

Social media, civil resistance, the *Varakashi* factor and the shifting polemics of Zimbabwe's social media "war"

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Abstract

A recent increase in the rate of internet access and ICT devices in Zimbabwe has led to a surge in social media use by the citizenry. WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram are the most popular social networking sites (SNS). Social movements have capitalised on these SNS to resist the ruling elite's kleptocratic and tyrannical style of governance. Apart from individual online activists, social movements and campaigns that rely on social media that have emerged include; #Thisflag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, #ThisGown and #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, and #ThisFlower. However, after President Robert Mugabe's toppling through a "soft coup" by his generals, a new breed of vicious online activists called *Varakashi* emerged. *Varakashi* are pro-establishment (the "New Dispensation"), anti-progressive civil society and opposition parties, and seek to counteract Zimbabwe's online activists who are inspired by democracy and human rights discourses. Accordingly, this article seeks to assess how social media platforms are used by social movements in Zimbabwe for the purposes of civil resistance and disobedience. The article also interrogates the "*Varakashi* effect" on Zimbabwe's social media "war." Crucially, the article embarks on a stock taking exercise to ascertain the drawbacks and prospects of social media use for civil resistance purposes by social movements in Zimbabwe. Existing literature on social media and politics tend to gravitate towards the "Arab Spring" and South Africa's #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. Therefore, this article affords attention to Zimbabwe's social movements to bridge the aforementioned scholarly lacuna. Moreover, social media reliant movements and campaigns in Zimbabwe represent "a third force" outside government and party politics and therefore a phenomenon worth interrogation.

Key words: Social Media; Civil Resistance; Social Movements; *Varakashi*; Zimbabwe

Introduction

The use of social media for purposes of civil resistance is largely associated with the famous “Arab Spring” of 2011 which plagued countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, Oman, and Djibouti. Accordingly, Chilwa (2012, p.1) raises the crucial fact that; during the Arab Spring, generally, planning and discussions were carried out on Twitter and Facebook, where activists talked to each other, mobilized protesters and advanced new strategies. Likewise, in the same year, the UK experienced a wave of social media related protests organised by students. “The violent protests in the United Kingdom (UK) from July–August 2011 were also driven through Twitter, Facebook and BlackBerry Messenger” (Institute of peace and Security, 2012, p.1). In terms of scope and impact, the UK scenario comparatively fell far short of the “Arab Spring.”

In North Africa, the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan cases were outstanding as they led to dramatic and fundamental changes. In the Tunisian scenario, which sparked the Arab Spring, social media enabled the formation of networks by the “digital elite”; reporting on the magnitude of protest events; and the facilitation of the formation of a national collective identity which transcended geographical as well as socio-economic disparities (Breuer, 2012, p.i). In the same vein, one Egyptian activist during the Egyptian revolution said: “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world” (Storck, 2011, p.4). While Harvey (2014, p.5) acknowledges social media use during the Libyan revolution she dispels the notion of a “Twitter or Facebook revolution” due to low levels of internet penetration in Libya at that time.

Importantly, Chilwa (2012, p.217) notes that, “the North African revolutionary experience, with its huge implications for the rise of new paradigms for political change and

government, demonstrates the potential for similar uprisings, not only in the Muslim world but also in other parts of Africa.” Chilwa’s remarks are validated by the emergence of social media driven political activism in Sub Saharan Africa in recent years. Correspondingly, Willems (2016, p.1) notes that the #GoToVote campaign which sought to mobilise people to vote in peace had gained ground in Kenya. The Southern African region cannot be excluded from the narrative of social media political participation. By the same token, Willems (2016, p.2) notes that, social media platforms – primarily Facebook, WhatsApp and to a lesser extent Twitter –also played an important role in circulating information during the recent Zambian elections. In South Africa, March 2015 witnessed the birth of the #RhodesMustFall protest movement. Luescher & Klemenčič (2016, p.1) describe the #RhodesMustFall movement as: “a wave of student protests that started at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, with an intent to ‘decolonise’ the University and rid it of offensive colonial symbols such as the statue of Cecil John Rhodes.” Importantly, Luescher & Klemenčič (2016, p.1) emphasise the importance of social media; mainly Twitter in the articulation of messages by the #RhodesMustFall movement. Additionally, in October 2015, the #FeesMustFall protest movement, advocating for free tertiary education in South Africa, also emerged. The two social movements operated in conjunction.

In Zimbabwe, economic collapse, kleptocracy, ZANU PF’s authoritarian rule, and former President Mugabe’s advanced age and ill-health led to the revival of civil resistance and the birth of social and citizen movements. Moyo (2017) notes that, the government’s corruption in Zimbabwe stirred a deadly pot of stark civil resistance and disobedience, leading to the birth of social movements and campaigns such as #ThisFlag, #ThisGown, #ThisFlower, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile etc.

In November 2017, President Robert Mugabe was unceremoniously removed from power by his generals through a popular and “soft coup.” The dethroning of Robert Mugabe paved way for a “new” political order, led by his former deputy, Emmerson Mnangagwa. The new regime has sought to change the social media narrative on Zimbabwe by deploying an online defence brigade known as *Varakashi*. As this article shall later reveal, the advent of pro-status quo *Varakashi* on the political scene has changed the face of social media dynamics and activism in Zimbabwe.

This article illuminates how social movements in Zimbabwe are using social media in their resistance against the ruling elite and ZANU PF party. Moreover, the paper embarks on a stock taking exercise to ascertain the effectiveness of the aforementioned social media groups. There is inadequate literature on this area of study particularly in relation to Zimbabwe since most studies tend to focus on social media in relation to the “Arab Spring” or South Africa’s #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. This study is one of the few which seek to fill such a scholarly lacuna. The new wave of social media political activism which was ignited by Pastor Evan Mawarire’s #ThisFlag movement, raised curiosity and motivation for the undertaking of this study. In a similar vein the emergence of *Varakashi* forms an essential part of this article’s inquiry, owing to the fact that, social movements in Zimbabwe, now represent “a third force” outside government and political parties and therefore a phenomenon worth investigating.

Methodological Note

This study followed a qualitative methodological trajectory. Therefore, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram accounts of social movements in Zimbabwe were utilized. Of particular interest were the social media accounts of the #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, #ThisGown, #OccupyAfricaUnity Square and #ThisFlower movements. Social media accounts

of Varakashi were also closely observed. The audio-visual and textual content posted by these social movements from their social media accounts was analysed. In addition to that, newspaper articles, journals, reports, and various other internet sources played an important role in terms of data collection for the article. The researcher also conducted a quasi-ethnographic observation as he was in Zimbabwe for four months (from August to December 2016). In this period the researcher witnessed many activities (including street protests) by these social movements.. In addition, discussions with some members of the social movements in question were critical in excavating relevant information. For the purposes of analysing the data, thematic analysis was employed. Although there are several social movements in Zimbabwe, this article is biased towards the #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare movements. Other movements will be highlighted but not in greater detail. The period of study for this article is January 2016 up to 2020. However, the period before 2016 will be used for reference purposes.

Theoretical and Conceptual Paradigm

In terms of its theoretical underpinnings and analytical spectacles, this article is anchored in the social penetration and social exchange theories. These two theories align with the discourse of social media and political participation. Accordingly, the social penetration theory is summed up in the following words:

The social penetration theory suggests that relationships become more intimate over a period of time when more personal information is revealed; this is evident in Twitter relationships. Millions of friendships have formed from “tweet-ups” or a friend request. A person may start to follow you, but constant and direct interaction will lead to more intimate friendships that go beyond the computer or cell phone. Maintaining relationships also relies on intimate exchanges by both parties (Fatkin, 2017).

Thus, the social penetration theory is relevant to this paper considering the relationships that have been created (over time) on social media networks by social movements in Zimbabwe. The fact that the relationship between the leadership of social movements and their followers has graduated from the virtual to the physical space compliments the dictates of the social penetration theory. Moreover, social and citizen movements in Zimbabwe have managed to penetrate societies through social media platforms.

Another relevant theoretical paradigm is the social exchange theory. Emmerson (1976) as cited in (Pan & Crotts, 2012, p.7) notes that, the social exchange theory states that human beings form close relationships through self-disclosure. Social exchange theory was originated from sociology studies exploring exchange between individuals or small groups (Pan & Crotts, 2012, p.7). Furthermore, Homans (1958) in Pan & Crotts, 2012, p.7) observes that, the social exchange theory mainly uses cost-benefit framework and comparison of alternatives to explain how human beings communicate with each other, how they form relationships and bonds, and how communities are formed through communication exchanges (Pan & Crotts, 2012). The theory underlines that individuals engage in behaviours they find rewarding and avoid ones where the cost is too high (Pan & Crotts, 2012, pp 7). It could therefore be said that citizens in Zimbabwe are making relations on social media because of the beneficial nature of such relationships- the prospect of restoring the rule of law and democracy. Thus, it is important to underline that the social penetration theory and social exchange theory blend well with social media and citizen centred movements not only in Zimbabwe but the world over. .

Social Movements in Zimbabwe: Evolution of Civil Resistance

Before delving in to the evolutionary component of social movements in Zimbabwe, it is crucial to focus on the meaning of social media, social/citizen movement and civil resistance.

“The term social media refers to a wide range of internet based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges; contribute user-created content or join online communities (Dewing, 2012.p.1). Examples of social media platforms include; Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Viber, YouTube etc.

Batliwala (2012, p.3) cited in *Gender and Social Movements* (2016, p.19) notes that: “Social movements are forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands.” Hlatywayo and Mangongera’s definition (2020, p.7) is more nuanced: “Social movements consist of citizen mobilization clusters that use collective non-violent action, have change oriented goals and demands, are sustainable over time and involve some unity building and organization.” In short social movements are underpinned by convergence of citizens in order to press for popular demands and change through non-violent methodologies. On the other hand, civil resistance, which is a philosophy associated with Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jnr is “a type of political action that relies on the use of non-violent methods. It is largely synonymous with terms such as - ‘non-violent action’, ‘non-violent resistance’ and ‘people power’” (Roberts, 2009, p.1). Unlike revolutions that are defined by violence and the deployment of “all means necessary” to change social situations, civil resistance is hinged on non-violence and the Kantian velvet glove of idealism.

To fully comprehend the current social media related movements and resistance, it is important to briefly reflect on the history of civil resistance in Zimbabwe beginning from the late 1990s. Mandaza (2014) cites the economic problems of 1990s in Zimbabwe- the budget crisis, unemployment and Economic Structural Adjustment Programme which in turn gave birth to mass unrest: the December 1997 stay-away, and the food riots of January 1998. Resistance against poor governance gained momentum in the late 1990s particularly with the formation of the National Constitutional Assembly in 1997. Masunungure and Bratton (2011,

p.23) note that, the NCA – a broad alliance of various professions, labour, women’s and religious organizations, including the prominently ZCTU created educational campaign on constitutional issues disseminated through a network of meetings in all provinces. The NCA and its allies lobbied for a democratic and people driven constitution, restoration of the rule of law, human rights, jobs and decent wages.

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) were some of the NCA’s top allies. Together with the newly formed MDC they successfully lobbied for the rejection of a government sponsored constitution in a referendum in 2000. In 1999, the NCA, ZCTU and its affiliate members had successfully formed the Movement for Democratic Change, the largest opposition in Zimbabwe. What is important for this paper is that the NCA and other pressure groups did not rely on social media because the use of computers, mobile phones and internet was minimal at that time. Instead, a network of meetings across the country was the main method and messages were passed on through word of mouth, newspapers, flyers and pamphlets. Such a scenario is totally different from that of the current citizen driven movements that rely heavily on social media platforms. The defining moment in Zimbabwe’s social media political activism was the emergence of *Baba Jukwa* on Facebook.

Enter *Baba Jukwa*

In 2013, an anonymous and shadowy activist and character called *Baba Jukwa* emerged on Facebook. *Newsday* (2013, June 21) reports that *Baba Jukwa* had 161, 131 followers since joining Facebook on March 22, 2013. On its Facebook timeline, the anonymous character described itself as a “Concerned father, fighting nepotism and directly linking the community with their leaders, government, Members of Parliament and ministers” *Newsday* (2013, June 21). Also, *Newsday* (2013, June 21) notes that, *Baba Jukwa*, who claimed to be a disgruntled

government and ruling party insider, exposed information on government corruption, assassination plots and incompetence, among other issues. *Newsday's* account is corroborated by the author's own observation. *Baba Jukwa's* Facebook account was deactivated soon after the 2013 elections. The identity of *Baba Jukwa* remains a matter of speculation up to this day. The author of this article was a close follower of *Baba Jukwa*. At one point, *Baba Jukwa* promised to end Mugabe's rule even through force- a promise that was never fulfilled. It is also worth mentioning that *Baba Jukwa* had a rival in the form of *Mai Jukwa* but the latter failed to match the "firepower" of the former. Thus, *Baba Jukwa* is generally regarded as the "pioneer" and "Godfather" of social media political activism in Zimbabwe.

The 2016 Wave- Dawn of a New Era in Social Media Activism

The year 2016 was a turning point in the context of social media activism in Zimbabwe as it witnessed the birth of online social movements such as; #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, #ThisGown and #ThisFlower. The #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, which had been initiated in 2015 also became nuanced in 2016. Although this article focuses mainly on #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka and #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, it is important to highlight the #ThisFlower and #ThisGown campaigns. The #ThisFlower campaign is a social movement that was initiated by Stan Zvorwadza the then leader of the National Vendors Union of Zimbabwe (NAVUZ). The movement was against police brutality in Zimbabwe and used the flower as a symbol of love and peace (Manayiti, 2016). The #ThisFlower's members were drawn mainly from vendors and the movement was not as active as its counterparts on social media. The movement in question collapsed when its leader, Stan Zvorwadza, out of personal aggrandizement, crossed the floor to collaborate with the ruling elite. #ThisGown was a group of graduates who protested against unemployment and played football and sold sweets (putting on their gowns) on the streets to demonstrate that there were no jobs and that they were idle. Its members posted

videos and pictures of their activities mainly on Facebook. The impact of this movement however, was minimal compared to the #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare movements. As a result, the #ThisGown died a natural death.

#ThisFlag

#ThisFlag describes itself as a “citizens’ movement” started by a Zimbabwean Pastor called Evan Mawarire in May 2016. *Aljazeera* (2016, September 5) notes that, Pastor Evan Mawarire is heralded as the initiator of the rise of social media activism, with an online monologue discussing the "violation" of the Zimbabwe flag. Moreover, “The video created a domino effect, launching an on-going campaign using the hash tag #ThisFlag, used as a means of protesting about President Robert Mugabe's government” (*Aljazeera*, 2016, September 5). The #ThisFlag campaign mainly uses the Zimbabwean flag as a symbol of resistance. Mawarire with a flag wrapped around his neck, started posting videos which bemoaned government corruption, national leadership ineptitude and poor service delivery. In line with the social penetration and social exchange theories, his videos consequently went viral and scores of Zimbabweans in the country and diaspora joined his movement. On its Facebook account, the #ThisFlag movement articulates its vision: “Our vision is a Zimbabwe where citizens are emboldened to speak out, ask questions and act against corruption, injustice and poverty.” The #ThisFlag mission is short and precise: “Speak. Ask. Act” (ThisFlag, 2016).

The #ThisFlag movement is predominantly on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp with occasional activity on YouTube and Instagram. As of 25 February 2017 the #ThisFlag Facebook page had 59, 649 followers (ThisFlag, 2016) and 63, 000 followers on its twitter handle (#ThisFlag E. Mawarire, 2017). The #ThisFlag movement has a large support base from Zimbabweans in the diaspora, mostly in the US, UK, Germany, South Africa and Australia, among other countries. An observation shows that, on social media platforms, the movement’s

activities include; issuing statements, updates, holding interviews with national leaders, hosting policy dialogues, presenting at universities, education, mobilisation and recruitment. Apart from online activities, the #ThisFlag movement also participates in protests on the streets and at Zimbabwean embassies in foreign countries like South Africa, UK, Australia, USA and Germany, among others. Supporters of #ThisFlag are from diverse sections of the society: business, church, student movements, intellectuals, journalists, women's groups, youth organisations etc.

#Tajamuka/Sesijikile

Another notable social movement in Zimbabwe is the #Tajamuka/Sesijikile campaign. On its account, the movement had 42 326 and 4 693 followers on Facebook (Tajamuka/Sesijikile Campaign, 2017) and Twitter (Tajamuka-Sesijikile, 2017) respectively as of 25 February 2017. In an interview with the *International Business Times Uk* (2016, August 1), #Tajamuka Spokesperson, Promise Mkhwananzi described the word Tajamuka: "As an expression, *Tajamuka* literally means 'outraged', 'angry' with an implicit component of 'action' - something like: "Let's act". We are very happy about this colloquial term... Generally, it captures very well the national sentiment in the country." The expression Tajamuka is a *Shona* word which means to strongly disagree. It is common amongst the youth and the youth are the majority of social media platforms in Zimbabwe. The youth also constitute the largest support base of the #Tajamuka/Sesijikile social movement.

Unlike #ThisFlag which claims political impartiality and neutrality, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile comprises of civic society organisations and opposition political parties. Mkhwananzi in his capacity as national Spokesperson stated that Tajamuka is comprised of 14 political parties and more than 30 civil society organisations and youth pressure groups. Political parties include, PDZ, Zunde, the NCA, EDP, PDP, MDC-N and MDC-T (*International Business*

Times UK, 2016, August 1). What is important to note is that #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile complement each other's efforts with overlapping membership and following. An important distinction is the fact that #Tajamuka/Sesijikile is more local facing than #ThisFlag. . #Tajamuka/Sesijikile is also radical in its approach; Mkhwananzi notes that #Tajamuka/Sesijikile follows a "hard way" whereas #ThisFlag follows the "soft way" to achieving peace (*International Business Times UK*, 2016, August 1). On his Facebook page and in his usual combative style, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile's Spokesperson, Promise Mkhwananzi said: "In 2017, we will resist ZANU PF on the streets, in valleys, on mountains, in bars, kitchens and even in our bedrooms" (Mkhwananzi, 2016). On the other hand, #ThisFlag's stance could be influenced by its guiding principle of non-violence emanating from its founder's (Pastor Evan Mawarire) Christian background. While he was in Zimbabwe, the author of this article witnessed some of the activities organised under the #Tajamuka/Sesijikile banner in Harare; these included; occupation of the Africa Unity Square, street protests (sometimes violent), petitions, addressing people at bank queues as well as lobbying and negotiating with the Reserve Bank Governor, John Mangudya to stop the introduction of bond notes as Zimbabwe's new currency.

#OccupyAfricaUnitySquare

#OccupyAfricaUnitySquare is closely associated with the abducted journalist-cum activist, Itai Dzamara who was abducted by suspected state security agents in Harare on 9 March 2015. #OccupyAfricaUnity is against government corruption and state brutality. On its Facebook account, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare says its mission is: "To demand an end to Zimbabwe's cycle of national failure and suffering" (Occupy Africa Unity Square, 2015). The movement seem to have been inspired by the Tahrir Square occupation protests in Egypt; hence they want people to occupy the Africa Unity Square in Harare until their demands are met. #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare also uses the Zimbabwean flag and is also active on Facebook. As

of 26 February 2017, the movement had 14, 470 followers on its Facebook account (Occupy Africa Unity Square, 2017). After the abduction of Itai Dzamara, the movement's leadership is working closely with #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka; a case of overlapping membership and interests, however #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare seems to favour street protests compared to online activism. Dr. Patson Dzamara, brother to the abducted activist Itai Dzamara, and Dirk Frey are leading names in the #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare social movement.

Most importantly, it is crucial to note that unlike the *Baba Jukwa* era, the current citizen driven movements in Zimbabwe no longer rely on anonymity to protect their identity in most cases. The leaders of these groups are well known and even their supporters sometimes show solidarity with them at courts and other public spaces. This shows that the state's strategy of harvesting fear is relatively fading away.

Individual Activists- The “Lone Rangers”

Apart from the citizens' movements discussed above, there are individual online political activists whose work has caught the eye of most followers of the Zimbabwe Crisis. Some of these individuals are prominent journalists, writers, academics, lawyers, political analysts, civil society members, politicians, former cabinet ministers etc. Such individuals fall into two categories: those who support the status quo (*Varakashi*) and the good governance activists.

Amongst those activists who are inspired by human rights discourses, Award Winning Journalist, Hopewell Chin'ono is notable. Observation reveals that he had 102 300 followers as of 23 January 2020. Chin'ono is a trenchant critic of the current kleptocratic regime and military dictatorship in Zimbabwe. He is an able articulator of issues around political reforms, democracy deficit and human rights violations in Zimbabwe. In addition, Writer and Novelist, Tsitsi Dangarembga is another staunch human rights advocate. She has a significant following

on Twitter: 16 300. There are also Mugabe's former cabinet ministers who fled Zimbabwe during the November 2017 coup. Former ministers such as Saviour Kasukuwere, Walter Mzembi, Godfrey Gandawa, Patrick Zhuwao and Jonathan Moyo are the most vocal against the Mnangagwa administration. Jonathan Moyo is one of the harshest critics of the "New Dispensation" and boasts of a significant following on twitter: 541 600 followers as of 23 January 2020. Due to issues of space and time, the full list of anti- government activists cannot be discussed. In a bid to counteract anti-government forces, the ruling ZANU PF has deployed a "brigade" of online pro-government activists popularly known as *Varakashi* (destroyers).

***Varakashi*- Regime "Enablers" and Gatekeepers**

Mwareya (2019), who describes *Varakashi* as "Zimbabwe's online army," throws light on the origins of the term *Varakashi*. Accordingly, the term traces its origin to Zimbabwe's President, Emmerson Mngangagwa, who at a rally in May 2018 encouraged his supporters to "destroy" the ruling party's opponents on social media: "*Varakashei pa social media ipapo*" [Jump in and hammer party enemies online. Don't play second fiddle] (Mwareya, 2019). Observation reveals that Mnangagwa's speech not only emboldened already existing pro-government and ZANU PF online activists such as Reason Wafawarova, Mutisi, Jones Musara and others, but also led to the emergence and reinforcement of "ghost" accounts and anonymous characters such as Nicole Hondo, Matigary etc. *Varakashi* has support from the top echelons of ZANU PF and government officials. Observation for instance reveals that the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services, Nick Mangwana often retweets and openly supports them. In fact, Chin'ono (2020) argues that Nick Mangwana and George Charamba who is Mnangagwa's Presidential Spokesperson and an ardent supporter of *Varakashi*, are behind some of *Varakashi's* "ghost accounts."

In answering questions around the exact purpose of *Varakashi*, Mwareya (2019), whose account can be verified through observation, provides the following job description:

Their job is clear cut: disrupt online debates, stymie criticism of Emmerson Mnangagwa and his government...the Varakashi are on call 24 hours a day...New Twitter accounts with deceptive avatars- are registered in under two minutes, then the disruption begins. Chat threads are spammed, and eventually slowed, with a barrage of hyperlinks. Or they are driven off topic by volleys of disingenuous interjections.

Within this scheme of things, it seems inescapable to argue that although some of the *Varakashis* might be voluntary ZANU PF supporters, some of them could be on the ruling party's payroll. *Varakashi* arguably form part of the state's crude propaganda programme. They fall into a category in which Magaisa (2019) calls "regime enablers"- individuals and institutions which help promote, defend and sustain authoritarian regimes. However, what is worrying is *Varakashi's* toxic, hostile, sexist, uncritical and undemocratic brand of politics.

Citizen Movements and Social Media Activism: Prospects and Challenges

This section deals with how social media has been used by the citizens' movements in Zimbabwe and what they have achieved so far and the challenges they currently face. The utilisation of social media platforms by citizen led protest movements in Zimbabwe can be linked to the proliferation of ICT equipment and internet in Zimbabwe. In 2009, during the inclusive government, duty was scrapped on ICT products. Consequently, Zimbabweans imported ICT equipment free of charge. ZIMRA (2009) listed duty-free ICT equipment as; computers, laptops, I-pads, computer software, Braille computers, computer parts and

accessories, cell phones, base stations/boosters, radar apparatus and aircraft navigation equipment. The result of scrapping duty was the “flooding” of ICT equipment in the country.

Although duty was later reinstated on ICT products after the 2013 elections, many Zimbabweans already had huge access to mobile phones and internet. The latest report by POTRAZ (2015, p.10) shows that active mobile phones subscriptions increased from the 3rd quarter to the 4th quarter of 2015 from 12,394,383 to 12,757,410 subscriptions (2.9% increase). Furthermore, (POTRAZ, 2015, p.15) notes that in 2015 mobile data utilisation increased by 27.4% to a record 1,203,378,839MB from 944,268,192MB recorded in the previous quarter. The report further notes that in terms of mobile internet and data usage, WhatsApp bundles took up 34%, Facebook 3% and others (including YouTube, LinkedIn, emails, Skype, and Instagram) took the remaining 63% (POTRAZ, 2015, p.15). This information clearly shows the importance of the mobile phone, social media and internet in the Zimbabwean society. It is therefore not surprising that citizen movements are utilising social media for political activism in Zimbabwe. Willems (2016, p.2) notes that, the number of Facebook users in Africa (including Zimbabwe) was estimated at 124.6 million at the end of 2015 and continues to grow. In 2014, Zimbabwe had an estimated 1, 400, 000+ Facebook users, a number that keeps changing (Chui, 2014). This is a huge number considering the Zimbabwe population of approximately 14 million.

#ThisFlag, #Tajamuka, Occupy Africa Unity Square, #ThisFlower and #ThisGown frequently use online videos on Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Twitter to communicate their messages. In relation to #ThisFlag, “Evan took to a camera and decided to speak out, ask questions and act against corruption, injustice and poverty. He encouraged Zimbabweans to be bold in speaking out and seeking accountability from the Government that should serve them. It is from this moment of reflection that #ThisFlag was born” (ThisFlag, 2016). In line with the dictates of social penetration and social exchange theories, Zimbabweans in the country

and those in the diaspora joined him and started posting videos on social media bemoaning government corruption and ineptitude. Thus, through social media, social movements in Zimbabwe have managed to create a democratic space online in terms of freedom of expression and association; important values of democracy. This is in sync with Joseph's (2012) assertion that social media creates a public sphere in the virtual space which acts as an alternative to the physical.

Further to this, by providing information and updates on social media platforms, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, Occupy Africa Unity Square, #ThisFlower and #ThisGown movements have managed to counter state propaganda by providing information related to government's bad governance to the public. There is currently one television station in Zimbabwe and state-controlled newspapers like *The Herald*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Chronicle*, *Kwayedza*, *H-Metro* and *B-Metro* have been accused of being the ruling party's propaganda mouth-pieces (Moyo, 2017). In affirming the above, one respondent to the study asserted that: "Social media activism is a huge relief, alternative and break from the state's diet of poisonous propaganda." Correspondingly, another respondent described social media reliant movements in Zimbabwe as "the only game in town." Based on this it could be argued that, online social movements have helped to challenge the status-quo and by-pass state propaganda instruments.

Citizen led movements in Zimbabwe are also relying on social media for the recruitment of new members or followers. As shown in the last section, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and #ThisFlag have managed to recruit a significant number of followers online. Levin & Cross (2004) note that for political mobilisation and recruitment to be effective, social media facilitates acquisition and transfer of political knowledge through social networks. Videos, pictures and statements have been used for the purposes of recruitment and mobilisation by citizen movements in Zimbabwe. This is contrary to the conventional methods of challenging state power. Christensen (2009) notes that the introduction of social media has changed the

pattern people use to challenge political authority; an assertion relevant to Zimbabwe's scenario.

Moreover, citizen movements in Zimbabwe have managed to promote political participation and robust debates online. For instance in 2017, the author of this article witnessed #ThisFlag's Fadzayi Mahere hosting a dialogue (live-streamed on Facebook) where she discussed issues of service delivery with the then Mayor of Harare, Ben Manyenyeni and leaders of residents associations in Harare. Viewers asked questions online and got responses from the dialogue panel. This does not only promote political participation but also brings leaders closer to the people and in some way; make them more accountable. In relation to that, the #ThisFlag members also hold BBC Hard Talk style interviews with leaders of political parties in Zimbabwe to ignite debate and hold them accountable to their followers. Then President of the Zimbabwe People First (ZIM-PF), Joyce Mujuru and MDC Spokesperson, Obert Gutu, were the latest interviewees. This is changing the nature of political activism in many respects. Although wary of the effectiveness of social media, scholars such as Tendi (2016) and Mutsvairo (2016) acknowledge that social media is changing the nature of political activism and the struggle for good governance particularly in Zimbabwe. Moreover, in relation to social movements, there is no doubt that social media platforms have boosted political participation by Zimbabweans.

On 6 July 2016, in an act of civil disobedience, #ThisFlag and its counterparts organised a mass stay away where citizens were asked (through social media) to stay at home and "shut down" the country. The message code named #ZimShutDown trended on Twitter and Facebook (#ThisFlag, 2016). The majority of Zimbabweans heeded the call to "shut down" Zimbabwe. *BBC* (2016, July 6) reported that: "Zimbabwe's main cities are deserted during a nationwide stay away to protest at the lack of jobs and unpaid wages." A respondent to this study described the shut down as "one of the biggest civil resistance campaigns since the

MDC's 'Stay Away' programmes of the early 2000s." In reaction to the shutdown, the state panicked and arrested #ThisFlag's leader, Evan Mawarire. On 13 July 2016, massive crowds carrying Zimbabwean flags gathered outside the courtroom in Harare, in solidarity with Mawarire. Sensing public anger and pressure, the judge released him to his jubilant supporters (*Daily News*, 2016, July 13). After his acquittal, citing security threats, he fled to South Africa and later to the US with his family. On 1 February, Mawarire was arrested at the Harare International Airport by state agents upon his return from the US and later charged with subversion (*The Herald*, 2017, February 2). His passport was seized but he was later cleared of the charge by the Mnangagwa administration. What is interesting is that his arrest was captured live and instantly posted on Facebook yet the state controlled *The Herald* (2017, February 2) only covered the story a day later. This shows the importance of social media in terms of timely information provision and updates.

The #Tajamuka/Sesijikile movement places more emphasis on shifting from online activism to the ground. This is in line with Tendi's (2016) thesis that unless social media activism is turned into concrete action on the ground, political change in Zimbabwe will remain a dream. #Tajamuka/Sesijikile seems to be aware of Tendi's argument as the movement is more militant and action oriented when compared to the #ThisFlag movement. #Tajamuka/Sesijikile is also associated with violent protests that occurred on 1 July in Beitbridge at the Zimbabwean-South African border post. The *SABC* (2016, July 1) reported the reason behind the protest as trade laws in Zimbabwe that limit the import of basic goods from South Africa. Furthermore, Tajamuka/Sesijikile's Dennis Juru said:

Tajamuka is an organisation which is fighting corruption in Zimbabwe which is fighting everything which is very bad like what they are doing today they want to monopolise the importation of goods. They want to give to the ministers and stop millions of people who are crossing the border into South Africa and give the contract to one person; we

want to bring back the original trade between South Africa and Zimbabwe (*SABC*, 2016, July 1).

The Beitbridge protests, which turned violent, were brutally crushed by the security forces in Zimbabwe. However, these protests marked the genesis of a series of protests that followed. On 5 October 2016 more protests occurred at the Beitbridge border post (*Newsday*, 2016, October 6). The protests, which later spread to Harare and eventually the entire country were organised by #Tajamuka/Sesijikile with a coalition of opposition political parties under the banner of National Electoral Reform Agenda (Nera). In September 2016, from August to December 2016, the author of this article witnessed violent protests almost every week where protesters clashed with the police. *Nehanda Radio* (2016, August 25) reported that protestors looted Vice President Phelekezela Mphoko's shop, burnt police and ZBCs vehicles. The author of this article also witnessed the violence in question. It is important to note that the organisation, coordination and updates on these protests were done online; via social media platforms.

Central issues to the Zimbabwean protests were the controversial stay of the former Zimbabwean Vice President Phelekezela Mphoko at an upmarket hotel at the expense of the taxpayer, the introduction of bond notes and corruption. #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and #ThisFlag also met the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe Governor, John Mangudya to voice concerns about the introduction of bond notes. #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and their allies, also generated an online petition which compelled the state to act on Itai Dzamara, the #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare founder who was abducted in March 2015 by suspected state security agents.

In 2017, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile Spokesperson, Promise Mkhwanazi filed a lawsuit against former President Mugabe arguing that he was too old to rule and his continued stay in

power violated the constitution. Mkhwanazi's lawsuit was dismissed on a technicality (*Daily News*, 2017, February 9). This is the work that #Tajamuka/Sesijikile does on the "ground" outside the "bubble" of social media. One #Tajamuka/Sesijikile member who spoke to the author alerted the author to the fact that #Tajamuka has representatives and structures countrywide. Moreover, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, and #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare seem to be gaining more support compared to traditional opposition political parties. One discussant to this article noted that she prefers these citizen led movements as they are after genuine political change compared to political parties that are hungry for power and personal aggrandisement.

Social movements in Zimbabwe also played a pivotal role in the popular, army driven and "soft coup" that removed Robert Mugabe from power in November 2017. "Nonviolent social movements played a crucial role in promoting citizen agency immediately before the coup, at a time when traditional forms of civil society and the opposition were both weak," observe Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020, P.1). Observation and media reports reveal that social movements such as #ThisFlag, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile played a crucial role in terms of mobilizing the public to pressurize Robert Mugabe to step down in the context of the so-called "Operation Restore Legacy" (coup code-name). The social movements in question marched against Mugabe and gave solidarity speeches together with the pro-Mnangagwa ZANU PF leadership.

Although the above discussed citizen movements have scored relative success in their work, a lot still needs to be done. One of the greatest challenges that these movements face is to turn online activism into practical action on the ground. Grossman (2009) cited in Mandikwaza (2013) acknowledges that social media allows political dissent and political participation but also warns social media activists of treating social media like a "magic bullet against authoritarianism." This is an important point as social media is not an end in itself but

a means to an end. Tendi (2016) notes that, social media activists in Zimbabwe “ignore the realities of power.” Furthermore, Tendi (2016) advances the argument that Zimbabwean online activist did not learn from the “Arab Spring”:

The reason is quite simple: the angry urban social media activists and pro-democracy pundits have failed to absorb two key lessons of the Arab Spring. The first is that the role of the military in times of civil unrest is pivotal. The second is that social media activism can never substitute for organized political activity on the ground (Tendi, 2016).

Tendi’s above argument is supported by the fact that in Tunisia and in Egypt to some extent, the army supported social movements, and this is highly unlikely in Zimbabwe due to military-ruling party-state conflation. Within this scheme of things, one discussant mounted the strongest counter-argument to that of social media optimists and argued that: “Confronting Zimbabwe’s military dictatorship with social media tools is like stopping a tsunami with bare hands.” In relation to the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, Mandikwaza (2013, p.46) notes that: “It remains unclear whether social media motivated political dissent or whether it was socio-economic and political frustrations which influenced people to maximise on social media.” Whatever the case; social media should be heavily complimented by diligence on the ground. There is therefore a need for the creation of a “critical mass” and the formulation of a concrete and clear programme of action by social movements in Zimbabwe. Therefore, activists should desist from becoming “keyboard activists” and also avoid the temptation of relying on spontaneity as a route to democratic change.

#ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, and #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare have been active in terms of protests but the protests have not achieved anything outstanding- except for the removal of Robert Mugabe which was largely an exercise under the supervision and

jurisdiction of military generals. The removal of Mugabe from the political scene renewed hopes for reform and restoration of rule of law and good governance. However, the reverse is true. In terms of repression, brutality, kleptocracy and incompetence, the Mnangagwa administration has proven to be a copycat of its predecessor. Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020, p.3) describe the transition from the Mugabe to the Mnangagwa era as an “arrested transition...since the authoritarian systems and patronage networks that sustained Mugabe remain largely intact.” Ironically, the same social movements that worked with the military and a pro-Mnangagwa ZANU PF faction during the coup days, are now under extreme repression from the same regime they helped to bring to power; leading one discussant to argue that: “the fatal mistake that the opposition and social movements made, was hobnobbing with an unreformed ZANU PF and the military establishment during the coup days.”

Hlatywayo and Mangongera (2020, p.3) alert us to the fact that a day after the July 30 Elections, six unarmed civilians were gunned down by security forces during a protest in Harare. In October 2018, labour union leaders particularly from the ZCTU were arrested, detained and humiliated. Similarly, in January 2019, protests broke out countrywide against a background of fuel price hikes. The state reacted to the protests through deployment of security forces who killed 17 civilians, tortured and assaulted many, raped scores of women and destroyed property and livelihoods (Hlatywayo and Mangongera, 2020, p.4). Against such a background, one respondent accused the Mnangagwa administration of “exhibiting ‘Third Reich’ and ‘Gestapo’ tendencies.” Due to massive repression by the Mnangagwa administration, the robustness of social movements has been severely curtailed. However, social movements still carry great potential with them and they only need to be revived.

As previously highlighted, another challenge to social media activists is the emergence of *Varakashi* on the social media scene. Observation reveals that the advent of *Varakashi* has fundamentally poisoned and polarized the social media political landscape since *Varakashi* are

responsible for misinformation, disinformation, deception and churning out sexism, racism, tribalism and other evil forms of “isms.” Ill-informed members of the society are falling prey to *Varakashi's* crude propaganda. It cannot be too strongly stressed that *Varakashi* are manipulating, diluting and counteracting democracy and human rights discourses by social movements which makes the achievement of their mission cumbersome.

Another challenge faced by social movements in Zimbabwe is the exclusionary tendency of social media. Both Mutsvairo (2016) and Tendi (2016) are wary of the exclusionary nature of social media activism in Zimbabwe especially towards the elderly and the rural youth who form the bulk of the Zimbabwean population. This is true considering that most members of social movements like #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, #ThisFlower and #ThisGown are young people based in cities and outside Zimbabwe. The report of the last census in Zimbabwe by The Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (2012, p.11) showed that 67% of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas. Due to internet connectivity challenges, limited number of smart phones and lack of technological know-how- some sections of the population especially in rural areas are excluded, which essentially reduces social movements to urban outfits. Members of the social movements in question raised concern about the urban bias of social media activism. Therefore, social movement leaders should connect with remote areas for face to face interactions. For instance, Carty (2010) cited in Mandikwaza (2013) posits that online communication and face-to-face communication are mutually important. By excluding the rural populace, social movements ignore one of the most revolutionary sections of the population. In the context of the decolonization struggle, Fanon (1963, p.114) distrusts urbanites and prefers rural peasants who are good absorbers of revolutionary propaganda:

The memory of the anti-colonial period is very much alive in the villages, where women still croon in their children's ears songs to which the warriors marched when they went out

to fight the conquerors. At twelve or thirteen years of age the village children know the names of the old men who were in the last rising, and the dreams they dream in the *douars* or in the villages are not those of money or of getting through their exams like the children of the towns, but dreams of identification with some rebel or another, the story of whose heroic death still today moves them to tears (Fanon 1963, p.114).

Although the context differs, social movements in Zimbabwe should heed Fanon's submission and take their "propaganda" to rural areas. A member of the #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare admitted that their movement is largely urban oriented, hence the need to connect with the rural populace.

Another drawback to progress of social movements in Zimbabwe that the author of this article witnessed is the scourge of violence especially during the 2016 and January 2019 protests. For instance, *Nehanda Radio* (2016, August 25) reported that demonstrations by #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and its counterparts turned violent resulting in the looting of shops and burning of cars of state related institutions in August 2016. The danger of such a scenario is that, if left unchecked, the situation could get out of control and the country could descend into a civil war. In the latter case, the aim of social movements with regards to bringing democracy and development to Zimbabwe would remain a pipe dream. One #ThisFlag follower who spoke to the author noted that, another consequence of violent protests could be the declaration of a state of emergency by the authorities which could curtail and roll back efforts by citizen movements.

In Zimbabwe, just like in many other authoritarian countries, social media activism has led to increased state surveillance, heightened propaganda, and brutality against activists. Since the emergence of social movements, the state has augmented its dictatorial tendencies. In March 2015, Itai Dzamara, the founder of #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, was abducted and his whereabouts were still not known by the time of writing of this paper. *Aljazeera* (2016,

September 8) notes that, a court denied bail to 58 people arrested during protests on August 26 when riot police fired tear gas, beat up several people and blocked off the site of an opposition demonstration in Harare. In the same month, former President, Robert Mugabe attacked the judiciary for being reckless in allowing several anti-government protests that later turned violent (*Aljazeera*, 2016, September 8). Police also banned demonstrations in Harare in 2016. “The police declared that no protests would be allowed in Harare for 30 days from 16 September to 15 October, a decision it said was aimed at preserving peace” (Amnesty International, 2016). *Foreign Policy* (2016, November 18) reported that six activists (from #Tajamuka, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, #ThisFlag and #ThisFlower) were abducted, tortured and their car burnt by suspected state security agents. All this brutality is in reaction to the rise of social media related citizen movements and protests.

State repression continued unabated in Zimbabwe. On 1 February, #ThisFlag founder, Evan Mawarire was arrested at the Harare International Airport by state security agents upon his return from the US and later charged with subversion (*The Herald*, 2017, February 2). He had previously skipped the country and sought refuge in South Africa and later in the US. Correspondingly, *Chronicle* (2016, July 7) carried a story where the government was strongly warning social media users that they will be arrested if they shared “subversive” material. This was a clear sign of intimidation. On 6th July, the author of this article witnessed an internet shutdown amidst a stay-away that had been called for by the #ThisFlag movement. In retaliation, in August 2016, parliament came up with the Computer Crime and Cyber-Crime Bill to deal with cybercrime (*The Herald* 2016, August 17). Many consider the Bill to be draconian and a clear reaction to online activism. In January 2017, POTRAZ desperately tried to hike internet prices to limit social media use in the country (Moyo, 2017).

The above discussed examples clearly show that social media activism has caused the state to panic and in turn deploy its deadly arsenal of authoritarianism against the people. Campaigns like Occupy Africa Unity Square have become almost impossible under such minimal democratic space. Thus, the social media activism by social and citizen movements in Zimbabwe act as a double edged sword with potential to deepen civic liberties on one hand and erode them on the other hand. Sadly, repression against social movements and dissent in general continue unabated even in the post Mugabe era. The extra-judicial killings of August 2018 and January 2019 are a clear testimony that the democratic space has deeply shrunk even for social movements in Zimbabwe. This is worsened by *Varakashi's* efforts to sanitize each and every undemocratic move by the current political establishment in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The ZANU PF government's incompetence, tyrannical and kleptocratic tendencies over the years, have triggered an avalanche of criticism and resistance from Zimbabweans. With the proliferation of the internet and liberalization of ICT product imports during the inclusive government period (2009-2013), social movements utilized the window of opportunity to establish pro-democracy and online-reliant social movements in Zimbabwe. Hence, the birth of social movements such as #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, #ThisFlag, and #Tajamuka/Sesiikile, and others, especially between 2015 and 2016. The social movements in question, together with individual online activists, have executed the role of civil resistance and the projection of Zimbabwe's democracy and human rights deficit narrative with relative success, both in the pre and post Mugabe eras.

Crucially, the above-mentioned social movements have registered considerable achievements since their formation: the opening up of online debates and the deepening of freedom of expression; initiation of online policy debates and interviews; counteraction of government monopoly on information, propaganda, and autocratic discourses; creation of online “safe and free” spaces; petitioning and suing the government, among a host of others. Significant events that were organized by the social movements in question include; the mass stay away or “shut down” of 6 July 2016, and the January 2019 fuel hike protests. Also, #OccupyAfricaUnitySquare, #ThisFlag, #Tajamuka/Sesijikile and others, were crucial in the context of the organization, coordination and mass mobilization of military sanctioned protests that were opportunistically used by the military to sanitize the “soft” coup (the so-called Operation Restore Legacy) that deposed Robert Mugabe in November 2017.

However, social movements are still plagued by numerous hurdles in Zimbabwe even in the post Mugabe era. Citizen movements are still beleaguered by the same old problems: state repression, draconian cyber regulatory frameworks and the ever-shrinking democratic space under Mnangagwa’s military dictatorship. The massacring of civilians in August 2018 and January 2019 is a stark reminder to social movements that Mugabe is dead but “Mugabeism” (the system of patronage, corruption and violence) is alive. Also, for the purposes of disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and counteracting good governance inspired social movements and activists; the Mnangagwa administration has created, sponsors, and supports an online “army” of vicious pro-government activists and “enablers” known as *Varakashi* (destroyers). Within this scheme of things, *Varakashi* continue to relatively dilute and “contaminate” the message from progressive forces in Zimbabwe and abroad.

Moreover, social movements in Zimbabwe also suffer from internal contradictions and shortcomings. Their biggest liability is their urban orientation and exclusionary tendency

which overlook the rural populace who make up 67% of the population in Zimbabwe. Therefore, social movements must transcend online platforms by physically engaging the grassroots especially in rural areas. A corrupt military dictatorship like the Mnangagwa regime cannot be tweeted out of power. Skyrocketing internet costs also spell doom for online based social movements and activists. Violence is another vice that should be nipped in the bud. However, social movements have great potential and play a pivotal in demanding and projecting the good governance discourse in Zimbabwe.

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