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# **INTERNET & TRANSITION TO A DEMOCRATIC DISPENSATION: NAVIGATING THE PLACE AND ROLE OF A ZIMBABWEAN YOUTH!**

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***Zimbabwe Democracy Institute***

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## MAJOR HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Government attempts to sustain transition to a democratic dispensation will not succeed without giving the youth their right full space in politics, economy, society and online.
- ✓ Youth are usually the most vulnerable and marginalized social strata in the world yet occupying the largest share in the population. It has traditionally been very difficult for their views to be heard in public spaces let alone being considered in key decision making bodies.
- ✓ Internet revolution has opened up opportunities for the fulfillment of fundamental human rights and for social and economic development for the youth.
- ✓ Social media that came with it has become popular among this social group as a new form of communication around the world and it has rapidly grown in significance as a forum for political activism in its various diverse forms.
- ✓ To that end, internet has become widely regarded as key to attainment of following human rights: information access, freedom of expression and privacy.
- ✓ In the context of a struggle for transiting into a democratic dispensation in Zimbabwe, the youth and internet freedom are two very critical factors for that change to come now than ever.
- ✓ Given their dominance in the netizen population, their dominance in the electorate population and their domineering in the national population, it follows that they have the ability to change the future for the better.
- ✓ Their oversight role, monitoring human rights, accountability and rule of law abuses, promoting citizen journalism and voting out poor quality of government is possible now than ever.
- ✓ However, the government of Zimbabwe, hiding behind combating online criminal activity, has passed the Cybercrimes and Cyber security Bill aimed at fighting cybercrime in a way that inhibits internet freedoms and fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution.
- ✓ Extensive internet monitoring occurs despite the fact that, in theory, Zimbabwe enjoys an extensive set of constitutional rights that apply both offline and online.
- ✓ Despite the existence of suppressive internet governance laws in Zimbabwe, access to internet is comparatively high especially in urban areas.
- ✓ An estimate of over 5 million people in Zimbabwe is believed to be using Whatsapp.
- ✓ Social media serves a number of democracy defense purposes during election monitoring in Zimbabwe such as: *(i)* engaging citizens in the election process; *(ii)* deterring electoral fraud; *(iii)* exposing problems and irregularities; *(iv)* proving an accurate measure of the quality of the election and; *(v)* providing citizen voices in recommendations for improving the process for the next election.
- ✓ Despite the fact that young people in Zimbabwe make up the majority of the population, their role in electoral processes is limited. Their use of social media is not necessarily for human rights and democracy promotion but rather for social networking and others.
- ✓ However, an urban/rural disconnection exists between rural and urban youth in collective mobilization and participation which further deepens the ineffectiveness of youths foster a nation-wide rise to claim their rightful space in politics, economy and the internet.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Youths are usually the most vulnerable and marginalized social strata in the world yet occupying the largest share in the population. It has traditionally been very difficult for their views to be heard in public spaces let alone being considered in key decision making bodies. Internet revolution has opened up opportunities for the fulfillment of fundamental human rights and for social and economic development for the youth. Social media that came with it has become popular among this social group as a new form of communication around the world and it has rapidly grown in significance as a forum for political activism in its various diverse forms. Most importantly, the prevalence of free, open and accessible internet space has demonstrated to be pivotal in their realization of freedom of expression online. To that end, internet has become widely regarded as key to attainment of following human rights: information access, freedom of expression and privacy.

In the context of a struggle for transiting into a democratic dispensation in Zimbabwe, the youths are very critical generation demography now than ever. Given their dominance in the netizen population, their dominance in the electorate population and their domineering in the national population, it follows that they have the ability to change the future for the better. Their oversight role, monitoring human rights, accountability and rule of law abuses, promoting citizen journalism and voting out poor quality of government is possible now than ever. Like elsewhere across the globe, social media is very essential in for meeting this end. It has the potential of putting much needed pressure on government to affect the required policy reforms.

In Zimbabwe, people under the age of 35 (youths), make up the majority of the population and make up about 41% of eligible voters, but used to constitute 14% of the registered voters (as per the voters' roll

used in 2013 elections).<sup>1</sup> This has been a clear reflection that youths do not actively participate in the country's electoral processes. However, empowered with knowledge and skills to protect themselves and make informed decisions courtesy of internet usage upsurge, youths are bound to realize their full potential and contribute to sustainable transition to social and democratic transformation. By and large, social and youth activism enables information acquisition, knowledge development, transfer and sharing, and thought leadership, empathy and emotional connection, and the spread of credible ideas that inspire policy change agenda. Thus, this study sought to examine the t-junction between the youth bulge and internet penetration upsurge in Zimbabwe, find possible advocacy ways through which the positive potential of the youth bulge can be harnessed and channeled to meaningful online civic agency necessary for sustaining transition to a democratic dispensation in Zimbabwe.

## OBJECTIVES

In light of the advent of internet and social media during this era, youth population bulge and the state vulnerability to change; this advocacy paper seeks to contribute to:

- (a) Ascertain youths' awareness of the Cybercrime and its prohibitive impact on their internet freedoms;
- (b) Promote internet and social media use for 2018 election monitoring;
- (c) Promote social media use for by youths to enhance human rights, rule of law and accountability;
- (d) Influence internet use for the purposes of nationwide youth mobilization, sensitization activism,

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<sup>1</sup>Research and Advocacy. Unit. 2017. *Framing the debate: youth voter registration in Zimbabwe in preparation for 2018 elections.* Available Online at: [http://researchandadvocacyunit.org/system/files/Framing%20the%20debate%20Youth%20voter%20registration%20in%20Zimbabwe%20-%20Opinion%20piece%201\\_17%20final.pdf](http://researchandadvocacyunit.org/system/files/Framing%20the%20debate%20Youth%20voter%20registration%20in%20Zimbabwe%20-%20Opinion%20piece%201_17%20final.pdf)

and political empowerment and;

- (e) Promote a guaranteed easy access to information held by the state and other government institutions as a mechanism of ensuring transparency and constitutionalism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was purely qualitative in that, it used desk-research, content analysis and focus group discussions with purposively sampled key-informants drawn from social movements, academia, civic society leaders and media practitioners. A focus group discussion guide was created guided by objectives of this study on youth, internet opportunities and enhancement of a sustainable transition to a democratic dispensation in Zimbabwe.

## **POLITICAL CONTEXT**

Zimbabwe is a country where freedom of association and speech are highly limited. Nevertheless, internet and social media have given citizens the platform for communication with limited hindrances. In Zimbabwe, like elsewhere across the globe, social media is essential in efforts to demand transparency and accountability from the responsible authorities vis-à-vis the governance processes in the country. This is done through online human rights monitoring and as well as rule of law and accountability monitoring. This has an effect of putting much needed pressure on government to conform to the required policy reforms.

In spite of such, the government of Zimbabwe, hiding behind combating online criminal activity, has enacted such laws as the Cybercrimes and Cyber security Bill. These policies are prompted by the desire to fight cybercrime in Zimbabwe in a way that impedes internet freedoms and fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> Such

pieces of legislation are designed to monitor the use of internet and further disregarding citizens' rights online.

The government has enabled its security and spy agencies to actively monitor internet and telecommunications, without necessarily first obtaining permission through the courts.<sup>3</sup> Extensive internet monitoring occurs despite the fact that, in theory, Zimbabwe enjoys an extensive set of constitutional rights that apply both offline and online. Consequently, access to internet and its usage for human rights and democracy promotion activities in Zimbabwe is constantly under threat as evidenced by the recent introduction of cyber security element under the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and Cyber Security whose intention is suspected to be to curtail freedom online and to push for the enactment and implementation of the draconian Computer Crimes and Cyber Crimes Bill.

Despite the existence of suppressive internet governance laws in Zimbabwe, access to internet is comparatively high especially in urban areas. It clearly indicates that internet uptake in Zimbabwe is moderately high. The rise in internet uptake during the period can be attributed to massive usage of social media by citizens and political activists to engage each other online and mobilize large scores of people to protest against the deteriorating economy under the government of the then President Robert Mugabe.

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<sup>2</sup>Media Institute for Southern Africa - Zimbabwe, MISA Zimbabwe: Commentary on Cybercrime and Cyber security Bill Issue 4, 2017. Available on at:

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<sup>3</sup> FGDs February 2018.

## 2. KEY FINDINGS & IDENTIFIED ADVOCACY ENTRY POINTS

### YOUTHS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTION MONITORING

Elections are an important instrument in enabling broader democratic consolidation and state building efforts in any given country (Kotze, 2010; Ethier, 1990). Citizens' election monitoring therefore forms part of the basis for the conduct of free, fair and credible elections. The process involves the observation of the electoral processes before, during and after elections are held (ZDI, 2017). It therefore implies that election monitoring increasingly looks at the entire electoral process over a long period of time rather than at election-day proceedings only. The process is fundamental for necessitating democracy and human rights protection. As such, the use of social media in elections has yield positive results in social and peaceful democratic struggles during political transition in the country.<sup>4</sup>

In Zimbabwe, social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are providing new ways to stimulate citizen engagement with duty-bearers in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have taken to social media for appeal to the growing youth electorate.<sup>5</sup> The increased involvement of people, particularly youths, online in political debate is evident on an even greater scale on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. An estimate of over 5 million people in Zimbabwe is believed to be using Whatsapp for various reasons *inter alia* reporting on the ongoing Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) process.

In Zimbabwe, social media has played a critical role in election monitoring prior to

the forthcoming 2018 elections. Social Media and WhatsApp in particular has gone a long way in informing citizens about latest political and socio-economic developments in the country.<sup>6</sup> The non-partisan election monitoring, courtesy of internet, has managed to collectively mobilize thousands of citizens around the country to participate in their country's democratic processes as election monitors.

Social media serves a number of democracy defense purposes during election monitoring in Zimbabwe such as: (i) engaging citizens in the election process; (ii) deterring electoral fraud; (iii) exposing problems and irregularities; (iv) proving an accurate measure of the quality of the election and; (v) providing citizen voices in recommendations for improving the process for the next election.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that young people in Zimbabwe make up the majority of the population, their role in electoral processes is limited. Their use of social media is not necessarily for human rights and democracy promotion but rather for social networking and others. During a focus group discussion, participants reiterated that 80 percent of the youths in Zimbabwe are on social media but less than 20 percent of them actively participate in promoting human rights, rule of law and accountability.<sup>8</sup>

Various contributing factors were identified chief among them being repressive laws aimed at punishing online freedom of expression. Because of these laws, youths have been deterred from social media politicking and a seriously high level of self censorship exists among this stratum of netizens in Zimbabwe. This calls for determined efforts by civic groups to mobilize the youths to use the internet and social media to create nation-wide networks of information sharing and use in

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<sup>4</sup>Nehanda Radio (11 January 2013). New Media Can Play A Key Role In Zimbabwe. Available Online At: <http://nehandaradio.com/2013/01/11/new-media-can-play-a-key-role-in-zimbabwe/>

<sup>5</sup>Hissain, A. 2017. Social Media in Election Campaign: Roles and Responsibility. Available on online at: <http://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/229566/Social-media-in-election-campaign:-Role-and-responsibility>

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<sup>6</sup> ZDI-MC Focus Group Discussion (February 2018)

<sup>7</sup> Analysis of FDGs, February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See Note 7



strengthening for citizen accountability and human rights monitoring and reporting. It is therefore important for purposes of upholding human rights and covering the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe to encourage social media use and its uptake in remote rural areas where political violence usually goes undetected.<sup>9</sup>

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, RULE OF LAW AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

*(i) Social Media amplifying Youth's ability to promote Human Rights*

Social media has created a favorable platform for the promotion of human rights in Zimbabwe and elsewhere across the globe. It has become a key forum for open debate, organization, motivation, response and counter-response on human rights issues. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp have played a very significant role in political mobilization and generating public protest against state suppression, exploitation and attempts of restricting freedom of expression and speech.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the internet played a fundamental role in the Malaysian political tsunami of 8 March 2008 and continued in 2013 by exposing and disseminating information pertaining to the weaknesses of the government.<sup>11</sup>

Internet and social media usage in Zimbabwe is gradually turning into mainstream media of mass communication and advocacy for human rights defenders. As a result, social media is now an essential tool for free expression in this digital era. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), human rights

defenders and citizen journalists through their ever increasing online presence expand their strength to reach national audience and raise the issue of human rights violations which are often ignored by mainstream conventional mass media. By so doing, free expression online as a constitutional right is promoted and exercised.

It is important to note that social media has made it possible to achieve the aspirations of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (194) and International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) which acknowledges the need for free flow of information, freedom and pluralism of the media, and the freedom of expression and speech as human rights.

During the era of traditional media in Zimbabwe, youths and media organizations were denied their constitutional rights to access information, freedom of expression and media freedom due to restrictive information and media laws enacted by the government. However with the emergence of social media, youth-led social movements around the country have used internet-based platforms to communicate, organize, and share critical political and socio-economic information that impacts their lives.<sup>12</sup> For instance in 2016, the protests against former President Mugabe were organized through communication on social media. As a result, youth-led social movements such as #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka managed to exercise their constitutional right to peacefully demonstrate against a government policies and the government itself. In this regard, social media was used to promote human rights in form of right to demonstrate and freedom of association. Therefore, social media in Zimbabwe is playing a key role in helping to raise awareness or trigger social movements much more easily and on a wider scale.<sup>13</sup> It is lending a voice to the people who otherwise had no means to communicate

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<sup>9</sup> ZDI-MC Focus Group Discussion, 8 February 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Mishra, R. 2015. Social Media and the Protection of Human Rights. Available online at: [http://www.academia.edu/16416690/Social\\_Media\\_and\\_Protection\\_of\\_Human\\_Rights](http://www.academia.edu/16416690/Social_Media_and_Protection_of_Human_Rights). [Accessed: 21/02/2018]

<sup>11</sup> Nga, J.H.L. et al. (2014). Internet, Youth and Democracy: Political Participation of Malaysian Youth. Available Online at: [http://192.192.83.167/bitstream/987654321/1245/2/20140722\\_11th%20ISTR\\_Muenster.pdf](http://192.192.83.167/bitstream/987654321/1245/2/20140722_11th%20ISTR_Muenster.pdf). [Accessed: 25 February 2018].

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<sup>12</sup> ZDI-MC Focus Group Discussion, February 2018

<sup>13</sup> ZDI-MC Focus Group Discussion, February 2018



their grievances or put their ideas across.

Freedom of expression through online social media platforms, the formation of a common culture based on humanitarian values, the possibilities of forming associations across boundaries, and social mobilization are some of the opportunities presented by social media to enable the youth to pressure government and influence transition to a democratic dispensation.

*(ii) Internet promoting the Rule of Law and Accountability*

The participation of young people in politics predominantly in the electoral processes is one of the means through which democracy in the country can be entrenched as it bolsters their interest in promoting the rule of law, transparency and accountability. The internet provides the opportunity needed to get the youths involved and engaging duty-bearers on election matters. However, the Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU)'s "An Audit of Zimbabwe's 2013 Voters' Roll", reveals a seriously marginalized place of the youth in electoral affairs and this might explain their back-bencher role in political decision making that affect their future. The report noted that, as of July 2013, the youth made about 41% of the eligible voters but constituted only 14% of registered voters in Zimbabwe. With most youths using social media in Zimbabwe, it is high time that they must utilize the internet for the purposes of promoting the rule of law and accountability. Rule of law entails the principle that law should govern a nation, as opposed to being governed by decisions of individual government officials. It therefore implies that all people and institutions are subject to and accountable to law that is fairly applied and enforced and the principle is of great significance to national cohesion, development, citizens' rights and emancipation of the youth.

It is only when the rule of law is respected that citizens can have long-term confidence in

democratic process and invest in the sustainable development of their society.<sup>14</sup> In Zimbabwe the youths through social movements such as #ThisGown and #SheVotes have utilized social media for a comprehensive range of citizen participatory activities such as: (i) demanding for public and social services like education and water; (ii) engaging government and/or petitioning State's institutions; (iii) political campaigns and discussions; (iv) demanding for the respect of human rights and; (v) fighting corruption. These are exemplary roles which a modern Zimbabwean youth should emulate if transition to a democratic dispensation is to be ensured.

Demanding respect for human rights is anchored on the State's obligation that it should, according to the law, uphold the fundamental citizens' human rights provided for in the supreme law of the land. Such petitions through social media by youth-led social movements to foster a human rights friendly political environment will contribute to creation of a country where there is rule of law. For instance, the constitution of Zimbabwe under section 149 (1) provides that "every citizen and permanent resident of Zimbabwe has a right to petition Parliament to consider any matter within its authority, including the enactment, amendment or repeal of legislation." Therefore, social media in Zimbabwe is useful in the promotion of rule of law and the internet must always allow bloggers and commentators to remain anonymous to bolster open discussion and freedom of speech.

The internet is also playing a critical role insofar as the promotion of transparency and accountability is concerned. The use of social media in Zimbabwe plays a very critical role in citizen engagement and advocacy, which have a major bearing on transparency and ac-

<sup>14</sup>UNESCO, 2014. Rule of Law to Ensure Safety of Journalists and Combating Impunity. Available Online at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/2014-themes/rule-of-law-to-ensure-safety-of-journalists-and-combating-impunity/>. [Accessed: 22/02/2018].

countability in governance and the conduct of public affairs.<sup>15</sup>

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND NATIONWIDE YOUTH MOBILIZATION, SENSITIZATION AND ACTIVISM**

In Zimbabwe, social media is playing a very influential role in mobilizing youths to take part in the country's governance processes. In other words, social media continues to be useful in mobilizing and drawing citizens to focus on issues that are perceived as important and in priming public opinion among many citizens to get engaged in the political process of governance and democratization.<sup>16</sup> Mass mobilization refers to mobilization of civilian population as part of contentious politics.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, Zimbabwe saw thousands of people being mobilized through social media to take part in country wide demonstrations against the then President Mugabe's government. As highlighted earlier, social movement protests against former president Robert Mugabe were purely organized through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to demand government transparency, accountability and standing against corruption, poverty and injustice. For instance, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July 2016, Zimbabwe broke news both regionally and internationally when Pastor Evan Mawarire's #ThisFlag movement resulted in a national boycott that brought all sorts of business in the Harare Central Business District (CBD) to a halt. The citizens stayed at home with banks and shops across all towns and cities closed.

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<sup>15</sup>Kalemera, A. 2011. Here's How Social Media Could Promote Democracy. Available Online at: <https://cipesa.org/2011/11/heres-how-social-media-could-promote-democracy/>. [Accessed: 22/02/2018].

<sup>16</sup>Kalyango, Jr. K. 2011. African Media and Democratization: Public Opinion, Ownership and Rule of Law. Available Online at: [http://www.academia.edu/17577283/Social\\_Media\\_as\\_a\\_Veritable\\_Tool\\_for\\_Mass\\_Mobilization\\_towards\\_Effective\\_Election\\_Management](http://www.academia.edu/17577283/Social_Media_as_a_Veritable_Tool_for_Mass_Mobilization_towards_Effective_Election_Management). [Accessed: 22/02/2018].

<sup>17</sup>Awaisu, S. 2015. Social Media as a Veritable Tool For Mass Mobilization Towards Effective Election Management. Available Online at: [http://www.academia.edu/17577283/Social\\_Media\\_as\\_a\\_Veritable\\_Tool\\_for\\_Mass\\_Mobilization\\_towards\\_Effective\\_Election\\_Management](http://www.academia.edu/17577283/Social_Media_as_a_Veritable_Tool_for_Mass_Mobilization_towards_Effective_Election_Management). [Accessed: 22/02/2018].

This must and will serve as a lesson and a pointer to youth and human rights defenders that internet presents endless possibilities for thrusting the power of citizens to cause desired socio-political change.

The above move by social movements in Zimbabwe confirmed lessons learnt during the Egyptian revolution in 2011. In Egypt, the #Jan25 hash tag emerged as a unifying mean for people to join the cause, and has established a conducive environment for individuals with no power (youth) to raise their voice and concern(s) regarding political and socio-economic issues and impose change notwithstanding state repression.

The emergence of internet and social media has made the art of mass youth mobilization to disseminate ideas more easier<sup>18</sup> as the multi-modal and digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history.

The internet and social media has, of late, played a very pivotal role in nationwide youth activism in Zimbabwe. For instance, a group of unemployed graduates in the country have utilized social media to mobilize crowds and come up with a youth activism group cum social movement called Zimbabwe Coalition for Unemployed Graduates (ZCUG). The movement, courtesy of internet, has managed to mobilize the masses to protest against high unemployment rate in Zimbabwe. In this regard, the internet and social media in Zimbabwe, like in Egypt during the Arab spring, has created a new era of social activism where the powerless can finally be heard, be part of government policies and have a voice. <sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, some of the social movements led by youths have gone to the extent of utilizing internet and social

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<sup>18</sup>ZDI-MC Focus Group Discussion, 8 February 2018.

<sup>19</sup>Jameel, A. 2016. The Role of Social Media in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Available Online at: <https://mystudentvoices.com/the-role-of-social-media-in-the-2011-egyptian-revolution-9867a5f32be1>. [Accessed: 23/02/2018].

media for advancing their individualistic interests that proved to have retarded a national consensus for democracy and rule of law promotion.<sup>20</sup>

*(i) Rural/Urban Youth Disconnection*

In Zimbabwe, the use of internet and social media for massive youth mobilization, sensitization and activism is mainly dominant in urban areas particularly Harare and Bulawayo. Such disconnection that exists between rural and urban youth in collective mobilization and participation further deepens the ineffectiveness of youths to embody their needs in the governance space. The emergence of, for example, the #Tajamuka and #ThisFlag social movements, is a clear testimony of this assertion that the campaigns, which were most prevailing in urban centers of Harare and Bulawayo in particular, did not manage to connect with rural youths which happen to be the majority and a formidable force in determining the direction of political outcomes in Zimbabwe. Thus, vibrant youths in urban areas should take advantage of internet and social media to integrate the rural youth populace into existing urban activism, information access and sharing initiatives. This sentiment was equally highlighted by a representative from a students' body, Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), who reiterated that pro-democracy movements in Zimbabwe should use the internet and social media to create nation-wide networks of information sharing and use such for effective citizen accountability and human rights monitoring. Zimbabwe should draw lessons from the Egyptian revolution where individuals have had their belief and ideas that led to utilization of internet and social media as platform for people from across the rural and urban divide to connect and raise their voice for a social change.

*(ii) Challenges faced by Youths in using internet for democracy promotion*

Following the discovery by government of Zimbabwe that internet and social media is playing a pivotal role in exposing its maladministration practices, it has responded through the enactment of laws, establishment of state institutions and sabotage ways aimed at thwarting the use of social media by citizens to demand transparency and accountability. Zimbabwe currently suffers the machinations of a competitive authoritarian electoral regime that fears freeing the private media, social media and the internet in general in belief that doing so will prevent possible public scrutiny, transparency, criticism and exposure of its maladministration crimes to the electorate and consequent electoral defeat.<sup>21</sup> The trend to monitor people's internet usage and online presence is seen in Zimbabwe, where there has been an unchecked rise in state surveillance and censorship of all types of communication.

*(iii) Legal Instruments for Internet Regulation*

In an unprecedented manner, the government since 2016 has been making efforts to enact a Cybercrime Bill whose sole purpose is clearly to stifle internet use at the expense of people's liberties. This has worsened as the responsible minister has recently told parliament about the government's intention to infuse two other Bills into it so that it becomes an Omnibus Cybercrimes law. This is regardless of the fact that internet freedoms are provided for in the constitution of the country. For instance, section 61 (2) of the constitution guarantees freedom of media and protection of journalists' sources of information. However, under the disguise of curbing crime, the Bill was created for government to tighten its grip over the control of cyber space and spy on its citizens and little focus has been put on the need for the protection of individual liberties, or

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<sup>20</sup> ZDI-MC Focus Group Discussion, February 2018

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<sup>21</sup> ZDI(2017)

accountability in the processes of combating the cybercrime. This has a direct negative impact on citizens' human rights because it: (i) endangers citizens' online freedoms through authorizing state interference and arbitrary breach of privacy and security; (ii) captures the internet and blocks access to government information by citizens; (iii) limits accountability pressure enabled by internet platforms and; (iv) shuns publicity and transparency which are salient principles of the constitution.

The Interception of Communications Act (2007) is another legislation used by the government of Zimbabwe to stifle internet freedoms.<sup>22</sup>Section 5(1) of the act authorizes state officials<sup>23</sup> to intercept telephone and electronic communications so as to guard against content which is judged as a 'threat to national security.' Section 12 of the act also compels service providers to offer services that can be intercepted by responsible and legit authorities. Section 11 states that, authorized persons can declare disclosure of private information if it appears to them that such information endangers national security, necessitates detection of a serious crime or is necessary for economic wellbeing in Zimbabwe. Under such conditions, Zimbabwean citizens are bound to self-censorship as their rights to freedom of expression and privacy are infringed.

In addition to the above, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) of 2002 was also crafted by the government of Zimbabwe to monitor and censor online and offline information access.<sup>24</sup>Under this act, media persons and privately

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<sup>22</sup> See, interception of Communications Act (2007), document available online at: [http://www.vertic.org/media/National%20Legislation/Zimbabwe/ZW\\_Interception\\_of\\_Communications\\_Act.pdf](http://www.vertic.org/media/National%20Legislation/Zimbabwe/ZW_Interception_of_Communications_Act.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> These include the Chief of Defence Intelligence or his or her nominee, the Director-General of the President's department responsible for national security or his or her nominee, the Commissioner of the Zimbabwe Republic Police or his or her nominee, the Commissioner-General of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority or his or her nominee

<sup>24</sup>See, AIPPA. (2002). Available online at: [www.parl.zim.gov.zw/acts-list/access-to-information-and-](http://www.parl.zim.gov.zw/acts-list/access-to-information-and-)

owned media houses are obliged to be licensed. Notwithstanding that, the Act states that practicing journalism without a license is a criminal offence punishable by a sentence of up to two years in prison or more and that state agencies can deny access to information (MISA, 2004).<sup>25</sup> The act also states that state agencies have the right to deny access to information which therefore negatively impacts on citizens through infringing citizens' constitutional right of access to information. This has made it very difficult for awareness on human rights situations, rule of law, election events and accountability mechanisms to be done through citizen journalism as all citizens will have to be registered or risk this sentence. According to this Act, citizens have no right to access information in public bodies unless authorized by heads of such bodies. In addition, public officials can holdback requested information for 30 days following a request and this makes efforts to monitor elections, ensuring accountability and rule of law work unfeasible.

*(iv) State sponsored sabotage*

The government of Zimbabwe, on 6 July 2016, forced telecommunications operators to block popular social media platform WhatsApp, as social movements demonstrated spreading across the country. The social media blackout was a direct response to protests organized by #ThisFlag movement that called for a national stay away and protests that crippled business operations across the country. This kind of sabotage cannot be left out when listing key challenges that should be named and shamed to free the internet for the youth in Zimbabwe.

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protection-of-privacy-act27

<sup>25</sup> See, MISA. (2004). *The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act: Two Years On* Available online at: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/zimbabwe-aippa-report.pdf>

## CONCLUSION &RECOMMENDATIONS

### CONCLUSION

The study concludes the use of internet and social media in Zimbabwe especially by youths is a key to sustaining transition towards a democratic dispensation. The incumbent government has gone viral nationally and internationally giving promises and emphasizing commitment to transition to a democratic dispensation. Thus, this paper emphatically states that there is nowhere to go leaving behind internet freedom and youth integration into decision making chains. Internet opportunities availed to citizens will go a long way in facilitating a broad range of citizens' participatory activities such as demanding for public services like education and clean water, contacting leaders, political campaigns and discussions, election monitoring, mass mobilization, rule of law monitoring and fighting corruption. Social media in Zimbabwe is also playing a critical role in citizen engagement and advocacy, which have a major bearing on transparency and accountability in governance and the conduct of public affairs. However, some youths are using internet opportunities for other purposes totally detached from the need to bring forth a sustainable transition to a democratic transition. In addition, youth social movements have used internet opportunities and proven to the nation that internet mobilization is the way to go if effectiveness and efficiency is to be achieved.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

To augment the use of internet opportunities for sustainable transition to a democratic dispensation under authoritarian internet governance framework in Zimbabwe, this study recommends the following to key stakeholders:

#### *(i) Youths Across Sectors in Zimbabwe*

- ✓ The youths in urban areas should integrate rural populace (youths) into

existing urban activism, information access, information sharing networks taking advantage of ICTs that have gotten accessible to rural citizens.

- ✓ Youths should use internet and social media in raising awareness about issues important to the general public such as political decentralization. Such will enhance good governance, increase pro-poor service, and sustain socio-economic development.

#### *(ii) Civil Society and Pro-Democracy Actors Across Sectors in Zimbabwe*

- ✓ Should use the internet and social media to create nation-wide networks of information sharing and use such to enforce citizen accountability & human rights monitoring.
- ✓ Should concentrate on mobilizing citizens for informed and issue-based participation in the elections.
- ✓ Should attach socio-economic rights and basic issues of human development to electoral discourse to allow citizens to make the elected office bearers accountable on citizen rights throughout the electoral cycle courtesy of internet and social media.
- ✓ Should ensure that young people's participation is enhanced by grassroots mobilization and motivated by communicating electoral issues that speak to the targeted constituency of young people and their needs.
- ✓ Should educate citizens that access to information and freedom of expression still remain important drivers towards informed participation in governance and a means through which political culture is shaped with the hope of addressing apathy among the youth population. Such education can be done through conducting civic education forums and radio shows at national and community levels.
- ✓ Should raise awareness among citizens on gaining internet access and use it to expose them to new information, engage



in political discussions, and join social media groups that advocate for worthy causes and read news stories that change their outlook on the world. Such awareness could be raised through the creation of social media sensitization forums.

- ✓ Should make use of internet for coalition building among themselves, social movements, and student unions, government agencies for effective mobilization and citizen-government engagement and information sharing.
- ✓ Should enhance social media use and encouraging its uptake in remote rural areas where political violence usually goes undetected. This is very important for upholding human rights and covering the 2018 election in Zimbabwe
- ✓ Should cultivate engagement between government, civic society, academics and the citizenry to find common ground on internet freedoms and internet access for promoting human rights and democracy.

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