights crisis' (Mazarura & Tsunga 2021). Zambia's slide to authoritarianism was accompanied by poor economic management, both of which were associated with a decline in support for the ruling party. An Afrobarometer survey conducted in December 2020 showed that support for the PF had declined significantly since elections in 2016 and the last Afrobarometer survey conducted in April 2017 (Seekings & Siachiwena 2021, p. 1). Support for the PF dropped by 25.5 percentage points between 2017 and 2020, while that for the UPND increased by 1.4 percentage points during the same period. However, half of all survey respondents refused to declare which party they would support in the 2021 election (Seekings & Siachiwena 2021). This meant that the true extent of support for both parties could not be predicted confidently.

The large percentage of Zambians refusing to declare who they would vote for could be understood within the context of democratic backsliding. Between 2016 and 2021, the PF increasingly eroded democratic means of competition and used state institutions such as the police and the courts, to intimidate Lungu's opponents (Sishuwa 2021a). There were also concerns that Lungu was preparing to manipulate the 2021 election. The PF deployed some of the strategies discussed in *How to Rig an Election* by Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas (2018, pp. 4-5). The Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) created a new voters' roll that registered more voters in provinces won by PF in 2016, while provinces that voted for the opposition had a decline in voters registered, despite continued population growth (*The Africa Report* 26 March 2021). Further, the PF government used COVID-19 regulations to proscribe public meetings by opposition parties, including rallies, while ignoring these restrictions and continuing to hold their own (PF) events (Sishuwa 2020a). PF officials also distributed large amounts of

cash to informal economy workers – reportedly using state funds – in the months leading to the elections (*Lusaka Times* January 31 2021). The media environment was polarised along political party lines during the campaign period, with the public broadcaster providing coverage in favour of the ruling party (African Union 2021). Further, the campaign period was characterised by political violence involving foot soldiers of the PF and UPND, as well as threats and attacks on journalists (Ahmed 2021). These dynamics created an uneven playing field that disadvantaged the opposition.

Therefore, it came as a surprise that the UPND won the first round of the presidential election with a resounding victory. On 16 August, the ECZ announced that the UPND had won the presidential vote by a margin of 981 568 votes, which translated into 20.3 percentage points more than the runner-up (ECZ 2021b). The difference was so large that Lungu conceded defeat, despite speculation before the election that he would hold on to power, either by outright rigging through the electoral commission, forcing a run-off vote; or using the courts to petition the results in his favour (Sishuwa 2021b). Moreover, the extent of Hichilema's victory over Lungu was historic. The difference between the two candidates was the largest in a presidential election since 1996, when Frederick Chiluba of the MMD won with a margin of 60 percentage points ahead of his closest rival.

The results also confirmed speculation in the months leading to the elections that there was a 'silent revolution' in Zambia (*Lusaka Times* May 7 2021). On the previous occasions when Zambia witnessed a change of government, in 1991 and 2011, citizens had openly agitated for change. In the five years preceding the 1991 change of government, there had been two unsuccessful coups and food riots in urban centres (Mills 1992, p. 16). In 2011, the opposition, civil society, and the independent media publicly mobilised support for then opposition leader, Sata (Sishuwa 2020b). Yet, in 2021, demands for change were muted, largely because of threats of political violence and intimidation against opposition supporters (*Lusaka Times* May 7 2021).

It is also instructive that voter-turnout in the 2021 election was 70.61%, the highest turnout in Zambia's multiparty democratic era, second only to 70.77% in 2006 (Electoral Commission of Zambia 2021). This shows that Zambian citizens turned up in large numbers to revolt against the PF, using the power of their votes, despite the threats of political intimidation and violence.

This article draws on Afrobarometer survey data and media accounts to understand the context within which the 2021 election was held. In doing so, the paper demonstrates that the UPND won in a context of poor government economic performance and democratic backsliding. Further, it builds on the analysis of previous Zambian elections to identify issues that were specific to the 2021 election (Banda, Kaaba, Hinfelaar & Ndulo 2020). The article demonstrates

that the extent of authoritarianism under Lungu was clearly resented by most Zambians, who used their vote to hold their government accountable in the absence of other democratic platforms to do so. It also shows that a significant decline in economic conditions, accompanied by an increase in the cost of living, was associated with a decline in support for the ruling party, especially in urban areas. Moreover, the UPND leader Hichilema presented himself as the candidate best placed to address Zambia's many challenges, in a way that resonated with voters, many of whom were young and voting for the first time. This article does not assign causal explanatory power to these factors. Rather, it demonstrates that these factors were salient features of the 2021 election.

This article also has broader implications for the study of elections in Zambia. On the one hand, the democratic backsliding between 2016 and 2021 demonstrates that Zambia's democracy has not yet consolidated despite the country meeting Samuel Huntington's two-turnover test (Huntington 1993). Previous electoral alternations have not guaranteed independent institutions that can promote and sustain democracy. On the other hand, the 2021 results demonstrate that Zambian citizens are likely to change government when their demands for improved economic conditions and democratic governance are not met. This confirms the argument that experiences of at least one alternation in power between political parties in Africa, are likely to condition citizens to believe that they can hold governments accountable even in subsequent elections (Carbone & Pellegata 2017).

The remainder of this article proceeds with a discussion of factors in Zambian elections. These factors have not necessarily contributed to election outcomes. Yet, they are useful for understanding the contexts within which Zambia's elections have been held. The discussion also helps to situate the 2021 elections in a historical perspective and identifies the continuities and changes in Zambian elections. The paper then uses descriptive statistics from Afrobarometer's 2017 and 2020 surveys to understand changes in attitudes that Zambian citizens had towards governance, the economy, and the leading political parties. The article then turns to a discussion of the 2021 election results which is followed by the conclusion.

## DOMINANT FACTORS IN ZAMBIAN ELECTIONS

While regular multiparty elections have become the political norm in Africa, democratisation in the region has not advanced much since the democratic wave of the early 1990s (Bleck & van de Walle 2018, p. 63). Incumbents deploy a range of strategies to create uneven electoral playing fields and manipulate elections in their favour (Cheeseman 2015; Cheeseman & Klaas 2018; Levitsky & Way 2010; Bleck & van de Walle 2018). Although Zambia has witnessed three electoral alternations between political parties – in 1991, 2011 and 2021 – elections held in

the democratic era have been biased in favour of incumbents (Siachiwena 2020; Siachiwena & Saunders 2021). Nonetheless, elections held since 2001 have been competitive and incumbents have either won with a plurality of the vote (less than 50%), by thin margins, or been defeated.

There are at least four factors that help to explain the context within which elections in Zambia are held, some of which have also contributed to election outcomes. Firstly, broader concerns regarding governance have been crucial. These include concerns about economic management and democratic governance. The defeat of Zambia's first president, Kenneth Kaunda, in 1991, was the consequence of demands for economic liberalisation and multiparty democracy (Lebas 2011; Rakner 2003). The failure of economic growth translating into improved living conditions during the 2000s also contributed to the defeat of the MMD in 2011 (Resnick 2014). Yet, even when concerns regarding the economy and democratic governance were crucial, dissatisfaction with incumbents was rarely widespread because other political factors were also important.

A second factor that has dominated Zambian elections and politics is the salience of ethnicity and regionalism. The history of political parties mobilising along ethnic or regional lines predates Zambia's independence. According to Posner (2005, p. 26), the institutions established by colonialists in Northern Rhodesia created incentives for rural Africans to invest in their identities as tribe members. By the time of Zambia's independence in 1964, the colonial government had consolidated the over 70 different dialects spoken by locals into four dominant languages: Bemba, Lozi, Nyanja and Tonga (Posner 2005, p. 57). By 1990, 80% of the Zambian population spoke one of the four languages as a first or second language of communication (Posner 2005, p.58).

The salience of ethnic identity amongst Zambians has provided incentives for political parties to target the support of particular ethnic groups or regions. In the 1960s, Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) derived most of its support from Bemba and Nyanja speakers in the north and east of the country, respectively. Meanwhile, Kaunda's main opponent, Harry Nkumbula – leader of the Zambia Africa National Congress (ZANC) – derived most of his support amongst the Tonga in the south of Zambia (Macola 2008, pp. 36-39). When Kaunda was defeated in 1991, UNIP was reduced to a regional party. It won only 25 out of 150 parliamentary seats, including all nineteen seats in Eastern Province (Rakner 2003, p. 122). Although the MMD first came to power winning more than three-quarters of the vote in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, by 2001 its support was reduced to the Bemba speaking provinces.<sup>2</sup> Yet, support in these

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2 The Bemba speaking provinces are the urban Copperbelt, and the rural Luapula, Muchinga and Northern provinces.

provinces shifted to PF in the 2000s. The PF was led by Sata, an ethnic Bemba speaker. During this period, the MMD's support shifted to Central, Eastern, North-Western, and Western provinces. Support for UPND was limited to Southern Province, which is also the home region of Hichilema. Both ethnic and regional voting patterns have been evident in elections held since 2011.

The third dominant factor in Zambian elections and politics relates to the strategies of opposition political parties. Much of the literature on the strategies of opposition parties in Zambia has focused on Sata's populist mobilisation strategies in the 2000s (Larmer & Fraser, 2007; Resnick 2014; Sishuwa 2016). As an opposition leader, Sata presented himself as a political outsider, despite his longevity in Zambian politics. His populist mobilisation discourse was rooted in an anti-neoliberal agenda, including the limited benefits of foreign direct investment and economic growth on improving the living conditions of the poor. Sata also addressed issues such as poor working conditions in foreign-owned mines, the shortage of market stalls for informal economy workers and inadequate housing in urban slums (Larmer & Fraser 2007, p. 613). Hitherto, these issues had found little expression in national political debates. Sishuwa (2021) argues that populism as a mobilisation strategy did not emerge in the 2000s but had its roots in the 1950s during the struggle for independence. Nationalist leaders had mobilised trade union workers and urban residents using populist strategies (Sishuwa 2021c, p. 1). In practice, leaders who have employed populist strategies in urban areas have often combined these strategies with ethnic or regional appeals to rural voters, to broaden their national appeal (Cheeseman & Larmer 2015; Gadjanova 2017).

Beyond using populist strategies, opposition political parties have also built coalitions as a strategy to broaden support and unseat incumbents. In multi-ethnic societies such as Kenya and Zambia, opposition coalitions of ethnic 'big men' are often formed to consolidate the support of two or more large ethnic groups or regions (Arriola 2012). After the 2011 election, Hichilema began to broaden support for the UPND by co-opting a MMD faction (which included Mutale Nalumango, his running-mate in the 2021 election) and disgruntled PF leaders (including Geoffrey Mwamba, his running mate in the 2016 election) (Beardsworth 2020). The purpose of these coalitions was to co-opt prominent leaders from regions where support for UPND was weak, most notably in the north which is dominated by Bemba speakers.

A fourth dominant factor in Zambian elections and politics is the stability of ruling coalitions. In the multiparty democratic era, ruling coalitions have been susceptible to defeat during open-seat elections, when transfers of power happened from one party leader to another. At the same time, governing parties have traditionally shifted their regional representation and strongholds over time as a way of maintaining dominance, especially after leadership changes.

When Chiluba – the MMD’s founding president – left office after ten years in power, the intra-party struggle to succeed him resulted in the formation of at least four breakaway parties.<sup>3</sup> This significantly affected support for MMD which retained power with 29% in 2001, under the first-past-the-vote system, a drop from 73% in the 1996 presidential vote (Siachiwena 2020, pp. 97-103). The MMD’s fortunes subsequently improved under Chiluba’s successor, Levy Mwanawasa who obtained 43% of the vote in the 2006 presidential election, ahead of Sata of the PF who obtained 29% (Beardsworth 2020, p. 41). Yet, following the death in office of Mwanawasa in 2008, rival factions emerged in the MMD to find his successor. When Rupiah Banda, who was Mwanawasa’s vice president, won the intra-party election, he struggled to maintain party unity. Banda won the 2008 presidential by-election – which was held to complete Mwanawasa’s term of office – with 40%, only 2 percentage points ahead of Sata who obtained 38% (Beardsworth 2020, p. 42). The internal wrangles within MMD continued after Banda won the election, partly because factions that had opposed his succession were either marginalised or forced out of the party (Cheeseman & Hinfelaar 2010; Simutanyi 2010). Consequently, Banda lost to Sata in 2011.

Similarly, when Sata died in office in October 2014, rival factions within his party emerged to succeed him. Some members of the losing faction supported Hichilema of the UPND rather than Lungu who was their party candidate. This contributed to the increase in support for Hichilema who lost narrowly in the 2015 election (Siachiwena 2020, pp. 105-106). The challenges associated with presidential succession and party stability also point to the lack of institutionalisation among political parties.

The foregoing factors are useful for discussing the 2021 election. While the PF and UPND retained much of their respective rural ethnic and regional support, the UPND increased its share of votes in PF’s provincial strongholds. This article also shows that the UPND increased its support without necessarily adopting populist strategies. Although the PF did not face internal splits ahead of the 2021 election, support for the party had been precarious since the death of Sata in 2014.

Afrobarometer surveys are a useful source of descriptive statistics highlighting the attitudes of Zambian citizens towards various factors that are associated with elections in the country. The next section examines data from the 2017 and 2020 surveys.

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3 Four parties that broke away from the MMD ahead of elections in 2001 are: (1) Forum for Democracy and Development led by Christon Tembo, republican Vice President from 1997 to 2001; (2) Heritage Party led by Godfrey Miyanda (republican Vice President from 1994 to 1997); Patriotic Front led by Michael Sata, MMD National Secretary from 1995 to 2001 (and cabinet minister 1991 to 2001); and Zambia Republican Party, led by Benjamin Mwila, Minister of Defence from 1991 to 1997.

## VOTER ATTITUDES BEFORE THE 2021 ELECTIONS

Afrobarometer is a non-partisan, pan-African research institution that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy, and society in more than 30 African countries, that are repeated in a regular cycle. This article analyses data from the seventh and eighth rounds of surveys conducted in Zambia in April 2017 and December 2020, respectively. The analysis focuses on issues that are commonly associated with elections in Zambia. This includes issues focusing on democratic governance, economic management, and attitudes towards political parties.

### *Democratic Governance*

This section measures attitudes towards democratic governance on four dimensions: support for democracy, extent of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and performance of democratic institutions.

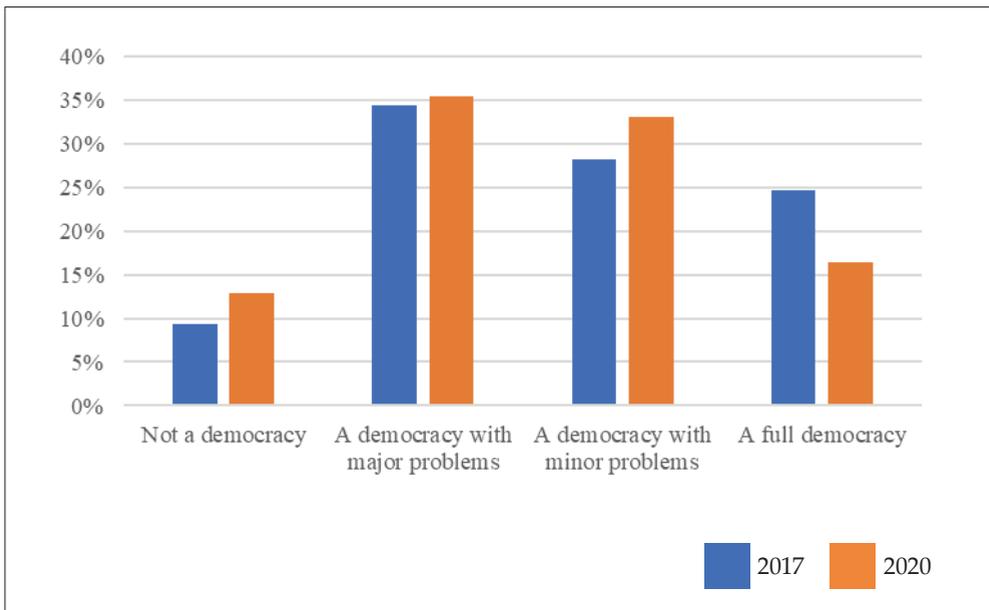
Afrobarometer measures support for democracy by asking respondents to choose one out of three statements that is closest to their opinions. The three statements are listed in Table 1. The results show that support for democracy in Zambia is very high, as more than 80% of Zambians preferred democracy to other forms of governance in both 2017 and 2020. Support for democracy increased slightly, by about 2%, between the two surveys. These findings are instructive given the extent of democratic backsliding in Zambia under Lungu.

**Table 1: Support for Democracy**

	2017 (%)	2020 (%)
STATEMENT 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government	81.4	83.8
STATEMENT 2: A non-democratic government can be a preference	9.3	6.2
STATEMENT 3: It doesn't matter what kind of government we have	5.9	8
Other responses	3.4	2
Total	100	100
N	1200	1200

**Source:** Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

While Zambians overwhelmingly prefer democratic government over other forms of government, the data show that citizens have concerns about the extent to which their country is a democracy. Afrobarometer asks: ‘in your opinion how much of a democracy is Zambia today?’ The responses were ‘not a democracy’, ‘a democracy but with major problems’, ‘a democracy with minor problems’, and ‘a full democracy’. Figure 1 reports the results to this question in the 2017 and 2020 surveys. The results show that in 2017, 9% of surveyed citizens reported that Zambia was not a democracy. In 2020, 13% reported that the country was not a democracy, an increase of 4 percentage points. This also meant that there was a reduction in the percentage of citizens who believed that Zambia was a full democracy. In 2017, 25% of respondents believed that the country was a full democracy but only 16% of respondents held the same view in 2020, a decline of 9 percentage points. Moreover, the extent to which Zambians felt their country was a democracy but with minor or major problems also increased between the two surveys, by 5 and 1 percentage points, respectively. These results are not surprising given the extent to which Zambia’s democratic credentials were eroded under the PF government.

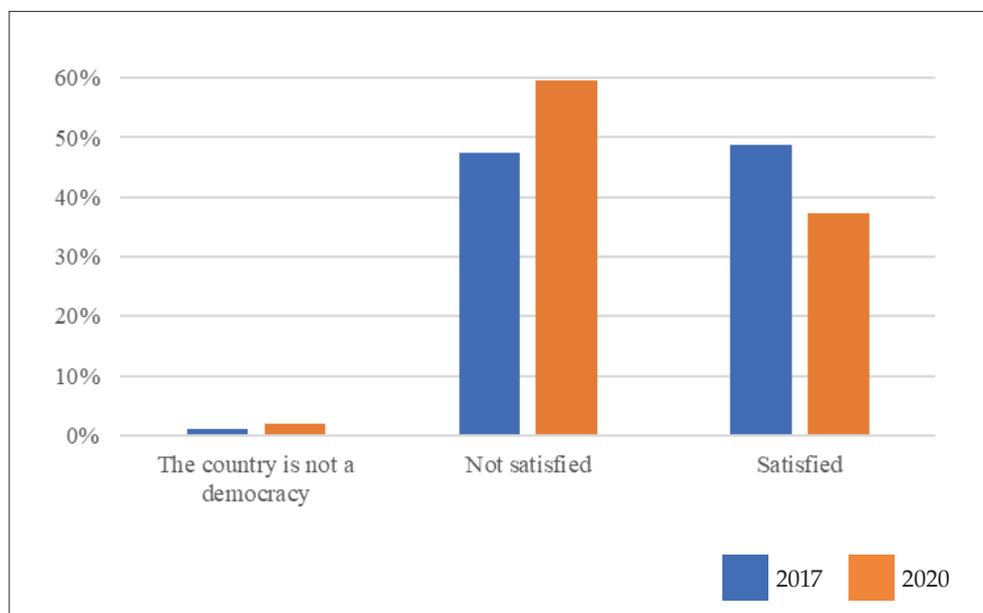


**Figure 1: Extent of democracy**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

In addition to asking about support for democracy and the extent of democracy, Afrobarometer also asks: 'overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Zambia?' The responses to this question were 'very satisfied', 'fairly satisfied', 'not very satisfied', 'not at all satisfied', and 'Zambia is not a democracy'. In 2017, 1% responded to this question by saying Zambia was not a democracy. This increased to 2% in 2020.

Figure 2 indicates the changes in satisfaction with democracy in 2017 and 2020. The response categories 'not very satisfied' and 'not satisfied' are taken as measures of not being satisfied. The categories 'very satisfied' and 'fairly satisfied' are taken as measures of high satisfaction. Figure 2 demonstrates that dissatisfaction with democracy in Zambia increased from 47% in 2017 to 60% in 2020. Conversely, satisfaction with democracy reduced from 49% in 2017 to 37% in 2020.



**Figure 2: Satisfaction with democracy**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

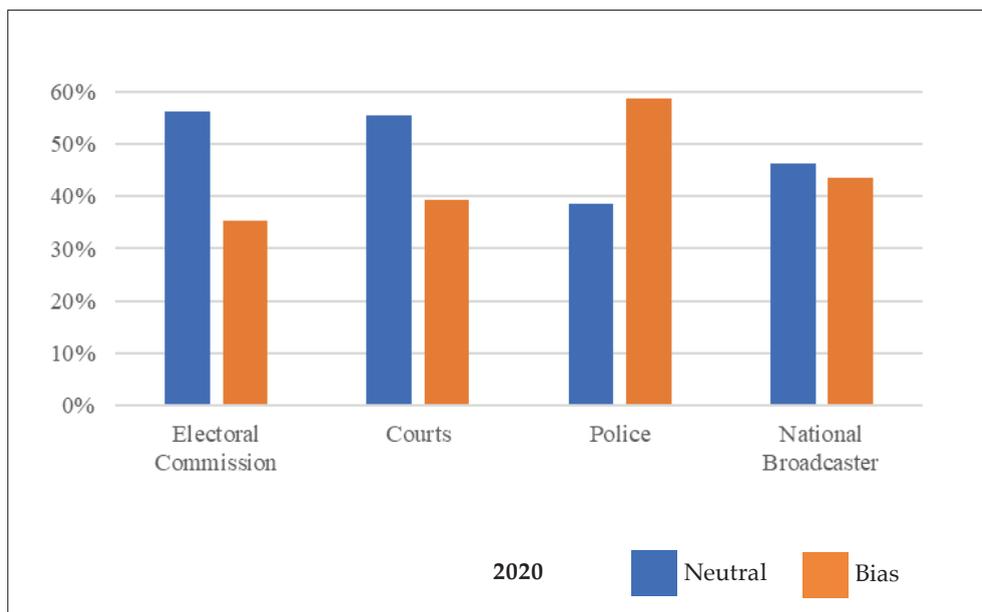
Taken together, the three questions on democracy reveal at least two patterns that are useful for understanding the state of democracy in Zambia and the 2021 election results. First, the huge gap between support for democracy and satisfaction with democracy corroborates media reports and reports from V-dem

and Amnesty International regarding the declining quality of democracy in Zambia. Second, the results show that the PF government was unable to meet the demands for democratic governance that citizens expected. Given Zambia's history of electoral alternation between political parties, it is reasonable to assume that a ruling party that fails to satisfy the demand for democracy is likely to lose popular support.

The 2020 survey included a question that asked citizens to rate the neutrality of institutions that were expected to play crucial roles in the 2021 election. The institutions include the ECZ which is responsible for conducting elections, and the courts which adjudicate election disputes. Others are the police service which enforces the rule of law; and the national broadcaster, the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), which is crucial for providing media coverage.

The Afrobarometer survey asked: 'do you think that the [institution] performs its functions as a neutral or bias institution'? Figure 3 shows that more than half of the citizens surveyed believed that the ECZ and the courts were neutral in performing their functions. While less than half of respondents (46%) believed the state broadcaster was neutral, this was slightly more than those who believed that it was biased (44%). Nonetheless, these results show that media coverage was not considered to be fair ahead of the 2021 election. Attitudes towards the police were the most notable from the results. Only 39% of respondents believed the police were neutral while 59% reported that they were biased. The police had the responsibility of enforcing the Public Order Act that deals with issues such as unlawful assembly and control of public meetings. Media reports suggested that the police had implemented the Act in a manner that benefited the ruling party and disadvantaged the opposition.

The results in Figure 3 also point to a broader issue regarding the importance of democratic institutions that are crucial during various stages of elections. Citizens had less confidence in institutions whose mandate is more crucial during the campaign period. Yet, they had more confidence in institutions that play a central role on voting day itself and after the elections. The public broadcaster was not only perceived to be biased according to survey data, but was also biased in favour of the ruling party, according to the UPND. The UPND sued ECZ and ZNBC for failing to cover Hichilema's campaign programmes and meetings he had with international dignitaries, while providing extensive coverage of the PF (*The Mast* June 20 2021). On another occasion, the police blocked Hichilema from leaving the airport when he arrived in Chipata – the capital of Eastern Province – for campaign events (*Lusaka Times* July 30 2021). The way the police and ZNBC conducted themselves undermined the popularity of Hichilema. The actions of these institutions were also consistent with some of the rigging strategies discussed by Cheeseman and Klaas (2018).



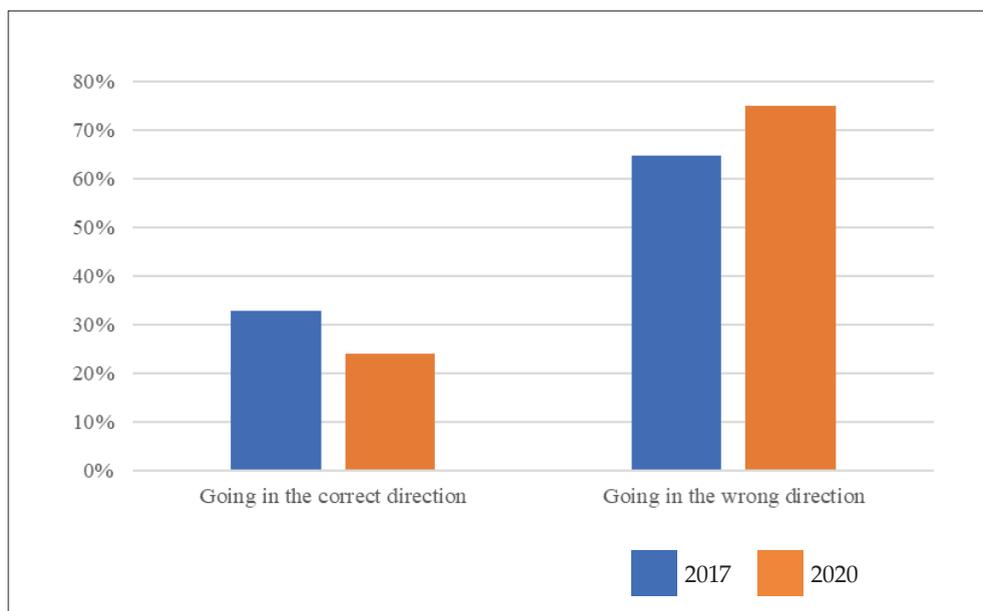
**Figure 3: Neutrality of institutions**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Round 8, (2020)

### *Economic Management*

Zambia had a negative economic outlook in the years leading to the 2021 general election. According to the African Development Bank (2021), the country faced severe economic challenges that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges include 'high inflation, widening fiscal deficits, unsustainable debt levels and low international reserves (African Development Bank 2021, p. 147). The severity of the economic challenges prompted the government to develop an economic recovery programme for the period 2020 to 2023 (Government of the Republic of Zambia 2020). How, then, did the economic challenges affect the perceptions that Zambians had towards the economy and the government's economic management?

Afrobarometer surveys ask the question: 'would you say the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?' Figure 4 reports the results of what citizens thought about the overall direction of the country in 2017 and 2020. The results show that while a third of survey respondents believed the country was going in the correct direction in 2017, this had declined to 24% in 2020. Further, two-thirds of respondents reported that the country was going in the wrong direction in 2017. This increased to 75%, three-quarters of respondents, by 2020.



**Figure 4: Overall direction of the country**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

Citizens' attitudes towards the overall direction of the country were not sufficient to understand their perceptions about the government's economic performance on various economic issues. A better understanding of their perceptions required further interrogation. Afrobarometer asks: 'how well or badly would you say the government is handling the following matters or haven't you heard enough to say?'

**Table 2: Government's economic performance**

Handling well	2017 (%)	2020 (%)	Difference (%)
Managing the economy	35	24	-11
Improving living standards of the poor	28	29	1
Creating jobs	21	15	-6
Keeping prices stable	18	6	-12
Narrowing income gaps	17	12	-5
Improving basic health services	57	44	-13
Addressing educational needs	60	48	-12

Providing water and sanitation services	38	41	3
Fighting corruption	25	17	-8
Maintaining roads and bridges	48	48	0
Providing reliable electric supply	42	25	-17
Addressing needs of young people	41	25	-16

**Source:** Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

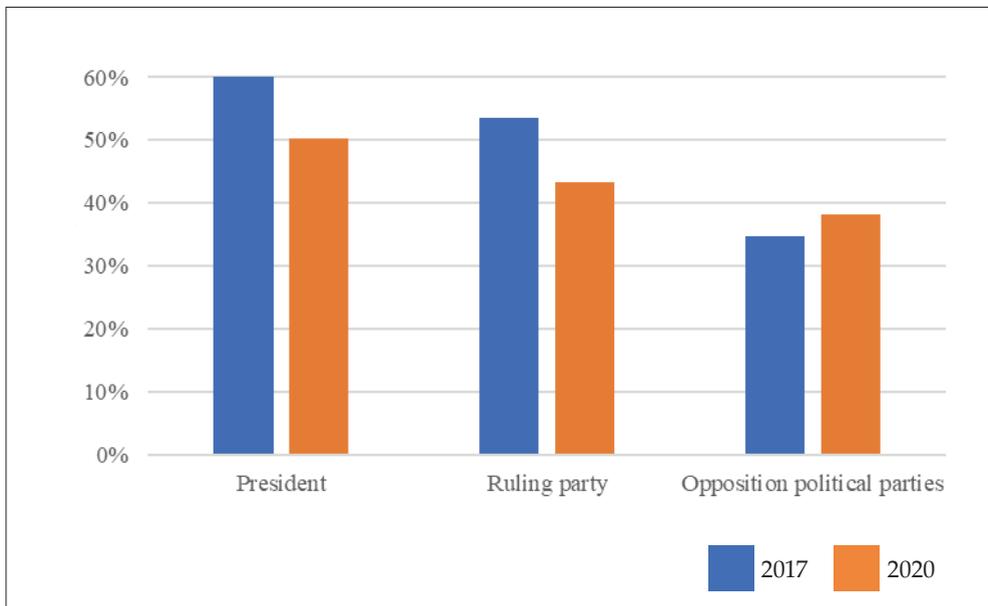
Table 2 reports how citizens rated the government's economic performance on 12 issues in 2017 and 2020. It shows the percentage of respondents who reported that the government was handling the issues 'well' i.e., 'fairly well' or 'very well'. It also reports the difference in percentage points for each issue between the two surveys. The evidence shows that the government was perceived to be handling only two out of twelve issues well in 2017. More than half of citizens surveyed believed the government was addressing education needs and improving basic health services well. Nearly half of all respondents also rated the government's maintenance of roads and bridges well. These results are not surprising given that infrastructure development was the cornerstone of the PF's development agenda. Infrastructure development was financed largely by international borrowing, which helps to explain the growth in the country's external debt levels.

By 2020, most citizens believed the government was not handling any of the twelve issues well. The government was perceived to have performed the worst at keeping prices stable, narrowing income gaps, creating jobs, and managing the economy. Other issues that citizens believed the government had not handled well were providing a reliable electric supply, and addressing the needs of young people. Further, on nine out of twelve issues, the government's performance in 2020 was rated worse than in 2017. These results demonstrate that the decline in Zambia's macroeconomic indicators had implications for the lived experiences of citizens.

Nonetheless, nearly half of respondents rated the government well on maintaining roads and bridges, addressing educational needs, and improving basic health services. This further demonstrates that the PF's infrastructure agenda was the area in which Zambians believed the regime had achieved the most. Yet, it also shows that the PF government prioritised investments in infrastructure development at the expense of addressing issues such as jobs, incomes, and the cost of living, that directly affect the immediate needs of households. With the low levels of confidence in the PF governments economic performance, it is not surprising that the ruling party lost elections with a wide margin.

*Attitudes Towards the President, the Ruling Party, and Opposition Political Parties*

Afrobarometer surveys include questions that measure attitudes of citizens towards elected political office holders and the opposition. The surveys examine the level of trust that citizens have in the president and the ruling party. It is also necessary to consider what the changes in trust for Lungu and PF meant for trust in the opposition. Figure 5 indicates the results of citizens who reported high levels of trust in the president, ruling party and opposition political parties. This includes those who reported that they trusted each of them ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’.



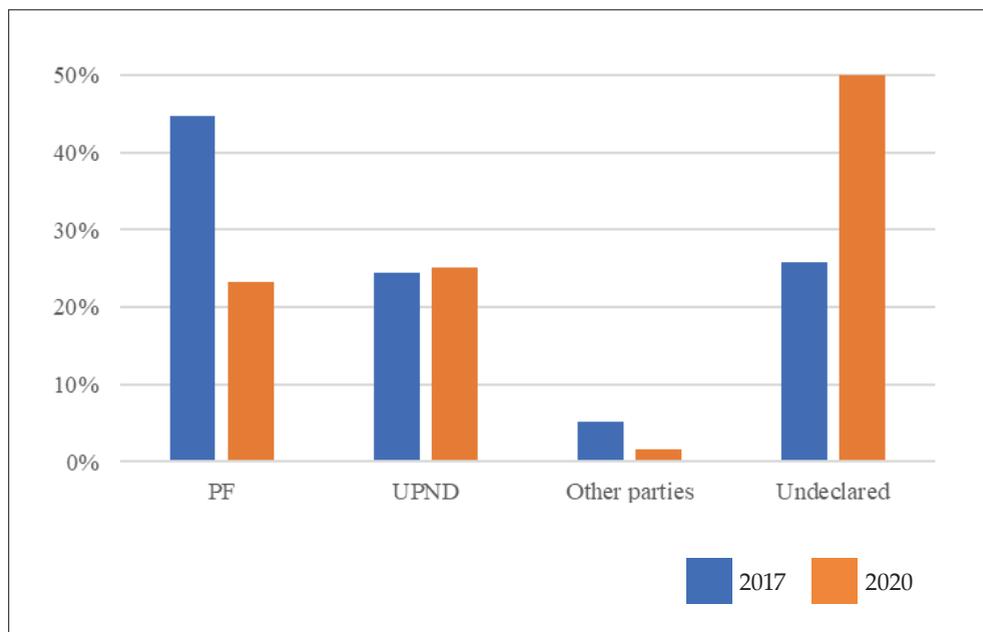
**Figure 5: Trust in the president, the ruling Patriotic Front party, and opposition political parties**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

The results, somewhat surprisingly, show that President Lungu was trusted by most respondents. Sixty percent of respondents trusted Lungu in 2017 but this declined to 50% in 2020. Lungu’s ratings remained higher than the ratings of his party, the PF. In 2017, 54% of respondents trusted the ruling party. This shows that a majority of citizens trusted both the president and the ruling party in 2017. By 2020, support for the ruling party had declined to 43%. Afrobarometer also asked how much citizens trusted opposition political parties. The question did not ask

about specific political parties. This meant that it was not possible to examine the levels of trust that citizens had in the UPND or Hichilema. Nonetheless, the results showed that in both surveys trust in opposition political parties was much lower than trust in the ruling party. Yet, trust in opposition political parties increased marginally from 35% in 2017 to 38% in 2020. These results provide some evidence that trust in Lungu and the PF was decreasing while trust in opposition political parties was increasing. It is possible that a question asking about trust in the UPND – and not opposition political parties in general – would have provided more favourable results for the opposition.

In addition to asking about trust in political parties, Afrobarometer asked the question: ‘if presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?’ Support for the PF dropped from 44.8% in 2017 to 23.3% in 2020, a decline of 25.5 percentage points. Meanwhile, support for the UPND increased from 24.4% in 2017 to 25.1% in 2020, an increase of 1.4 percentage points. However, a high non-response rate to this question in the 2020 survey, belied the true extent of support for both parties.



**Figure 6: Voting intentions in the presidential elections**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Survey Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020)

In 2017, 25.8% of respondents were undeclared. This includes respondents who refused to answer the question, would not vote, or did not know who they would vote for. In 2020, 50% of respondents were undeclared, an increase of 24.2 percentage points between the two surveys. It is instructive to note that the decline in declared support for the PF matched the increase in undeclared voting intentions. Because of the extent of undeclared voting intentions amongst respondents in 2020, the survey results could not provide an accurate prediction of the 2021 presidential election. Yet, the increase in undeclared voter support was clearly at the expense of the PF, suggesting that Zambians may have become dissatisfied with the ruling party. Nonetheless, declared support for the UPND increased by less than 2% between 2017 and 2020, suggesting that the decline in support for the ruling party did not necessarily guarantee support for the opposition. However, the outcome of the 2021 election suggests that most undeclared voters would have voted for UPND. This demonstrates that the increase in undeclared voters was at the expense of the PF.

### THE 2021 ELECTION RESULTS

Sixteen political parties participated in the 2021 presidential election. This includes the PF, UPND and the two former governing parties, the MMD and UNIP. The leader of the New Heritage Party, Chishala Kateka, was the only female candidate who competed for the presidency. Table 3 shows the results both in terms of valid votes cast and the percentage of the valid vote that each candidate obtained.

**Table 3: Presidential election results**

Presidential candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage
Hakainde Hichilema	United Party for National Development	2 852 348	59.02%
Edgar Lungu	Patriotic Front	1 870 780	38.71%
Harry Kalaba	Democratic Party	25 231	0.52%
Andyford Banda	People's Alliance for Change	19 937	0.41%
Fred M'Membe	Socialist Party	16 644	0.34%
Highvie Hamududu	Party of National Unity and Progress	10 480	0.22%
Chishala Kateka	New Heritage Party	8 169	0.17%
Charles Banda	United Prosperous and Peaceful Zambia	6 543	0.14%

Lazarus Chisela	Zambians United for Sustainable Development	5 253	0.11%
Nevers Mumba	Movement for Multiparty Democracy	4 968	0.10%
Enock Tonga	3 <sup>rd</sup> Liberation Movement	3 112	0.06%
Musonda Mwamba	United National Independence Party	3 036	0.06%
Sean Tembo	Patriots for Economic Progress	1 813	0.04%
Stephen Nyirenda	National Restoration Party	1 808	0.04%
Kasonde Mwenda	Economic Freedom Fighters	1 345	0.03%
Richard Silumbe	Leadership Movement	1 296	0.03%
<b>Total</b>		4 832 763	100%

**Source:** Electoral Commission of Zambia

Over 7 million Zambians registered to vote in the 2021 general election. The voter turnout in the election was just under 71%, an increase of 14% from a 57% voter turnout in 2016. Hichilema won the presidential election, receiving 2 852 348 votes. This represented 59.02% of valid votes cast. The UPND leader obtained 981 568 more votes than his closest rival, the incumbent president, Lungu. Compared to the 2016 presidential election, Hichilema increased the number of votes he received by 1 092 001. He also increased his percentage of the vote share by 11.39% between the two elections. Not only was Lungu runner-up in 2021, but his performance was a significant drop from the 2016 election. He obtained only 9 903 more votes than in 2016, while his share of valid votes cast reduced by 11.61%, from 50.35% in 2016 to 38.71% in 2021.

According to ECZ data (2021a), there were 1 725 127 voters gained on the 2021 voter register compared to the 2016 register, excluding deceased voters. Further, only 63% of voters registered for the 2016 election (excluding the deceased) were registered for the 2021 election. This suggests that 37% of voters in the 2021 election were first-time voters, mostly the youth. It is reasonable to conclude from these data that Hichilema benefitted from first-time voters far more than Lungu did. It is also clear that while Hichilema broadened his support base between the two elections, Lungu's support barely grew in the same period.

In terms of provincial results, Hichilema won the most votes in six out of ten provinces. He won Central, Copperbelt, Lusaka, North-Western, Southern and Western provinces. Lungu won four provinces: Eastern, Luapula, Muchinga and Northern. The distribution of provinces won demonstrates some continuities and some changes in voting patterns. Hichilema maintained the ethnic and regional support that has sustained the UPND electorally after 2011. Similarly, Lungu

maintained support in the east and north of the country that has been crucial for the PF's support in recent election cycles. Nonetheless, Hichilema increased his support in all provinces, including those where he finished runner up. Crucially, the two most populous and predominantly urban provinces, Copperbelt and Lusaka, swung in favour of UPND. The PF had won the presidential vote in these two provinces in every election from 2006 to 2016. Resnick (2014) argued that the increase in urban poverty amidst economic growth had created political demands that Sata addressed, using populist mobilisation strategies in the early and mid-2000s. The failure of the PF to retain these provinces in 2021 suggests that urban voters were not satisfied with the party's ten-year record in power.

In the parliamentary elections, UPND won 82 of the 156 seats. It won seats in eight of the ten provinces, excepting Luapula and Muchinga. It also won seats in Eastern and Northern provinces for the first time since the formation of the party in 1998. Further, the UPND also won urban seats in Copperbelt province for the first time, having previously won in rural parts of the province only. In total, the UPND gained 24 seats more than its total in 2016. The PF won 59 seats, a drop of 21 from its total in 2016. The seats won were in seven provinces, excluding North-Western, Western and Southern provinces. The Party for National Unity and Progress (PNUP) won a single seat in Western Province. The party, which was led by a former UPND parliamentarian, benefited from the UPND's failure to field a candidate in Nalolo constituency. The UPND candidate had failed to fill in his nomination to stand as a candidate after failing to produce all the documents required by the ECZ (Mofya 2021). This further demonstrates the unpopularity of PF in Western Province, which failed to win the Nalolo seat in the absence of a UPND candidate.

The MMD and the Forum for Democracy and Development had both won seats in 2016 but failed to win any in 2021. Meanwhile, 13 independents won seats, most of whom were candidates who had lost the primaries to contest elections as PF candidates. A parliamentary election in Eastern Province was deferred to 21 October 2021, following the death of an aspiring candidate before 12 August.

**Table 4: Distribution of parliamentary results**

Party	Number of seats won	Net change from 2016
United Party for National Development	82	+24
Patriotic Front	59	-21
Party for National Unity and Progress	1	+1
Independents	13	-1

**Source:** Electoral Commission of Zambia

*Strategies of the UPND in the 2021 Election*

Beardsworth (2020) demonstrates that the UPND benefited greatly from national political realignments after the defeat of the MMD and election of the PF in 2011. On the one hand, major shifts occurred within the MMD after the party's unanticipated loss. On the other hand, the death of Sata in 2014 created divisions within the ruling PF. From 2011 to 2014, Hichilema communicated with various political heavyweights from across the political spectrum, and built an informal alliance that included the UPND, a faction of the MMD, disgruntled PF heavyweights, and leaders of smaller political parties (Beardsworth 2020, pp. 44-45). Divisions within the MMD were particularly conducive for the growth of the UPND. The MMD contested the 2015 presidential election divided into three main factions. The first included MPs who preferred an alliance between MMD and UPND, with Hichilema as leader. The second, comprising MPs predominantly from Eastern Province, supported Rupiah Banda's return to active politics. However, Banda was unable to represent the party in the 2015 election after party president, Nevers Mumba, won a court case allowing him to be the party candidate. Curiously, Banda's faction backed Lungu and the PF, rather than supporting Mumba or joining the alliance with UPND. It is noteworthy that Banda and Lungu are both from Eastern Province.

The collapse of the MMD in 2015 created a de facto two-party dominant political system. The political realignments also exacerbated the salience of ethnicity and regional voting patterns. MMD party structures in the western and southern half of the country merged with the UPND. Similarly, MMD party structures in the eastern and northern half of the country merged with the PF. Going into the 2021 election, it was evident that both parties would benefit from their ethno-regional support. What was less clear was whether the two urban provinces, including the multi-lingual Lusaka, would maintain their support for the PF.

The collapse of the economy presented Hichilema with a key issue to address. The PF's failure to manage the economy had implications for jobs, the cost of living, and income gaps, among others. These issues affected young voters, especially those between 18 and 24 years. Hichilema mobilised the urban and youth vote using at least three strategies. First, the UPND enlisted its foot soldiers (also known as party cadres) to conduct door-to-door campaigns, especially in the high-density urban slums. Despite constant threats of political violence, UPND cadres conducted their campaigns using what they referred to as the 'watermelon strategy'. This strategy was first developed in 2016 as a counter to political violence and was also adapted in 2021. It involved UPND members wearing green outer garments (the colour used by PF), while concealing red under garments or t-shirts

(the colour of the UPND). In this way, UPND cadres conducted campaigns by disguising their true political identities.

Second, the de facto two-party system allowed him to present the UPND as the only alternative to the PF. The fact that fourteen of the sixteen presidential candidates who participated in the election obtained less than 1% of valid votes cast, demonstrates that voters recognised that the UPND was the obvious alternative to the PF. Even though campaign rallies were banned, Hichilema effectively used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to canvass support. The UPND leader embarked on a tour to distribute face masks across the country as part of his campaign. The events, which included a small entourage of vehicles, attracted scores of Zambians in various parts of the country who came out to see him. The events were streamed live on Hichilema's social media accounts where he had more than a million followers.

Third, Hichilema presented himself as the candidate best suited to address the economy and the concerns of the urban youth – which included demands for an adequate bursary system for tertiary education students. He did this in two ways. First, he drew on his experience as an economist, corporate businessman and commercial farmer to demonstrate that he understood economic management better than Lungu. Second, his connection to young voters on social media earned him the nickname 'Bally', a slang term for 'father' commonly used by urban youth in Zambia. This led to popular campaign phrases such as 'Bally will fix it', referring to his promises to address the economy, and 'Bally will pay', referring to his promises to address student bursaries.

## CONCLUSION

Zambia's 2021 elections resulted in the third alternation of power between a ruling party and the opposition since the democratic wave of the early 1990s. The opposition UPND won the presidential vote in the first round, avoiding the need for a run-off. This paper argues that there was a 'silent revolution' in Zambia prior to polling day. Under the PF, Zambia's democratic space had closed, and state institutions were used to create an uneven electoral playing field that disadvantaged the opposition. The main opposition was intimidated from mobilising freely, especially in urban areas. Further, an Afrobarometer survey conducted in December 2020 showed that half of all respondents were unwilling to declare who they would vote for.

Nevertheless, the Afrobarometer survey showed that Zambians had lost confidence in the PF's handling of the economy and its democratic governance. It is also clear from the data that Zambian citizens strongly supported the idea of having a democratic government in preference to other forms of government.

It is noteworthy that the country had experienced two previous alterations in power, the most recent in 2011, yet the quality of democracy declined rather than improved. Wahman (2014) observed that in countries where opposition parties won unfair elections, newly-elected leaders were less likely to implement reforms that would strengthen institutions and consolidate democracy. Rather, newly-elected parties sought to enjoy the benefits of incumbency their predecessors had enjoyed and further undermined democracy.

The election of the UPND in Zambia suggests that citizens expect better economic management and democratic governance. It remains to be seen if Hichilema's administration will implement reforms that will promote democracy and stabilise the economy. What is clear, however, is that support for the new ruling party will be precarious in some regions, especially in urban areas which have been historically volatile for incumbents. The salience of both ethnic and regional voting patterns also means that, in the absence of meaningful reforms, the UPND may struggle to significantly broaden its support in the east and north of the country.

Elections in Zambia also have implications for the rest of the region. The 2021 results show that authoritarian rule and poor economic management are not sufficient to sustain support for ruling parties. Elsewhere in the region, Malawi also experienced alternation in power between the ruling party and main opposition in 2020. The Malawian case also demonstrated the extent to which citizens – who held countrywide protests to challenge the credibility of the first round of the vote held in 2019 – were able to change government even in the face of compromised institutions, including the electoral commission. Taken together, Malawi and Zambia show that voters can change government even amid increased political violence and oppression, and general decline in the quality of democracy.

In the Zambian case, voters did not publicly advocate for change during the campaign period but turned up in large numbers for the August 2021 election, and voted for change. The extent of the PF's defeat despite enjoying a wide range of incumbent benefits, which also suppressed the UPND's campaign efforts, suggests that Zambia experienced a silent revolution.

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