

# Chapter 4

## Youth Participation in Politics: The Case of Zambian University Students

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the manner in which Zambian university students engage with public policy decisions which are of immediate and future interest to them. It observes that the youths may have little faith in representative democracy and instead are utilizing social media platforms to directly engage with decision-makers and publics, and thus subverting the essence of the authority of parliament. The study uses descriptive survey design and the methodology of “Briscolage” to capture and scrutinize two politically charged cases, and concludes that the youth globally may be challenging liberalism and in that way fashioning a new narrative entrenched in postmodernism.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Zambia has enjoyed a multi-party system since 1991. This is a good 27 years since its governance system was changed from the less participatory system of the one party state to a more democratic system. A good number of the youths therefore are the ‘born-frees’ who never experienced the draconian political reality where alternative views and political thoughts were not the norm.

Before 1991, Zambia was from 1973, a single party dictatorship where political participation was limited to members of the then ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP) led by the mercurial Kenneth Kaunda. Until his defeat to the Movement

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### ***Youth Participation in Politics***

for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in 1991, Zambia's founding President Kaunda had been in office for 27 years, that is from 1964.

By 2018, a further 27 years had passed, in which a whole new generation had grown-up. This is a group of youths who are generally oblivious to the circumstances that prevailed during much of the earlier post-colonial 27 years. However, since 1991, the year that marked Zambia's transition back to multi-party democracy, there has been a massive growth in the utilisation of the internet, for discourse and for political activism on social media and other platforms, in Zambia and across the world. Some two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is estimated that about 80 per cent of Zambians have access to cell phones or the internet (Malakata, 2018). The increased access to these digital communication platforms has important consequences for democratic participation among citizens (Lindgren, 2017. p147), especially the youth. This is so because generally, technical determinists have contended, from as far back as the 1990s, that the ubiquity and easier availability of the internet does engender a more pro-active digital citizenship which brings about a more critical population and in turn, produces a much more politically participative system

Furthermore, it is assumed that a well-functioning democracy flourishes in a society where citizens are active members of political processes by providing checks and balances on power holders. Such a society is built upon a collective intelligence (Fuchs, 2017. P 67) that buttresses various challenges to political power; and also ensures that barriers to free expression and open civic engagement are scrapped. In such a society, grassroots' freedom of expression and participatory democracy is thus extended to "all realms of society" (ibid).

This chapter traces the origins of youth activism, more specifically student politicking since independence in 1964, and then examines two recent instances in which Zambian university students, perhaps the most enlightened section among the Zambian youths, a majority of whom are under the age of 27, use modern means of communication like the internet, and social media, to consolidate a participatory political culture and freedom of expression. The chapter explores how youth activism has metamorphosed in recent times, and how it manifests itself nowadays. Two specific examples are given to illustrate youth civic engagement in Zambia today. Furthermore, the discourse acknowledges that although the inspiration for participatory democracy may have emerged from among youthful students (Lynd, 1965) of the 1960s, there is now an even more urgent need to examine whether that abrasive and radical approach to politics has been carried through by the current generation using both the new and mainstream media platforms.

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