Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University
2024, VOL. 3, NO. 3 (9), December, 70-96
https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.9.070

JOPS

GRIDLOCKED STREETS OR SIMPLY DISINTERESTED? URBAN YOUTH AND UNCONVENTIONAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ZIMBABWE'S SECOND REPUBLIC

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Abstract
This paper is situated in the political landscape of Zimbabwe's Second Republic, which many believed would usher in a new era of democratic governance. It examines urban youth and their engagement, or lack thereof, with unconventional modes of political participation. Utilising focus groups conducted in Harare and Bulawayo, findings reveal how young people engage with political issues through internet-based platforms and novel artistic expressions. While internet participation offers a space to the largely digitally savvy youth for critique and dialogue, it often fails to translate into tangible policy changes or meaningful impact, highlighting a sense of futility among the youth. Despite these creative outlets, findings also indicate a significant reluctance to participate in other traditional forms of protest, such as demonstrations or strikes, largely due to fears of police reprisals and the threat of lawfare. Life cycle factors, especially the economic situation, also deter further participation, as youths prioritise economic sustenance over political activism. The transition from Mugabe to Mnangagwa has not yielded the anticipated democratic dividend; instead, the political landscape remains unchanged, characterised by an enduring authoritarian culture. The pervasive use of lawfare and state security apparatus continues to deter young people from exercising their constitutional rights as outlined in Sections 58 (freedom of assembly and association), and 59 (freedom to demonstrate and petition). Unconventional participation can only thrive in an environment where constitutionalism is respected, thus the need for genuine commitment to democratic principles in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: youth, political participation, democracy, protests, demonstrations.

Introduction

The political landscape in Zimbabwe has undergone a notable transformation since the ousting of long-time leader Robert Mugabe in a coup in November 2017. This pivotal moment marked the end of a 37-year rule characterised by economic decline, political

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Received: 11.11.2024
Revised: 29.11.2024
Accepted: 12.12.2024

repression, and social unrest and also ushered in a new era, the Second Republic, which was meant to be a new and unfolding democracy (Phulu and Kamga 2023). This Second Republic, led by Emmerson Mnangagwa, sought to project an image of renewal and reform; however, seven years down the line, the realities on the ground reveal less hope and more disillusionment. Amidst this backdrop, the role of urban youth in shaping the political narrative has emerged as a critical focal point, raising questions about their engagement, motivations, and the forms of political participation they endorse.

Youth, defined by the Zimbabwe National Youth Policy[1] as individuals aged between 15 and 35, constitute a significant demographic in Zimbabwe (67.7% according to the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission), particularly in urban centres where they represent a substantial portion of the electorate (for those who are between 18 and 35). Historically, this group has been at the forefront of political movements from the period of the struggle against colonialism to the post-independence struggles, often catalysing change through protests, activism, and grassroots movements (Makwerere 2019; Sigauke 2020). However, the youth's relationship with traditional political structures has been complicated. While youth possess the potential to influence policy and governance, many young Zimbabweans express disenchantment with established political parties, viewing them as relics of a bygone era that have failed to address their needs and aspirations (Flam 2023; Balcı and Balcı 2011).

Studies demonstrate that while youth in Zimbabwe have a keen interest in politics, they are disengaged in formal or conventional politics which largely centres around electoral participation (Raftopoulos 2013; Masuku and Macheka 2021; Masunda 2023; Musarurwa 2018). This disinterest raises serious questions about the nature of political participation in Zimbabwe's 2nd republic and the avenues through which urban youth engage with the political process. The importance of youth in political participation cannot be overstated. Their experiences, shaped by high unemployment rates, economic instability, and limited access to quality education and healthcare, inform their political attitudes and behaviours (Musarurwa 2018; Ndebele and Billing 2011; Masunda 2022). As a result, youth in Africa and globally are increasingly exploring unconventional forms of political participation that transcend traditional voting and party affiliation (Ani and Okoye 2021; Nyatuka and Wolhuter 2023; Isaksson 2014; Kitanova 2019). This shift is indicative of a broader trend where young people seek to assert their agency through alternative channels, such as social movements, digital activism, and community organising. This trend is essential for grasping the evolving political landscape in Zimbabwe.

This paper seeks to address the central research question: How do urban youth in Zimbabwe navigate the political landscape in the post-Mugabe era, and what form(s) of political participation do they engage in? In addressing this question, it is important to consider the historical context that shaped the current political climate. The legacy of Mugabe's rule, characterised by authoritarianism and the suppression of dissent, left deep scars on the collective psyche of the nation (Hlungwani et al. 2021; Young 2019).

[1] Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Recreation of the Republic of Zimbabwe. 2019. "National Youth Policy 2020-2025." Accessed May 10, 2024. https://zgc.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/NATIONAL-YOUTH-POLICY-2020-2025.pdf.

Many Zimbabweans belonging to the millennials and generation Z cohorts grew up in an environment where political participation was fraught with risks, leading to a pervasive sense of cynicism towards formal (electoral) political processes. The aftermath of the first post-Mugabe elections in 2018, which were marred by allegations of fraud and violence (Mungwari 2019), further exacerbated feelings of disenfranchisement among the youth. As a result, many young people have turned away from traditional political participation.

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has seen the rise of social media and digital platforms, which have played a pivotal role in reshaping political participation among urban youth. In an era where information is readily accessible, young people globally are leveraging technology to mobilise, organise, and advocate for change (Arora et al. 2022; Gibbons and Poelker 2020). In Zimbabwe, movements such as #ThisFlag and #ZimShutDown during the Mugabe era demonstrated the power of digital activism in galvanising public opinion and challenging the status quo (Gukurume 2017). These platforms provided space for young people to express their grievances and facilitate connections across diverse groups, encouraging a sense of solidarity and collective action.

Conceptualising political participation

Political participation is a fundamental concept in democratic societies, referring to the ways in which individuals engage in the political process to influence decision-making and governance. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from traditional forms such as voting, campaigning for candidates, and joining political parties, to more contemporary and unconventional methods. The essence of political participation lies in the active involvement of citizens in shaping the political landscape, voicing their opinions, and advocating for their interests and rights (Macheka 2021; Ingwani and Kwaramba 2023). This engagement empowers individuals and builds a vibrant democracy where diverse perspectives contribute to policy formulation and community development.

The landscape of political participation has undergone significant transformation, driven by various social, economic, and technological factors (Mabhanda, Mabwe and Mashiri 2024; Gwindingwe 2023; Jena et al. 2023). Traditional forms of political engagement, while still relevant, have been complemented and, in some cases, supplanted by unconventional modes of participation. This expansion can be attributed to the growing disillusionment with established political institutions, particularly among younger demographics who often feel marginalised by conventional politics (Malafaia et al. 2021; Sloam and Henn 2019; Mhiripiri 2015). As a result, individuals are seeking alternative avenues to express their political views and effect change.

Unconventional political participation

Since the 1970s, previously ignored forms of political participation have been recognised and labelled as unconventional, informal and novel. Unconventional political participation refers to forms of political engagement that deviate from

traditional or institutionalised modes, such as voting or running for office. This type of participation often emerges in response to perceived inadequacies in conventional political systems, providing alternative avenues for individuals and groups to express dissent, influence policy, or advocate for change. Unconventional political participation can manifest in various forms, including protests, civil disobedience, and the use of social networks for political mobilisation. These activities are often characterised by their innovative, non-institutionalised nature and can be seen as both a response to and a critique of existing political structures. A few of the unconventional modes are highlighted hereunder.

Unconventional participation often involves activities outside formal political institutions, such as protests, strikes, and boycotts (Pitti 2018; Grace and Danfulani 2015). These forms of participation are frequently innovative, challenging traditional norms and practices within political systems (Pitti 2018). In contexts where traditional avenues are inaccessible, individuals, particularly marginalised groups, utilise social networks to engage politically, as seen in rural Egypt (Hussein 2022).

The rise of the internet and social media has revolutionised political participation. Digital activism allows individuals to mobilise, organise, and advocate for change through online platforms. Movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe exemplify how social media can amplify voices, encourage solidarity, and challenge prevailing narratives (Gukurume 2017; Ray et al. 2017). Digital spaces enable rapid dissemination of information and facilitate connections among diverse groups, empowering individuals to advocate for social and political change without the constraints of traditional political structures.

Grassroots activism is one mode of unconventional political participation which involves collective action at the community level, often initiated by individuals who feel discontented with the political status quo. These movements can address a wide range of issues, from environmental justice to human rights (Akihiko 2024; Chiumbu and Munoriyarwa 2023; Ruhanya and Gumbo 2023). By organising protests, rallies, and community meetings, grassroots movements mobilise citizens to demand change and hold authorities accountable. Examples include the environmental movement led by youth activists like Greta Thunberg, which has galvanised global attention towards climate action (Jung et al. 2020).

Relatedly, public protests and demonstrations serve as powerful tools for expressing dissent and advocating for change. They provide a platform for individuals to collectively voice their grievances and demand action from those in power. Historical examples, such as the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the Arab Spring, illustrate how protests can catalyse political and social change (LeBas and Young 2024; Ruhanya, Matsilele and Gumbo 2024; Malila and Pela 2020; Uldanov, Jakubiak and ait El Caid 2019).

Community organising, on the other hand, involves mobilising individuals within a specific locality to address shared concerns and advocate for collective action. This mode of participation emphasises building relationships, fostering solidarity, and empowering marginalised groups (Alexander and McGregor 2013; Christens et al. 2021). Community organisers often work alongside residents to identify issues, develop strategies, and implement solutions that reflect the needs and aspirations of the

community. This approach can lead to meaningful change at the local level and inspire broader movements.

Civic engagement encompasses a range of activities that promote active participation in the community, including volunteering, attending town hall meetings, and engaging in public discussions (Adler and Goggin 2005). While these activities may not always be overtly political, they encourage a sense of responsibility and connection to the community, encouraging individuals to become more informed and engaged citizens (Okocha and Akpe 2024). Civic engagement can serve as a pathway to more direct forms of political participation, as active individuals in their communities may be more likely to advocate for political change (McCabe and Gale 2023).

Artistic expression has long been used as a means of unconventional political participation, allowing individuals to convey their messages through music, literature, theatre, and visual arts. Artists often use their platforms to critique societal issues, raise awareness, and inspire action. In Zimbabwe, for instance, musicians like Thomas Mapfumo and Winky D and visual artists have played a crucial role in mobilising people and addressing political and social issues through their work (Chitando 2024; Matsilele and Msimanga 2022; Kellerrer 2013).

Boycotts serve as another form of unconventional political participation, allowing individuals and groups to express dissent against policies or practices they deem unjust. For instance, participants may refuse to purchase goods or services from specific companies or institutions with the aim of exerting economic pressure and driving change. This collective action highlights social grievances and raises awareness about issues such as labour rights, environmental concerns, or political repression (Gwaravanda 2023). Historical examples, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott during the Civil Rights Movement, demonstrate the effectiveness of boycotts in mobilising communities and influencing decision-makers (Balci and Balci 2011).

Additionally, petitions allow individuals or groups to express their grievances and advocate for change outside traditional political structures. Petitioners can mobilise public opinion on specific issues by gathering signatures and support, demonstrating collective demand for action (Okocha and Akpe 2024; Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro 2020). They serve as a tool for citizens to influence policymakers and raise awareness about social or political concerns. Petitions can be physically and digitally distributed, exploiting technology to reach broader audiences. This method empowers individuals, promotes community engagement, and challenges established norms, reflecting a shift towards more participatory and grassroots forms of political activism.

Factors influencing youth disinterest vs engagement

Factors that impact youth political participation can be classified into three broad categories: Micro (age, gender, political efficacy), Meso (education, family socialisation, peer pressure, trade union pressure) and Macro (political climate, economic conditions, party structure).

Micro factors. Young people are often less politically engaged than older generations, with a tendency to delay conventional political participation until later in life (Guzura, Dube and Madziwanzira 2017; Waerniers and Hustinx 2024). The relationship between age and voting behaviour is sometimes described as an inverted U-shape, where younger and older individuals participate less than those in middle age (Mutasa and Ndawana 2024; Waerniers and Hustinx 2024). Youth in Africa, defined as individuals aged 18-35, generally participate less in elections compared to older age groups. This trend is attributed to a lack of political knowledge and perceived inefficacy of the electoral process (Masarurwa 2018; Resnick and Casale 2014; Zakaria 2024). However, youth are increasingly engaging in new forms of political participation, such as activism and digital engagement, which traditional measures may not capture (Muxel 2009; Camara, Banu and Abeck 2023). In non-free countries, younger Africans are more engaged in protests, while political engagement declines significantly after age 60 (Dim and Schafer 2024).

Historically, young women have been excluded from political activities, but recent movements like MeToo have spurred increased political engagement among young women (Bessant 2022). Gender disparities in political participation can be attributed to socialisation processes and societal expectations, which often differ for men and women (Tarusarira 2013; Dilts and Guerrero 2006). The intersectionality of gender with other identities, such as race, further complicates participation patterns, as seen in the differing turnout rates among young black men and women (Camara, Banu and Abeck 2023; Coll and Juelich 2022).

Political efficacy, the belief in one's ability to influence political processes, plays an important role in shaping youth political participation (Chirongoma and Moyo 2023). It acts as a motivational factor that can either encourage or deter young individuals from engaging in political activities. Young Africans often feel marginalised and excluded from political decision-making, diminishing their sense of efficacy (Sauti and Makaripe 2023; Van Gyampo and Anyidoho 2019). The digital age has also seen youth using social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter to express political views, with political efficacy being a key factor in their engagement (Multani 2024; Ampomah and Cooper 2024).

Meso factors. Education plays a pivotal role in shaping political participation. While the impact of education on political engagement is mixed, active learning strategies in civic education have shown promise in enhancing participation, especially among marginalized groups (Persson 2015). Higher education levels correlate with increased political engagement, as seen in South Africa, where youth with educated mothers are more politically active (Amoateng 2015).

Family discussions about politics significantly influence youth political participation. In South Africa, political socialisation through family interactions is a strong predictor of political engagement among the youth (Gukurume and Maringira 2024; Amoateng 2015). The role of family in political socialisation is also evident in Ethiopia, where family pressure and socio-centric attitudes affect youth political involvement (Zerai, Dinku and Aynalem 2023).

Peer interactions are crucial in shaping political attitudes and behaviours. Engaging with peers in political discussions can enhance political awareness and participation among youth (Herzog 2023; Amoateng 2015). Social media has emerged as a platform where peer influence can be exerted, providing an alternative space for political engagement outside traditional structures (Van Gyampo and Anyidoho 2019).

Trade unions in Africa have become vocal advocates for addressing socio-economic inequalities, indirectly influencing youth political participation by highlighting issues that resonate with young people (Karreth 2018). Union membership can serve as a 'school of democracy', fostering political engagement among youth by exposing them to democratic practices and advocacy (Karreth 2018).

Macro factors. Political freedom and regime type play important roles in shaping youth political participation. In authoritarian countries, young people are less engaged in both electoral and non-electoral activities, but participation declines with age due to repressive political environments (Sabao and Nenjerama 2023; Dim and Schafer 2024). The political systems in some African countries often marginalise youth, excluding them from decision-making processes and policy implementation, which discourages their participation in mainstream politics (Van Gyampo and Anyidoho 2019; Masunda 2022).

The economic landscape, characterised by high unemployment and underemployment, particularly affects the youth, making them a critical demographic for electoral mobilisation (Zakaria 2024). Economic challenges contribute to the disenchantment of young people with traditional political structures, leading them to seek alternative forms of political engagement (Borges 2019; Ndhlovu and Santos 2022). Life cycle factors also often mean that young people have no time for politics as they are often engaged in activities to sustain their livelihoods.

On the other hand, political parties in Africa, especially liberation movements, are gerontocratic in nature; they often exploit youth for electoral gains but fail to integrate them meaningfully into party structures, leading to low levels of partisanship among young people (Zakaria 2024; Maringira and Gukurume 2022; Hlungwani and Sayeed 2018). The lack of political networks and experience among youth further limits their influence within political parties, despite their skills and knowledge (Ndlovu 2021).

Youth protests and demonstrations in Zimbabwe: A historical context

Much of the unconventional youth political participation in Zimbabwe in the aftermath of independence took the form of strikes, protests and demonstrations, given that there was no social media at the time (Moyo 2024, 79-129; Mpofu 2023; Chokera, Mudzimba, Masengu and Mashingaidze 2024). Importantly, much of the activity from 1980 to about 2000 was in student demonstrations, which have always been an important feature of Zimbabwe's political landscape. Independence in Zimbabwe in 1980 brought reforms in the education sector, where racial bottlenecks that previously existed were removed (Malunga 2022). These reforms resulted in an increase in the enrolment of black students at the University of Zimbabwe (which, at the time, was the only university in the country) (Hwami 2022; Makunike 2015; Ruhanya 2020).

Resultantly, the relationship between students and the government remained cordial for a little while. However, the increase in enrolment haunted the government a few years later as meant a corresponding increase in accommodation, student grants, and other services. These challenges became a breeding ground for protests on other national issues (Moyo 2024, 37-78). At the same time, with the ruling ZANU-PF government's increasing authoritarianism, the relationship between the government and the university students deteriorated beginning in the mid-1980s (Zondi 2011).

According to Hodgkinson (2013), three events stirred student demonstrations in the late 1980s: the anti-one-party statism agenda, the Willowgate scandal in which government ministers were accused of corruption, and the increasing heavy-handedness of the government on its critics. for instance, in September 1988, students from the University of Zimbabwe marched to the Central Business District of the capital Harare, accusing the government of having betrayed the goals of the liberation struggle. The government reacted by violently dispersing the demonstration and arresting many of the students. In the 12 months that followed this demonstration, the relationship between the government and the students' movement deteriorated significantly (Sabao and Nenjerama 2023; Hodgkinson 2013). In October of the following year, another student demonstration occurred at the university when the police attempted to arrest Arthur Mutambara, the then-leader of the Students Representative Council.

During the second decade of independence, student protests were on the rise. In 1989, the opposition Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) was formed. Its campaign was centred around anti-corruption and anti-Marxism themes, which corresponded with student issues (Raftapolous 1991). According to a UZ student leader, Mutambara (who later became Deputy Prime Minister of Zimbabwe between 2009 and 2013), students had to intensify their participation in national politics. Student demonstrations had thus become a launchpad to join national politics. Students established the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) during the same period. ZINASU's main objective was to create a national platform for students in all tertiary institutions of learning (including the University of Zimbabwe, teacher training colleges and polytechnics) to advance the cause of good governance, democracy, and human rights issues.

In the same decade (1990-2000), several notable demonstrations took place where student participation was central. This was when the government introduced the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which resulted in the social and economic hardship of Zimbabweans (Chinyoka 2023; Chattopadhyay 2000). The ZINASU, trade unions, and civic organisations organised strong resistance against the ESAP, resulting in the December 1997 national stay away and the highly subscribed national demonstrations in January 1998 (U.S. Department of State 1999). During the same year, ZINASU was instrumental in forming the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), a civic body which lobbied for constitutional reform in the country. The government subsequently accepted the proposal for constitutional reform and initiated a constitutional review process (Hatchard 2001). In February 2000, the ZINASU, in collaboration with other civic organisations and the newly formed MDC opposition political party, successfully campaigned for a 'NO' vote to a government-sponsored

constitutional draft (Dorman 2003). Earlier, in 1999, the ZINASU was also actively involved in the formation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), with some of its former leaders, such as Tendai Biti, Learnmore Jongwe, and Nelson Chamisa, occupying influential posts in the new party.

Zimbabwean Youth participation in protest action between 2000 and 2014 significantly declined, mostly as a result of the suppression of human rights, especially freedom of assembly, as well as the effects of the post-2000 economic downturn. However, in 2016, non-violent youth led protest movements such as #ThisFlagMovement, #TajamukaSesijikile, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, and #ThisFlagMovement successfully mobilised for a two-day stayaway in protest against rising food and transport costs (Gukurume 2022). Similarly, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare and #TajamukaSesijikile regularly mobilised protests mainly in Harare and Beitbridge. The post-2018 election period also saw largely youth demonstrations in Harare against the ZEC's delay in pronouncing presidential election results (Pikovskaia 2022; Ndawana and Hove 2023).

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used in this paper, focussing on insights derived from ten focus group discussions, which were conducted with five groups in Harare and five in Bulawayo. Each focus group consisted of 10 to 15 participants, resulting in a total of 115 youth aged 18 to 23, representative of generation Z. The focus groups were designed to facilitate open discussions, allowing participants to share their perspectives on political participation, motivations, and the barriers they face in engaging with political structures. Additionally, a literature survey was conducted to complement the focus group findings. This involved reviewing relevant scholarly publications that address urban youth political participation, unconventional engagement methods, and the historical context of Zimbabwe's political environment.

Internet-based platforms as an avenue for political participation

In the urban centres of Harare and Bulawayo, Zimbabwean youth are increasingly utilising internet-based platforms to critique the government and express their political grievances. Social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram serve as vital tools for young people to mobilise, organise, and disseminate information regarding socio-political issues. Youth-led movements like #ThisFlag and #ZimShutDown exemplify how digital activism has galvanised public opinion and provided a platform for citizens to voice their dissent against governmental policies and actions. These platforms allow for the rapid sharing of information, enabling youth to connect, share experiences, and foster a sense of solidarity among diverse groups, thereby amplifying their collective voice. However, while these online critiques reflect a burgeoning political consciousness among urban youth, they often fall short of translating into tangible offline action. The futility of such critiques is evident in several ways. Firstly, the Zimbabwean government has a history of repressing dissent, leading to a pervasive culture of fear among the youth (Heinicke 2021).

The Data Protection and Cyber Security Act of 2021, the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act of 2023 as well and the Interception of Communications Act of 2007 have been used to prosecute individuals accused of transmitting 'fake news'. Many respondents expressed apprehension about participating in protests or demonstrations due to the potential for police brutality and legal repercussions. This fear stifles the transition from online activism to real-world engagement, as young people hesitate to take risks that could jeopardise their safety and well-being.

Some respondents had this to say:

- *I have a fake Facebook account as well as a genuine account. I only use the fake account to critique the government as l am aware that there is a law against saying bad things about the president,*
- *I know people like Fadzai Mahere have been arrested for posting fake news. So, whilst one can say things about the government online, they really need to be very careful about what they say*.

Moreover, online activism can sometimes create an illusion of participation without fostering genuine political change. The ease of expressing opinions online may lead to a phenomenon known as 'slacktivism', where individuals feel they have contributed to a cause simply by liking or sharing posts, rather than engaging in more impactful actions. As a result, while the critiques may resonate within digital spaces, they often do not mobilise the necessary numbers to effect change in the physical realm.

Additionally, the Zimbabwean government has demonstrated its ability to manipulate narratives and control public discourse, often dismissing online dissent as irrelevant or unrepresentative of the broader populace. This further diminishes the impact of online critiques, as they may not reach decision-makers or translate into policy changes.

Art, youth and politics in Zimbabwe

Urban youth are increasingly turning to various forms of art, particularly ZimDancehall, to express dissent against the government. ZimDancehall, a genre of music that blends reggae and dancehall influences, has emerged as a powerful tool for social commentary and political expression among young people (Chidora et al. 2024). Some artists within this genre often use their lyrics to address pressing societal issues, including economic hardships, political corruption, and human rights abuses.

Through ZimDancehall and other forms of art, artists like Winky D, Baba Harare, Ricky Fire, and Awa Khiwe craft ideas that resonate with the frustrations and aspirations of the youth. Their music and poetry entertain and serve as a platform for voicing grievances against the government (Chidora et al. 2024). For instance, Winky D's tracks often highlight the struggles faced by ordinary citizens, capturing the sentiments of disillusionment and anger towards political leaders (Matsilele and Msimanga 2022). The catchy beats and relatable lyrics encourage young listeners to engage with the political discourse, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective action.

Moreover, music videos and performances further amplify these messages, often featuring imagery that critiques the status quo. The vibrant visuals and energetic

performances attract large audiences, making ZimDancehall a potent medium for mobilising youth against governmental injustices. The genre also thrives on social media platforms, allowing for rapid dissemination of content and enabling fans to share their interpretations and reactions. However, the same artists have not been immune to alleged government harassment and, or prosecution. For instance, between 2020 and 2022 some of Winky D and Baba Harare's shows have been cancelled on the orders of authorities for unclear reasons.

Protests and demonstrations

In this paper, it was important to establish whether young people in Harare and Bulawayo participated in demonstrations/protests against the government and whether they would ever consider doing so. From the findings, the majority of the respondents have never participated in protest action and demonstrations.

Two main reasons were put forward: fear and uncertainty of their legal right to protest. The outstanding reason which explains why most youth do not participate in protests and demonstrations is their fear of the police and army brutality toward protesters and demonstrators. As demonstrated below, participants believe that participation in protests can endanger their lives.

The respondents highlighted that:

- *If l am to go and protest, l must have a fat bank balance so that my parents can enjoy that money while l am in jail if l am lucky. Otherwise, l will be in the grave,*
- *I will not participate in any demonstration or protest. Look at what happened to Sikhala and Nharivhume; it shows you the futility of such actions*.

The Mugabe regime violently suppressed protests and demonstrations. This has been the case even after Emmerson Mnangagwa came to power in late 2017. The post-2018 elections saw seven people being killed; another seven had gunshot wounds, and another 274 human rights violations were committed. This created an uneasy situation wherein the government eventually appointed a commission of enquiry headed by former South African president Kgalema Monthlante to investigate the causes of the violence and make recommendations (U.S. Department of State 2022; Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2024, 4; Human Rights Watch 2019). The commission recommended that the perpetrators be prosecuted be brought to book - none thus far has faced justice. In January 2019, another violent demonstration against rising food and fuel prices occurred mostly in Harare and Bulawayo where security forces allegedly killed 17 citizens, 17 cases of rape committed, and 26 abductions. A total of 1803 violations of human rights took place (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2024; Amnesty International 2023; U.S. Department of State 2023). The case has been the same with the 2023 elections which were also marred by cases of politically motivated violence.

Some of the respondents had this to say:

- *I have never participated in any demonstration before. I saw some people in Tshabalala blocking roads in January 2019, but l chose to*

stay indoors, and that turned out to be a wise move because the police later came for them, and some are still in jail as we speak,

- *I watched the 2019 demonstrations from a distance. The challenge was that the demonstrations did not have any leadership. The leaders were talking on WhatsApp and Facebook. At the end of it all, Chamisa and his leaders were not arrested or dead. It's the ordinary poor people. So I have learnt that politicians can use you for their own mileage*.

The right to demonstrate is enshrined in Section 58 of Zimbabwe's Constitution. Section 59 of the Constitution states that every Zimbabwean has the right to demonstrate as long as they do so peacefully, without infringing on the rights of others. However, the government has often used the law, namely the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) (previously the Public Order and Security Act), to block protests and demonstrations.

Some of the respondents had this to say:

- *The problem is that our government does not recognise our rights to go and demonstrate,*
- *In Zimbabwe, politics starts and ends with votes. All of these other things are not allowed. So mine is to vote. If we win, we win; if we lose, we try our luck in the next election,*
- *As l said before, we are not in Europe here. Some of these things do not work here. I will not put my life at risk by joining such activities*.

The police argue that the law allows them to authorise any intended demonstration, while some legal experts claim that the law only states that the police must be notified. As such, MOPA has been used to bar people from demonstrating, with the opposition arguing that this is an abuse of the law. As of July 2023, a month before the harmonised elections, Zimbabwe's main opposition party, Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC), has had nearly 100 of its election campaign rallies and demonstrations banned by the police for what the CCC categorised as petty reasons (Matiashe 2023).

Although the majority of the respondents did not participate in protests and demonstrations, two of the respondents opined that protests and demonstrations could effectively work in Zimbabwe on the condition that they were organised in the same manner as during the Arab Spring or some protests that took place in South Africa where there was mass mobilisation.

Some of the respondents had this to say:

- *While l have not participated in demonstrations, l do think they work. We need the mentality of South Africans. The problem is that if anyone calls for a demo, only a few people go, and they easily get harassed. If we all go do you think they are going to kill us all?*
- *Politicians just want us to demonstrate for them while they are in the comfort of their homes. They call for demonstrations, but you do not see them. Go to Egypt or South Africa, Malema will always be in front. Even during the Tsvangirai days, we knew he would lead and get beaten up, but the problem now is that we have cowards of leaders*.

Participation in a strike

Strike action is a form of political participation that workers in Zimbabwe have used from colonial times to the present. A distinction must be drawn between industrial strikes that take place at individual companies, organisations, and corporations and strikes by public servants which demand the attention of government in one way or another. For instance, in the late 1990s, there was a two-week civil service strike, followed by another two-month strike by junior doctors and nurses (Dansereau 1997). Doctors and nurses have recently engaged in strike action. In 2019, 2020, and 2021, doctors and nurses went on strike, protesting over poor salaries as well as the unavailability of personal protective equipment in the advent of COVID-19. As noted before, such strike action has been met by the government's brutal force and suspensions and dismissals from work of perceived ring leaders and some participants. Given the frequent strikes that occur in Zimbabwe, employed participants in the focus groups were asked whether they have participated in any strikes (Mutema 2023).

The most common reason for striking was low salaries. At the same time, some participants highlighted fear as a reason why they would not participate, given the response of the security sector which is often brutal. A participant who was a teacher acknowledged having participated in a strike over salaries, though others were reluctant to participate, even though they noted the issue of salaries, which would have made them participate if it was safe to do so.

> *I am a teacher, and l have participated in a strike before. As civil servants, our salaries are very low, so yes, l joined after the Zimbabwe Teachers Association sent messages to say we should not open schools last term. However, the headmaster reported us to the district, so money was deducted from my salary. Now, the option is to just go to work and not really do the work. Let the parents do it.*

The fear of arrests and political harassment associated with strikes appeared as a reason why most respondents in the working groups would not participate in strike action.

- *I have seen those guys from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and Rural Teacher's Association languishing in prison. As a civil servant, I can't participate in a strike. Those big guys can hire lawyers, but if we are arrested, who will represent us?*
- *Strike action almost always attracts the police. The police in Zimbabwe do not negotiate with anyone; they use violence to quell down even peaceful protests.*

Previous strike action by teachers and nurses resulted in the participants being openly assaulted by riot police and being detained and charged for disruptive behaviour (Pigou 2019, 3).

Signing of petitions

Signing petitions is the most open, transparent, and effective way of involving the public in political participation, and is attractive to young people. Petitions have been used in numerous instances in many countries of the world. For instance, in Britain, Downing Street e-petitions have become a common tool used by citizens to communicate with politicians on policy issues (Wright 2015). Scholars like Yasseri, Hale and Margetts (2017) observe that the advent of social media has popularised petitions, although they also acknowledge that 99% of petitions do not succeed.

In Zimbabwe, individuals like Eve Charumbira solicited citizens to sign an e-petition that called for the UN and SADC to intervene in the political crisis in Zimbabwe after the killing of civilians by security forces in August 2018. Given the availability of social media and the ease of signing an electronic petition (e-petition), respondents were also questioned about their involvement in signing petitions to raise political issues (Ndlovu, Mtetwa and Makina 2021). However, most focus group participants, regardless of gender, age, education, and employment status, opined that they had not signed a petition before. The reasons vary, ranging from unawareness of what a petition is, its function, and whether it is successful. For example:

- *I do not know what a petition is; l have never seen one.*
- *I have not come across a petition before, but I think I would consider signing one if it speaks to issues dear to me. To me, it sounds like a safer way to express an opinion.*
- *Does it even work? If the government cannot listen to people demonstrating on the street, and actually responds by killing them, how about a piece of paper with some signatures?*

Two respondents confirmed having signed a petition before. These respondents demonstrated an understanding of the usefulness of a petition in raising an issue for attention. However, the issues they were attending to were not necessarily cause-oriented issues directed at the government or those seeking government intervention.

- *At my workplace, we had a number of issues resolved by signing petitions. Bosses are afraid of petitions because they show strength in numbers. I think it would work if, for example, the whole of Hillside suburb were to sign a petition against the non-collection of refuse by the city council.*
- *When l was at Teacher's College, we signed a petition against a lecturer who was sexually harassing female students.*

Boycotts

A distinction must be made between political and consumer boycotts. Political boycotts refer to the refusal to cooperate, usually with a government, over a political issue or event such as an election or policy (Bingisai 2023; Beaulieu 2006). For example, in Zimbabwe, Morgan Tsvangirai withdrew his candidature in the June 2008 run-off election, which forced Robert Mugabe to engage Mr. Tsvangirai as Mr. Mugabe then

faced legitimacy challenges (Ploch 2008). Parliamentarians from the opposition MDC and CCC also often boycott parliament, especially when the president appears for his State of the Nation address. Similarly, students across tertiary institutions of learning, such as the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), boycotted lectures in protests against Mugabe's resistance to calls for his resignation. In particular, at the UZ, students gathered outside the exam halls, singing and briefly forcing the cancellation of exams (Harrison 2017).

On the other hand, consumer boycotts refer to not buying specific goods and services as a way of showing displeasure in the actions of the producer of the goods or provider of the services (Mhuru 2023). Some respondents have been involved in consumer boycotts, but this is beyond the scope of this study.

Gender clearly stood as a factor that distinguished political participation between male and female youth through boycott activities. The respondents who opined that they had participated in both political and consumer boycotts were female. The researcher sought to find out why women preferred to use boycotts compared to other forms of political participation, and the one reason that came out was safety, as shown in the view illustrated below.

According to (Stolle et al. 2005, 251; Adugu 2014, 43), it is only those who have high-income streams and those who are influential who engage in boycotts. However, this does not explain why female youth find boycotts acceptable. Boycotts are very safe.

> *I highlighted earlier that l will not register to vote. That is my way of boycotting elections. It is very safe and effective, and l think it would actually make a huge difference if everyone were to boycott voting. I will be in my house with my children.*

When asked why none of the male participants had participated in boycott activities, the responses were mixed. Some felt that boycotts were not as effective, whereas others believed that they would work with better coordination.

This is what some male respondents had to say:

> *I would want to be part of boycott activities, but you see that Zimbabweans are not united. So, whatever boycott action you may want to take, it will not work. I do not know of anyone who is happy with the local currency. Yet I remember at some point there was a move that we should boycott using bond notes. I felt it was a good move, but what did we do? We continued to use them.*

Occupation of buildings

The last form of unconventional political participation is the occupation of buildings as a means of protest. A distinction must be drawn between the occupation of public buildings, which is mainly meant to attract the attention of government authorities to a particular issue or problem (Lopez and Bernardos 2015), and the occupation of private buildings, which may be motivated by private issues between the occupiers/trespassers and the owner of the building. In scholarly literature, the occupation of buildings is not

really a new phenomenon but one that is becoming more common in advanced democracies (Quaranta 2012). In the context of the study, one participant's view was that the occupation of buildings bordered more on criminality and would distract the cause at the end of the day.

> *I do not think that would work. Looking at Mako, he anguished in jail. Sometimes you just need to make your point without committing a crime (Hillside employed youth focus group, 18-24 years).*

In the case of Makomborero Haruzivishe, a Harare-based youth, he and others forcibly locked the premises of Impala Car Rentals in Harare (Gambakwe, 2020). Mr. Haruzivishe and others went to the Impala premises to protest against the company, as it was allegedly hiring its cars to state security departments that were allegedly involved in the abductions of opposition activists.

Conclusion and discussion

The research question guiding this study, how urban youth in Zimbabwe navigate the political landscape in the post-Mugabe era and the forms of political participation they engage in, reveals a number of factors influencing youth engagement and disinterest in conventional political activities. The findings indicate a significant detachment from unconventional forms of political participation largely due to a pervasive sense of disenchantment and fear stemming from historical and contemporary political repression.

The first critical finding is the youth's evident reluctance to participate in protests and demonstrations. Despite the constitutional right to demonstrate, the fear of police brutality and the potential for violent reprisals has created a chilling effect on youth activism. Participants in focus groups expressed a strong apprehension regarding their safety, citing instances of violence against protesters in the past and present. This aligns with the historical context of political repression in Zimbabwe, where government crackdowns on dissent have been commonplace. The legacy of violence and intimidation left by the Mugabe regime continues to influence youth perceptions of political engagement, leading many to view protests as futile and dangerous.

Moreover, the findings highlight that while there is a desire among some youth for mass mobilisation akin to movements seen in other countries, such as the Arab Spring, the lack of effective leadership and organisation in local protests has further diminished their willingness to engage. Youth respondents articulated a sense of disillusionment with political leaders who, they believe, exploit protests for their gain while remaining insulated from the risks faced by ordinary citizens. This disconnect between political leaders and the youth populace exacerbates feelings of cynicism and disengagement, indicating a crucial barrier to effective political participation.

Additionally, the study reveals that while some youth are aware of alternative forms of political engagement, such as signing petitions or boycotting, their actual participation remains low. The lack of understanding about the effectiveness of petitions and the perception that they do not lead to tangible change further discourage youth from engaging in this form of political activism. This reflects a broader trend

where young people, feeling marginalised and voiceless, opt for non-participation rather than engaging in processes they perceive as ineffective or irrelevant.

The findings also reveal that economic conditions play a significant role in shaping youth political participation. High unemployment rates and economic instability have led many young individuals to prioritise survival over political engagement, viewing participation as a luxury they cannot afford. This economic disenfranchisement feeds into a cycle of political apathy, as the youth feel that the political system does not address their immediate concerns. Consequently, the economic landscape in Zimbabwe acts as both a barrier to participation and a catalyst for disillusionment, further alienating youth from unconventional political processes. However, the emergence of unconventional political participation through digital activism and ZimDancehall presents a glimmer of hope. The findings indicate that urban youth increasingly exploit social media and digital platforms to express their grievances and mobilise for change. Movements such as #ThisFlag and #TajamukaSesijikile exemplify the potential of digital spaces to facilitate political expression and collective action among youth. This shift towards unconventional modes of participation suggests that while traditional avenues may be closed off, young people are finding innovative ways to assert their agency and advocate for their rights.

Urban youth in Zimbabwe represent a significant demographic, but their engagement in unconventional modes of political participation remains limited. The transition from Robert Mugabe to Emmerson Mnangagwa was anticipated to herald a new era of reform; however, the reality has been starkly different. Economic conditions have deteriorated further, exacerbating unemployment and social instability, while authoritarianism persists, stifling dissent and curtailing freedoms. As a result, many young people perceive political engagement as futile and dangerous, leading to a pervasive sense of disillusionment. Life cycle factors, such as the pressing need to secure livelihoods, further inhibit their ability to participate actively in political processes. The fear of repression, rooted in the legacy of violence and intimidation from both the Mugabe and Mnangagwa regimes, deters youth from taking risks associated with protests, activism, or other forms of dissent. Consequently, the combination of economic hardship, authoritarian governance, and a lack of meaningful avenues for participation has nurtured a climate of political apathy among urban youth, underscoring the urgent need for transformative changes that genuinely address their aspirations and grievances. Without these changes, the potential for youth engagement in Zimbabwe's political landscape remains severely constrained.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at
https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.9.070

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and critiques. The author would also like to acknowledge the support and mentorship received from the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Conflict of interests
The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards
The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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