

Rethinking Youth Civic Engagement and Political Participation in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article explores power shifts in Zimbabwe post November 2017's military assisted transition and its bearing on youth engagement in civic and political participation. The article further discusses youth engagement and participation as crucial in a country that has a significantly high youth population which has been disfranchised by political upheavals that have resulted in a polarised society with multiple socio-economic challenges. The article shares interventions that can be appropriate in scaling up youth agency in the making of a new political culture for Zimbabwe. Although political continuities such as intimidation and unabated state control of the public media are visible, there are also emerging opportunities for improved youth participation in civic and political processes such as creation of new spaces for youth engagement and renewed interest in political participation amongst youth both as candidates and voters. Acknowledging that Zimbabwe stands in a space where it can either consolidate the role of the youth or further obscure them from political participation, the article makes submissions on how the emerging political culture where youth are taking centre stage can be sustained if focus is given on issues rather than partisan interests.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Youth, Participation, Civic Engagement, Power

Introduction

This paper primarily seeks to explore how recent power shifts in Zimbabwe have a bearing on youth engagement in civic and political participation. Zimbabwe is a country that has undergone many political oscillations most of which have resulted in the shrinking of political space and a disengaged youth. Political space by characterisation has been discussed as exclusionary, a zero-sum concept where one actor (usually the state) gains or losses at the expense of other actors (Müller, 2018). With the way contestations for political space go, disengagement of young people from politics is not a new phenomenon.

Following decades of dominance of two key personalities in the two main political parties, the shifts in leadership in both the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the main opposition party the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) seems to have triggered increased youth participation in

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civic and political matters. Parallel to the conception of Sakil (2018), youth in Zimbabwe have for long been branded “Born Frees” with no legitimate claim on the socio-political and economic character of the country. Youth were generally viewed as citizens in the future and the government saw its mandate as discovering how to develop the appropriate skills for their future roles as citizens. In events leading to November 2017, the youth seemed to have redefined their position and claimed to be counted as citizens of now with demand for key elements of citizenship to be incorporated into their lives as youth. The paper specifically locates its discussion in the period between the build-up to November 2017 events and July 2018 just before the elections that have been considered as a critical election. November 2017 saw the country’s founding President Robert Mugabe being ousted and replaced by one of his vice presidents Emmerson Mnangagwa through what Crises Group Africa (2017) defines as a military assisted transition. In February 2018, another significant shift in Zimbabwe’s political landscape happened following the death of Morgan Tsvangirai the founding leader of the opposition MDC and a long-time political rival to Mugabe who was then replaced by one of his three vice presidents Nelson Chamisa.

Youth Civic and Political Participation in Zimbabwe

The past few decades have witnessed growing interest in the civic domain as a key aspect of [youth] development. This growth has been spurred by several factors, including an increased recognition of civic identity development as a central task of [youth] (Godfrey and Cherng, 2016). Most studies as noted by Varela et al (2015) show that young people have decreased their conventional political participation with respect to previous generations and partly this is attributed to lack of civic responsibility (Ames, 2013).

Youth in Zimbabwe constitute a big demographic cohort. According to the *Zimbabwe 2012 population Census*, people under 35 constitute 75% of the country’s population and youth aged 15-34 years number 4 702 046 which constitutes 36% of the national population. Even though youth are a significant majority, Zimbabwe’s civic and political participation has been dominated by much older people.

Besides general apathy in elections and other democratic processes, Zimbabwe has historically recorded low voter turnout of youth (Musarurwa, 2018) and low levels of participation in other decision-making processes (YETT, 2013). Some of the reasons why youth have not effectively participated in civic and political space include internal factors such as limited time and commitment to attend community meetings regularly due to their preoccupation with livelihood issues, lack of knowledge and skills on how to get involved in decision making processes and the lack of tolerance for the bureaucratic and customary practices involved in formal decision-making platforms (ibid).

The multiple external factors that affect the youth from participating include the practice of gerontocracy, patriarchy, and patronage by seniors at both community and national level; also, youth disillusionment with leadership failure and lack of visible youth representation in leadership positions, economic resource constraints and discrimination against youth from leadership and participation on the basis of disability, ethnicity, regionalism and autochthony. The situation is worse for marginalized groups, such as young women and PLWD, who are discriminated against at family, community and national level when they aspire to occupy leadership positions (YETT, 2017).

The long history of youth exclusion in civic and political participation in Zimbabwe resulted in the emergence of alternative ways and spaces to express their dissatisfaction. When frustration reaches high levels, it turns into civil disobedience and violence. At the height of political repression and increased relevance of social media as a platform for political expression, Zimbabwe witnessed the rise of youth led social movements *#Tajamuka/Sesijikile*¹ and *#Thisflag*². Though initially blamed as “*armchair revolutions*” and “*clickvism*” which connoted that the campaigns would bear no fruit, these two movements remain emblematic to a shifting political culture in Zimbabwe. This assertion is in tandem to conclusions drawn by Kim *et al* (2017) that, among late adolescents, online participation serves as a gateway to offline participation. However, among young adults, offline participation spills over into online participation. Kim’s findings indicate the positive potential of online political participation in youth’s political lives and highlight the need to focus on their developmental stages.

These movements symbolised alternative space for youth expression and engagement in civic and political participation. Although the social movements were simply concluded as protest driven, they are a new form of political organisation. Eze and Obono (2018) note that the political scene is witnessing a transformation whereby young people may not necessarily belong to political parties nor take part in formal political debates but rather engage in movements and networks. McAllister (2016) quoting Bennett (2011) distinguishes between ‘dutiful citizenship’, which stresses political participation in formal institutions driven by personal duty, and ‘actualizing citizenship’, which is based on ‘looser personal engagement with peer networks that...organize civic action using social technologies. He went on to outline Dalton (2008)’s discourse of the transition from ‘citizen-oriented’ to ‘cause-oriented’ activism, while distinguishes between ‘citizen duty’ and ‘engaged citizenship’.

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Methodology

Methodologically, the paper draws on interview, observation and survey data collected between September 2017 and July 2018. As a Youth Advisor for Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT),³ the author was responsible for youth focused environmental scans, conversations with youth and participation in platforms which have provided some key information utilised in this paper.

A core focus of the paper is on two studies that YETT carried out in 2017 and 2018. The first study is an Assessment of Issues Influencing Youth Participation in Elections and Decision Making in Zimbabwe, which was done in 2017. The assessment used a mixed methods approach, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, to understand the complex issues that affect Zimbabwean youth's participation in electoral processes. The study used an opinion survey, key informant interviews and focus group discussions that were administered through fieldwork research that was conducted in the country's 10 administrative provinces as well as review primary and secondary data. The study had the participation of 624 respondents. The second study is a Youth Analysis study that sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the context in which young Zimbabweans are living which was done in 2018 (just before the country's harmonised elections). The Youth analysis used non-experimental, mixed methods, exploratory, participatory design. The study utilized non-probability sampling techniques specifically purposive sampling including typical case sampling and expert case sampling. The study consulted more than 530 respondents from 9 administrative provinces out of the 10.

The research results from the two studies presented in this paper, combined with insights from key informants, literature review, information from continued assessment of the environment and observations, provides a unique vantage point from which to analyse the prospects and challenges of youth agency in the shaping of a new political culture in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is nested in the positive youth development theory. This theory contrasts those that have focused on problems experienced by youth as they grow up by looking at the capabilities, developmental potentials, and in increasing thriving behaviours of youth rather than on their deficiencies (Damon, 2004:14) By looking at the positive youth development this study will propose some of the critical aspects to consider ensuring that youth participate positively in civic and political engagement. In essence, this theory addresses young people from a balanced and positive perspective, as it views them as resources rather than problems. The paper also looks at youth civic and political participation from the lenses of the Advocacy theory which argues that social problems emanate from inequitable distribution of power and resources. Using the

Advocacy theory, the paper argues that the exclusion of young people from civic and political spaces is caused by politicians who are more powerful and consider the active participation of youth as a threat. The paper presents some of the approaches that can be followed in creating and sustaining space for youth to participate in civic and political processes.

Prospects and Challenges of youth civic and political participation post November 2017

In 2017, at the peak of its factional battles, ZANU PF was split between two main factions with one that presented it as pushing for among other things a “generational renewal” agenda. Named G40 for Generation 40, this faction in ZANU PF was pushing for the younger generation in the party to become central figures rather than the older cadres whose entitlement to lead was mainly based on their participation in the liberation struggle for the country’s independence. It seemed imminent that the G40 was making inroads, but the factional battles took a twist and the Military backed and older generation of the party which was grouped under the name Lacoste took over the reign in November 2017 and Zimbabwe witnessed a political transition that resulted in the ousting of President Mugabe. Apart from the factional wars and power struggles, one significant event leading to the eventual resignation of Mugabe was an Anti-Mugabe solidarity march that took place on the 18th of November 2017. A significant feature of this historic march was the outpouring of youth. YETT through its observation and interviews with youth noted that the majority of youth who participated in the march rallied behind the idea of “being Zimbabwean” as was represented by the national flag that most wore instead of political party regalia. The march for the majority of youth was “...not an endorsement of the army or anyone but an expression on the need for a new political culture and a celebration not just of the departure of Mugabe but the death of a culture of repression and holding on to state power” (Interview 21.11.2017).⁴

As political events in the ruling party unfolded, the health of late opposition leader of MDC Morgan Tsvangirai deteriorated and in February he succumbed leaving a leadership vacuum in Zimbabwe’s main opposition party. The opposition equally entangled in some factional fights was not at its strongest and “...some youth in the party felt that the best foot forward for the party was for the younger generation to take over” (Mukono, 18.5.2018).⁵ The need for a generational shift became a rallying point and an outfit consisting of activists led what was to become known as the *Generational Consensus* which eventually became a unifier for the younger generation in the opposition. “Nelson Chamisa at the age of 40 became the natural choice to represent this call by the youth in the opposition” (ibid).

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The above highly summarised political developments in the two main political parties might not necessarily be interconnected but they strongly influenced a shift in the role of young people in the political development of the country. The idea of generational renewal or consensus encapsulates the need to rethink the role that young people can play in shaping a new political culture in Zimbabwe. Post November 2017, Zimbabwe has witnessed some developments that present both prospects and challenges to youth civic and political participation which are further detailed below.

Prospects

New faces on the political stage

Youth apathy in pre-November Zimbabwe was partly driven by a political environment that did not pave for a free and fair election and predictable electoral result especially for the Presidency. Although youth amounted to about 41% of the eligible voters, they only constitute 14% of the registered voters in 2013 elections (YETT, 2017). The ascendance of Emmerson Mnangagwa to the country's presidency made youth for the first time actualise the idea of leadership renewal and the possibility of change. The immediate need for legitimacy of the Mnangagwa's president also necessitated an election that should get internal and external endorsement as free, fair and credible. On the opposite side of the political divide, the emergence of Nelson Chamisa as the MDC's president ignited interest in some young people who for the first time had a political candidate that they could identify with and relate to. Also, for the first time in the history of the country, there were unprecedented number of independent candidates and 23 presidential candidates. Although the high number of presidential candidates had its own drawbacks, for the majority of young people it was the only time they came to see an election that was not divided between two main rivals. Resultantly youth registered voters surged to 43.5% after the 2018 Biometric Voter Registration.

A seemingly reform agenda

After assuming power, the Mnangagwa's administration presented itself as reformist and this saw an increased consciousness on the need for reform in the country which is critical in shaping a constitutional democracy. After assuming power, the government of Mnangagwa signed some critical pieces of legislation that have facilitated improved civic participation, and these include the National Peace and Reconciliation Act and Electoral Amendment Bill. Although some reforms have been made, the reforms will only be relevant if accompanied by practice change to ensure meaningful change in the political culture. Youth because of their numbers hold a significant role in the reform agenda as they can leverage on their numbers, presence on social media and appetite for a better political environment to lobby government for both legal and practice reforms.

Social Media becoming main-stream

Statistics from the International Telecommunications Union show that 45% of the world's Internet users are below the age of 25, suggesting both an early surge by the young to access the Internet as well as a large potential group of users still to be connected (Abebe, 2011). Social media on the other hand has added a new dimension to the role of the internet in shaping political knowledge. The interactive nature of the social media is often seen to represent its greatest potential, by facilitating discussions between citizens on issues of mutual interest, and between citizens and election candidates (McAllister, 2016).

The role of social media in Zimbabwe has been contested so is its influence on critical debates that relate to politics and governance. Essentially, social media was viewed under the Mugabe regime as a medium for protest, oppositional politics and anti-government sentiments. In the same way it restrained media freedoms, the regime did not embrace new media as presenting a platform to promote citizens to participate and debate on issues of politics, governance and demanding public accountability from public institutions. The Mugabe government's response to the growing influence of social media has mostly been that of intimidation and threats rather than embracing the opportunities that the new media offers for engaging with citizens (TechZim 6.6.16).

The government of Emmerson Mnangagwa seem to have been forced by context to shift its opinions on social media. They seem to have noted that, just as human history, democracy and the public sphere are also dynamic entities (Erkan, 2018). The president has since embraced social media as a platform for expression and has gone on to authenticate Facebook and Twitter accounts where he has encouraged citizen engagement and has been engaging especially with youth.

Outside its use by those in political power, social media has for most citizens become mainstream as most official news is being accessed on social media. With youth's high presence and participation on social media and reduced data tariffs in the country there is increased number of youth participating in civic and political matters through social media. Recent development in Zimbabwe are consistent with Erkan's argument that political participation will become easier and higher than it has ever been in history as electronic/digital communication tools become more widespread, which in turn will spread and deepen democracy. However, even though social media presents some prospects, YETT (2017) noted that although youth acknowledge the growing importance of social media in their lives, youth from both rural and urban areas emphasised their limited trust in social media news due to rampant abuse of social media in the recent past.

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Reduced cases of Violence and Intimidation

YETT (2017) noted that among the key factors negatively affecting youth participation in elections and other decision-making processes is politically motivated violence. 76.6% of youth indicated that violence plays a key role in affecting their participation in elections. The deployment of violence during election campaigning has not only led to a general aversion of politics among the youth, especially among vulnerable groups like young women and people with disability, but also led youth to shun elections. The youth cited violence as a key factor negatively affecting their willingness to stand as candidates in elections or even goes on to vote.

Since assuming power in November 2017, the new administration made various calls for peace including signing of a peace pledge that the 23 contesting presidential candidates endorsed. The administration also set up special courts to deal with cases of political violence. Further, a special committee made up of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC), National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), ZEC and the police was set up to facilitate the swift handling of political violence cases ahead of the 2018 elections. With this environment of reduced political violence, youth participation has significantly increased during the pre-election environment and this presents potential for sustained participation if the government does not recede back to its default culture of violence and intimidation.

Renewed Citizen Activism

Youth participation in civic and political matters has been endured through activism and most recently social media and any positive signs on improving citizen activism will improve youth engagement and participation. Post November 2017, the new administration relaxed the state's apparatus responsible for prohibiting citizen engagement and participation. As a result of these relaxations, numerous citizen groups have managed to freely express their views on various governance issues.

A wave of citizens' protests related to poor service delivery, working conditions, remuneration, and the worsening economic situation have occurred since November 2017. In February 2018, thousands of women in Hwange freely demonstrated for weeks demanding three-year salary arrears from Hwange Colliery Mine. Similarly, junior doctors held a month-long strike against the government demanding improved remuneration and working conditions. The strike paralysed the public health delivery system and ended after the government complied with doctors' demands. In another case, the government displayed its ability to listen to citizen voices when a decision to ban minibuses from getting into the city centre by the Harare City Council was reversed following a public protest (PACT, 2018).

This renewed citizen activism through exercise of fundamental freedoms presents a great opportunity to reconfigure youth engagement in civic and political spaces which includes pressing for post-election accountability. Youth organisations including YETT have taken advantage of the opening up of space to host multiple dialogues and debates which have given unprecedented space for youth to interrogate key electoral stakeholders and prospective candidates. There is a potential benefit in turning the activist into citizen engagement which is defined by Varela et al (2015) as working to promote the quality of life of the community through political and non-political processes and involves the development of knowledge (eg, rights), skills (eg, communication), values (eg, responsibility), and the motivation (eg, political efficacy) to make this difference.

Challenges

Weakening Intra-party democracy

According to Matlosa (2007), political parties are in the business of contesting and capturing state power through peaceful means. This role therefore makes them important institutions in the quest for democratic societies. As much as democracy at a national level matters, intra-party democracy is as equally important. Quoting Maravall (2008:158), Magolowondo (2012) defines intra-party democracy as 'the capacity of party members to control their leaders'. Using this definition, it is increasingly becoming difficult to note any form of intra-party or internal democracy within the main political establishments in Zimbabwe. Rocked by factionalism and dismissals of party members especially those that challenge the political leadership, the main political parties in Zimbabwe have denigrated into autocratic and authoritarian parties where a single centre of power is not challenged. Although some within these parties have argued that the internal conflicts are in themselves a reflection of a democratic culture, what is missing from this justification is a clear process in which members who seek for accountability from their leaders are protected and even encouraged to do so.

Besides internal democracy promoting accountability, another key feature it promotes is responsiveness. Such responsiveness is not just over issues that political leaders agree to but even those that they might not assent to. However, in the current political dispensation challenging the political leaders has resulted in a lot of cases where party officials (including highly ranked ones) have being sacked from the party.

The issue is not just on the benefits that political parties accrue from strengthening their own intra-party democracy, but importantly what the lack thereof means to youth participation. Zimbabwe's huge youth cohort is looking for political establishments that respects and promotes their participation. The relevance of material benefits and patronage networks is losing grip with younger voters

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demanding for more open and participatory systems. Simply, the youth electorate wants to be involved and trust that their views are respected. With the youth's desire to be active citizens than just voters, political parties need to rethink their approach to democracy and this starts with them reorienting themselves to the concept of intra-party democracy. As Inglehart (1997) observed, democracy is not just a question of elite-level arrangements; the basic cultural orientations of the citizens also play a crucial role in its survival.

Elections without Democracy

In new or weakly institutionalised democratic systems, elections represent a form of crisis, testing the strength of institutions established to secure fair and peaceful political succession and representation (Gloppen and Kanyongolo, 2012). Zimbabwe is considered as a democratic country because it regularly holds elections. Unfortunately, without the relevant institutions, elections have not been able to deliver the anticipated democratic outcome but merely contested or negotiated legitimacy, which has resulted in a much polarised society with huge divide between the urbanites and the rural folk.

Although some electoral reforms have been made, there is still some outstanding reforms that ensure that Zimbabwe improves on its political culture and delivers a more democratic election and these include the independence of the ZEC, 40% of whose secretariat are either serving or retired members of the military, promoting free and equal access to public media by all contesting political parties; further reforms to the electoral act, the repeal of POSA and the AIPPA which forbid fundamental freedoms of speech and assembly including access to media.

Few weeks towards the July 2018 elections, a general fear among youth was that Zimbabwe was headed towards elections, which might not offer the country the needed democracy. This is based partly on the outstanding reforms, the military's involvement in the elections and merely the short time and limited political will to implement some of the reforms that have been made. Zimbabwe could also be headed towards a version of what Wilkin (2018) calls a form of illiberalism where the formal mechanisms of liberal politics remain (elections, a judiciary, a free press, the rule of law), but where the political system has been reorganised in a way that gives the government authoritarian power on a variety of levels.

Inadequate voter engagement

With three weeks to the elections, YETT through pre-election dialogues with youth noted that there were still some glaring knowledge gaps on how the election process was to be conducted with some thinking that it was a biometric or a hybrid and not ballot paper voting. The failure by election stakeholders, including the electoral

management bodies, political parties and civil society, to provide the youth with enough information about elections, especially information that speaks to the unique needs of the youth during voter mobilization and education campaigns is one of the key reasons that could threaten youth participation in the upcoming elections and subsequent decision-making processes. Asked if political parties, ZEC, CSOs, traditional and church leaders, radio and newspapers were giving enough information to promote youth voter registration in the 2018 elections, 57.7% of the youth thought that government and ZEC were either doing nothing or very little, while 58.5% thought the same about CSOs, and 65.5% held similar views about voter education initiatives by political parties (YETT, 2017).

Youth's disengagement from elections in Zimbabwe is partly due to the failure by election management bodies like ZEC to create favourable conditions for the youth to register and vote. Youth did not express concern only about ZEC failing to provide enough information about elections, but also about how ZEC fails to package its information in ways that appeal to the youth. The youth also raised concern on ZEC's failure to engage the youth in their 'own youth spaces' and through their 'own modes or language of communication'. They particularly complained that ZEC often locates its voter registration centres and polling stations in places that are not convenient to them as youth. Youth prefer voter registration centres to be located next to those spaces where they spend time hustling for survival such as vendors' trading markets, vegetable markets, informal industries, saloons and transport ranks or areas where the youth try to relax like shopping malls, bottle stores and nightclubs so that they do not waste too much time travelling to register or vote (YETT, 2017).

Continued Youth Apathy towards voting

There is still some risk of continued youth apathy, albeit mostly towards elections. The Afrobarometer-MPOI (2018) survey revealed that the voting intentions of 26% (almost 1 and a half million) of the voters is unknown. A breakdown of the statics by age further reveals that the youth (18-35) constitute the greatest percentage of these uncommitted voters (43%). These statistics do not just indicate that the majority of the uncommitted voters are youth but connotes continued youth apathy. Not knowing one's voting intentions and not pledging to vote a month away from the election might indicate that one might not vote. Costa *et al* (2018) noted that pledging to vote increased voter turnout by 3.7 points among all subjects and 5.6 points for people who had never voted before.

Messaging from opposition parties and some election focused CSOs on challenging the credibility of the Electoral Commission so close to the election diverged from increasing confidence and pledge to vote amongst youth. Although it is within the right

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and duty of such stakeholders to challenge the credibility of the commission, doing so especially closer to an election reinforced the long-held belief by the youth that elections in Zimbabwe are a futile exercise and is likely to have discouraged youth from voting. Continued political contestations on the credibility of the electoral commission pose a greater risk in pushing youth away from the electoral process, as Park in McAllister (2016) notes; youth are also less interested in major political issues or party-political agendas, focusing instead on individual concerns or on issues of specific interest to their peer group.

There is a general fear that low levels of youth participation in elections have a bearing on their eventual participation in post electoral engagements. Although elections offer legitimacy for the candidates, it is emerging that they also form bases for legitimacy for the electorate to actively engage in post electoral decision-making and accountability processes because they feel they have the obligation and reason to do so. Indeed, electorate stands at a better place to demand the delivery of political goods when they participate in the electoral process in numbers. However, there has even been a fretting narrative that “Don’t complain if you don’t vote”.

If youth who constitute 43.5% of the registered voters fail to participate in the 2018 election, there will be some obvious acceptability questions for the winners. The party that eventually gains control of government will always have questions from the biggest cohort of the demography. In line with this view, Mususa (2017) notes that “...(exclusion) of such huge numbers of dubiously disenfranchised Zimbabweans is an inaccurate record of the eligible voters, and, inevitably, the elections conducted ... are an invalid claim of the Zimbabweans’ choice of leaders”.

Limited participation in public policy formulation and low Knowledge levels on policies

If a new political culture of engaged youth is to be possible in Zimbabwe, there is need to address limited participation of youth in public policy formulation and tackle the dearth of knowledge of existing policies amongst the youth. A 2013 study by Restless Development noted that only 22% of the young people indicated being aware of the National Youth Policy. Analysis by gender shows that 24% of the male population as compared to 19% of the female population are aware of the youth policy. Current governmental initiatives emphasise the need for a form of citizenship education that focuses on knowledge of the constitutional order and the obligations of citizens (Roche and Tucke, 2012). With limited participation and low knowledge levels of existing policies, household as well as national level decisions are not reflective of and do not resonate with priorities of young people. Another key challenge on effective participation of young people in the implementation of policies is partisan policy implementation. YETT has documented concerns of young people around conflation

between the state and ZANU-PF as the ruling party. Youth hold perceptions that policy formulation and implementation in Zimbabwe is partisan and exclusionary.

Reimagining youth civic and political participation

Post November 2017, Zimbabwe yet again stood at the crossroads. There seem to be an emerging political culture in Zimbabwe. Although there is some political continuity, there also are some emerging opportunities for improved youth participation in civic and political processes. However, for there to be sustained progression towards a more positive political culture with increased space for youth to participate, there is need for specific considerations. Some of the options that can be followed through include mainstreaming youth participation, supporting youth candidates for political office, developing structures and spaces for youth participation and ensuring that youth turnout for elections.

Mainstreaming youth participation

Zimbabwe needs to promote a new political culture that promotes participation of youth, minority groups and those who demonstrate alternative views. Challenges related to limited participation transcend political spheres and have permeated all facets of the Zimbabwean society. Even though there are some youth leaders emerging in politics, the 2018 presidential campaign demonstrated an attempt to characterize youth as excitable, immature, inexperienced and therefore not fit to participate in civic processes. Adaptation of youth mainstreaming models is critical in providing guidance on approaches for addressing multi-faceted challenges facing youth. While there is consensus on the issues facing youth, few actors demonstrate capacity, resources and tools for strategic interventions that respond to this. Youth engagement should be preceded by development and popularisation of a model that provides basic guidance on how to address challenges facing youth. Young people need to be included; socially resuscitated through exposure to the ideas and ideals of citizenship, stake-holding, and the development of individual rights and responsibilities. What is thus called for is a renewed commitment to a 'moral strategy' for youth; young people need to be better exposed to ideas of social responsibility, discussions around citizenship need to emphasise not only their rights but also their obligations (Roche and Tucke, 2012).

Supporting youth candidature for elections

Currently only 3% of the members of parliament in Zimbabwe are under 30 (Inter-parliament Union, 2016) with the youngest Cabinet minister being 40 years old. Legally, Chapter Five of the Zimbabwean Constitution, section 125 (1) (b), states that a person is qualified for election as a member of the National Assembly if he or she is at least 21 years of age. Similarly, Part 119 of the Electoral Act states that only a person

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who has attained 21 years is eligible to stand for election as a councillor. To stand in as a presidential candidate one has to be at least 40 years old.

One strategy to promote more young people to stand in as candidates will be to localise global campaigns and social movements that resonate with Zimbabwe's realities. An example is the Global action on *Not too young to run* which is an open campaign that support young people's right to run for office. According to Beck in Varela (2017) the participation of global processes that transcend national sovereignty would make the motivations of young people more from person to world and less from citizen to nation. Leveraging on global and regional campaigns and movements can provide solidarity and encourage more young people to participate and influence how they are governed. As De Winter (1997: 24) argues, we need to recognise the potential capacities of young people and the contributions they make to society. He explicitly outlines the linkage between participation and citizenship in the following terms, 'in practice this comes down to regarding children and youngsters as fellow citizens, people whose share in society is appreciated and stimulated because of the constructive contribution they are able to make'. In line with this argument, increasing the number of youth who participate as candidates for elections is essential in improving the active citizen participation of young people in key decision-making spaces. As a representative democracy, parliament of Zimbabwe plays a key role and if issues of youth are to find traction there is need for youth to be part of the representatives that sit in parliament.

Development of structures and Spaces for youth participation

Currently there are limited to no clear structures and platforms for youth to participate and engage in civic and political processes. This is critical in a context where civic space was traditionally closed and personal freedoms were often denied. Discourse around participation has predominantly been driven by Civil Society Organisations. The fact that CSOs have had a predominantly adversarial relationship with Government means their reach has often been constrained. Another challenge is the absence of recreational spaces, which is an impediment to their participation in civic processes. In the absence of recreational spaces, youth only converge at the instigation of power holders who will often be pursuing their own agenda. Overall, youth lack the means and space to converge as well as to come up with consensus positions on their priorities. As Roche and Tucke (2012) argue, the main priority has to be that of seeing how young people can be centrally involved in shaping the health, social care and education services that have an impact on their lives. Broad participation is required to ensure that youth participation is actualised in Zimbabwe so as to consolidate the idea or "real" participation over "perceived" participation given fears that as soon as political leaders gain access to power they will regress to their default mode of excluding young people. Already there is a high sense of "betrayal" amongst youth

who took an active role in the November events with the hope that their reality will transform with the downfall of President Mugabe.

There are opportunities for implementing ICT based interventions due to their resource efficiency. This can be done through drawing linkages to community conditions which can be further corroborated by human interest stories. As Sakil (2018) notes one of the most difficult barriers has been to devise clear strategies and proven mechanisms for effective engagement of youth in governance processes. The fast-moving field [of ICTs] is to an important extent in the hands of youth and the development of new applications poses a challenge for local governments unlike any of the major trends in the past 40 years including environment, gender, sustainability and indeed good governance itself. Governments will need to add basic operational aspects of information and communication technology (ICT) to curriculum in training to get up to speed with the growing digital literacy of youthful constituents.

Ensuring that youth turnout for elections

If the huge number of youth register and vote, the youth will assume the power of being a swing vote. By assuming this position, the political parties that will participate in elections will be obligated to put youth issues at the centre of their political agenda. The youth will equally have power to shape key demands that political parties should consider if they are to gain their support.

Politics as a game of numbers, is won by the number of people behind any action be it voting or a resistance campaign. If youth are well mobilised and are to participate in any post-election nonviolent resistance, they will pivot power to themselves. As noted by Camus (2013), a critical source of the success of nonviolent resistance is mass participation, which can erode a regime's main source of power. He goes on to argue that all resistance campaigns-violent and nonviolent- seek to build the personnel bases of their campaign. Personnel are recruited for their special skills, knowledge, materials, resources and their willingness to fight and support the resistance. In an environment dominated by social media, global solidarity and demand for a generation of new leaders-youth will assume centre stage in any meaningful post-election campaigns.

There is need to rethink on strategies to get the youth to vote and ways of ensuring youth participation. As outlined above in this paper, there is a fundamental change in the nature of citizenship which is demonstrated most forcefully by declining election turnout among the young (McAllister 2016). There has been an historic disparity between the turnout rates of the youngest and oldest age groups. A novel strategy that can be explored to encourage more youth participation in elections is that of allowing and encouraging youth to register vote earlier before they turn 18 years

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which is the legal age that one can vote. Costa et al (2018) notes some evidence that suggests allowing young citizens to register to vote before they are actually eligible diminishes their chances of missing registration deadline and can increase youth turnout.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's political culture is constantly shifting. Post November 2017, Zimbabwe has redefined the role and agency of youth and the political environment presents opportunities for increased participation of youth in civic and political spaces. There are multiple platforms for engaging youth and these include physical, abstract and virtual spaces. The study draws parallels with Erkan's (2018) assertion that the network society created by new media will make political mobilization easier and make government units transparent and accountable, although not a fact but is a convincing possibility that deserves to be taken seriously. Political parties are key platforms for engaging youth as voters as well as leaders but in their current setup in Zimbabwe, they will not be able to attract a new form of citizen who is not just partisan but rather "*issue (san)*". Social media has increasingly become a key platform for dialogue and its relative freedom and virtual interactivity makes it attractive for youth who have predominantly been exposed to limited freedom of speech. Government being the primary duty bearer, has failed to develop interventions that respond to issues of youth in the immediate and long term and youth mainstreaming needs to be prioritised. Instead of supporting youth as a development priority, support to youth is often provided as part of campaign strategies during election times and if a new political culture is to be sustained this has to change. Civil Society Organisations can play a key role in providing civic education as well as participation of youth in public policy formulation and such efforts should be sustained. There is need for clear structures supporting and facilitating youth participating and engagement that are driven and supported by multiple stakeholders.

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Notes

1. The Tajamuka/Sesijikile Campaign was a youth movement that sought to address problems affecting the youth in Zimbabwe.
2. This flag on the other hand was a campaign defined as a movement dedicated to empowering and partnering citizens of Zimbabwe to be engaged and active in the national issues that affect their livelihood.
3. The Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) is a youth networking organisation committed to the full participation of young people in

sustainable development through advocacy and capacity building of youth and youth organisations in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole.

4. Interview conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe on 21 November 2017
5. Interview conducted in Livingstone, Zambia on 18 May 2018

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