FROM TRIBE TO NEO-TRIBE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 2021 ZAMBIAN ELECTIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates the shift in patterns of affiliation within Zambian politics, as observed on Facebook during the 2021 general election cycle. Specifically, the study investigates the role of social media in the shift from ethnic tribes to emerging online neo-tribes as salient forms of affiliation or association. This is against the background of political mobilisation on ethnic grounds being a common feature in African politics, including Zambia's. Historically, ethnic identity has played a central role in the mobilisation and eventual distribution of votes in Zambian elections. Of further interest to the study is the increasingly recognised potential of social media to enable and propagate disruptive messages and ideologies, such as xenophobia, cultural homogeneity, neo-Nazism, anti-immigration and nationalism. The study takes particular interest in the prevalence, and possible implications for a nascent democracy like Zambia's, of what may be termed anti-democratic aspects of social media, such as disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, echo chambers and bots, during the 2021 election cycle.

The study adopts a qualitative methodological orientation. It employs a mixed-methods (thematic content analysis, focus group discussions and individual interviews) case study approach. The content analysis is based on purposively selected Facebook posts and related comments published from 1st May to 31st August 2021 – the period from when presidential nominees were announced and campaigns started in earnest to immediately after the election. Participants and broad discussion points for the focus groups and individual interviews were identified from the Facebook posts.

The study draws on the theories of the public sphere, social media and elections, tribalism and neo-tribalism.

The findings of this study reveal that neo-tribes, mediated by social media, emerged as salient forms of political affiliation in the 2021 Zambian elections. Some distinctive differences with ethnic tribes include the fact that these online neo-tribes organised within and across ethnic lines, were temporarily situated, affectual, and not geographically bound (Cova & Cova, 2002; Clay, 2018; Clark et al, 2019; Hibbing, 2021). The study also reveals some contradictions to the traditional expectation of neo-tribes, for example their ephemeral nature, when some members of these online neo-tribes report their interactions transitioning into long-term political relationships. The findings demonstrate a similarity in mechanisms of connection and establishing in-groups and out-groups. This is particularly observed in online neo-tribes rallying around a political leader as a mechanism for building community and using accusations against out-groups as ways of building tribes, all of which are associated with ethnic tribes. With regard the normative stakes of the study, the conclusion is that the rise of neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation in Zambia represents a tension between democratic progress on the one hand, and political fragmentation on the other.

The findings reveal the different ways members of online neo-tribes made sense of campaign messages based on tribe, and what appears to be a generational shift in perception and articulation of tribe and tribalism, as well as some spatial elements to the shift. The findings also reveal the prevalence of neo-tribe members who have ethnic tribe affiliations to both Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi groups, and how they made sense of tribal politics from their liminal space.

The findings demonstrate the study's three main theoretical postulations of the relationship between social media and elections, namely: social media as an extension of the digital public sphere, social media as a tool for political mobilisation, and social media as alternative media.

Dedication

In loving memory of my dear parents, **Lwanga B. Mwewa-Mwilu** and **André M. Mwilu**.

The enduring wind beneath my wings.

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Lastly, I wish to thank my research participants, without whom this thesis would have not been possible. Thank you.

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Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
BN	Bemba/ Nyanja
BSA	British South Africa
ECL	Edgar Chagwa Lungu
ECZ	Electoral Commission of Zambia
HH	Hakainde Hichilema
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
LAZ	Law Association of Zambia
MMD	Movement for Multi-party Democracy
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OSISA	Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa
PF	Patriotic Front
SE	Smart Eagles
TL	Tonga/Lozi
UNIP	United National Independence Party
UPND	United Party for National Development
UPP	United Progressive Party
US	United States of America
VPN	Virtual Private Network
ZANC	Zambia African National Congress
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front
ZEIC	Zambia Elections Information Centre
ZICTA	Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority
ZWD	Zambia Watchdog

Chapter One: Introduction and Context of the Study

This study explores the role that social media played in the 2021 Zambian general elections with regard to the weaponisation of tribe, the prevalence and implications of misinformation and disinformation, and the shift in associational patterns from ethnic tribes to neo-tribes. The study is located within the fields of media studies, social media, media and elections.

1.1 Research Questions

Using the 2021 Zambian elections as a lens, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What role does social media play in the transition from ethnic to neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation?
2. How do voters who use social media make sense of campaign messages based on tribe?
3. How do members make sense of their online participation in neo-tribes?
4. How do anti-democratic voices on social media affect nascent democracies?

1.2 Significance of the Study

The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the nexus between social media, changing relational patterns vis-à-vis elections, and democracy, in the Zambian context. It also contributes to deliberations on the anti-democratic potential of social media and the implications for Zambia's still nascent democracy. The findings could thus inform policy and motivate more research and knowledge production in the area.

1.3 Context of the Study

National elections are a time of intense public discussion, citizen engagement and social media coverage. After being initially credited with a democratising potential, the internet and social media are increasingly being recognised as enabling and propagating disruptive voices, messages, or ideologies such as xenophobia, neo-Nazism, nationalism, right-wing populism, cultural homogeneity and anti-immigration and anti-globalisation (Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Mihelj & Jiménez-Martinez, 2021). Furthermore, there is a significant focus in the West on social media aspects that may negatively affect democratic deliberation, such as disinformation, echo chambers, polarisation, bots, hate speech, and political advertising

(Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Persily & Tucker, 2020). These concerns have been raised for both established democracies, such as the United States (Tucker, Guess, Barbera, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal & Nyhan, 2018) and new, such as Zambia's. The anti-democratic potential of digital technology is also recognised in the geographical Global South. The Kofi Annan Commission (2020:15) asserts that "for the foreseeable future, elections in the democracies of the Global South will be focal points for networked hate speech, disinformation, external interference, and domestic manipulation". The present study focuses on social media deliberations before, during and after the 2021 presidential elections in Zambia, with a particular focus on the salience of tribe in the election cycle on Facebook.

Political mobilisation on ethnic grounds is a common feature in African politics, as has been witnessed in countries like Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia (see Baloyi, 2018; Shilao, 2018; Adeyanju, 2020). Ethnicity is sometimes weaponised when politicians and their supporters fan ethnic hostilities for political gain (Maweu, 2022). Tribal propaganda is adopted as a divisive strategy that encourages citizens to make electoral decisions on the basis of the tribe of candidates. Munemo (2019:5) posits that part of the legacy of colonialism is a postcolonial leadership that still practices politics "informed by colonial logic that breeds inimical practices such as racism, tribalism, regionalism and patriarchy". As in other parts of Africa, Morifi and Mahlatsi (2021) argue that tribalism in South Africa is in part the result of a colonial and apartheid design aimed at the birthing of antagonism among black people. The weaponisation of ethnicity increases the risk of ethnic conflicts. Some examples of grave outcomes of tribal propaganda in Africa are the genocide in Rwanda, and the ethnic clashes in Kenya over disputed election results (see Ajulu, 2002; James, 2007). Many studies on African electioneering analyse vote mobilisation through the lenses of ethnicity, clientelism, populism, nationalism, programmatic appeals and other discourses and symbols (Paget, 2019). Cheeseman (2016: 26) points out that, in Africa, parties tend to be weak and election campaigns have limited programmatic content. Furthermore, until recently, the capacity to communicate messages via television was limited to urban areas, and political aspirants relied heavily on delivering highly targeted messages in face-to-face meetings. The geographical reach of the television signal is almost countrywide in Zambia, but actual access remains limited to mostly urban areas due to the cost and lack of infrastructure. Although the internet and social media had been increasingly used in previous election campaigns in Zambia, the primary platforms had remained physical (Cheeseman, 2016).

During the 2021 election, restrictions on movement and assembly due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Chenoweth, 2022) were weaponised by the then incumbent president to bar opposition candidates from conducting countrywide in-person campaigns, which further increased campaign managers' reliance on social media. According to the Zambian Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA, 2022), internet penetration was close to 60%. Thanks mainly to mobile devices, network coverage reached all of the country but, as noted by Donner and Gitao (2009), such mobile-centric internet could be slow, expensive and unreliable. Over 60% of Zambians lived in rural areas, and users of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were mainly concentrated among relatively affluent urban dwellers, who could access suitable devices and who were proficient in English (Wyche & Baumer, 2015; Cheeseman et al., 2020). As of January 2021, social media users in Zambia accounted for approximately 14% of the total population (Kemp, 2021). One must add to this figure those who used peer-to-peer platforms such as WhatsApp (see Cheeseman Fisher, Hassan & Hitchen, 2020) and those who listened to radio stations that incorporated social media content into their mainstream broadcasts and interactions with audiences (see Ureta & Pena-Fernandez, 2017). Furthermore, as was the case in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, information gathered through social and other media was shared via word of mouth, a phenomenon Nyamnjoh (2005) calls "radio trottoir" [pavement radio] (see also Wasserman, 2018). While it is difficult to estimate its actual reach, it is reasonable to assume that social media contributed to the transmission and exchange of vivid drivers of grievances based on both real and fake inequalities (Kapesa, Sichone & Bwalya, 2020). Facebook was the most used social media platform in Zambia (Kemp, 2021).

Prior to the August 2021 elections, Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front (PF) was the incumbent president and Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND), was the main opposition contender. The PF and the UPND do not fit onto a defined left-right ideological continuum as is typically the case for political parties in the West (see Hallink & Siachiwena, 2023). The PF and the UPND, instead, express ideological positions rooted in "the socio-economic interests of the ethnic groups and regions where support for each party is dominant. These are shaped by the ways in which these regions were historically incorporated into the colonial economy" (Hallink & Siachiwena, 2023:323–324). Both parties prioritise socio-economic development in their manifestos but differ in their delivery approach (ibid). As Hallink and Siachiwena (2023:338) elaborate, "the PF articulates a more statist and pro-poor ideological outlook … The UPND, by contrast, emulates the

opposite approach of the PF … [articulating] its ideological outlook in terms of limited state intervention". The two candidates, Lungu and Hichilema, belong to different tribes and regions. The word tribe is typically understood as an ethnically homogeneous community organised under the authority of a traditional chief (Posner, 2005). The word is contested in some parts of the world, with some communities continuing to embrace the terminology and others rejecting it as "derogatory, colonial, and unrepresentative of local dynamics" (Leake, 2024:828). In Africa, for example, the word tribe is used in the specific context of ethnicity and is not without controversy. Mafeje (1971) argues that the portrayal in literature of tribalism as a distinguishing feature of the African continent came not from objective reality but rather subjective perception. He cites the lack of a local language equivalent of 'tribe' in South Africa to support his assertion that the ideology of tribalism was a colonial construct, and Africans only used the word 'tribe' when they spoke English. He further argues that colonial authorities, in many instances, helped to create tribes, in the sense of political communities, and that the process was aided by anthropologists' preoccupation with tribes. Majefe (1971:254) argues that the colonial exercise "provided the material as well as the ideological base of what is now called 'tribalism'. Is it surprising then that the modern African, who is a product of colonialism, speaks the same language?" In Zambia, tribe is widely used in public deliberation despite its colonial associations (Mamdani, 2012; Sneath, 2016), and that is the context in which the word is used in this thesis.

While a traditional tribe is a group that members are born into, neo-tribes can be understood as connections that are only temporarily situated. Cova and Cova (2002:67) theorise neo-tribes as postmodern tribes that are "inherently unstable, small-scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society; instead they can be held together through shared emotions". Originally coined with reference to other domains, the emphasis on the affective dimension makes the concept of neo-tribes relevant to political communication on social media. Papacharissi (2015) theorises the role of affect in politics, as well as the ways in which online media may facilitate it. She states that networked "publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be" (Papacharissi 2015:9). Although often identified as "communities of feeling" (Hetherington 1998:49), neo-tribes are also deliberate groups of people "who have chosen to come together for a particular period of time and place, for a specific reason" (McKerron, 2003:3). Dean (2017) applies the concept of acclamation and democracy, as coined by Carl Schmitt in 1927, to social media, and posits that social media

practices are a form of political acclamation – the voicing of approval, praise, triumph, disapproval – because it is possible for users to follow, unfollow, friend, unfriend, like and dislike. According to Dean (2017:417), "acclamation is a practice that forms publics, whether as the direct presence of the 'people', mass-mediated 'public opinion', or a 'public mood' decipherable through countless social media postings".

Citizen participation in elections represents an institutionalised attempt to fulfil the essence of democracy as rule by the people (Lindberg, 2006; Ojo, 2007). This resonates with the Habermasian conception of the public sphere where citizens exchange political views and participate in public affairs (Habermas 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Dahlberg, 2007). Often-cited contributions of the internet and social media to democratic participation are increased accessibility to news and information by the citizens, and the creation of alternative spaces in which citizen interests are discussed (Silverstone, 1999; Atton, 2002; Margetts, 2013; Akinbobola, 2015; Mohammed, 2020). Social media has also been hailed as a vehicle for facilitating interaction between candidates and office holders, and their constituents (Pierskalla, 2013). The use of social media during elections has been praised further, particularly in Africa, for its supposed ability to provide space for public deliberation even under unfavourable circumstances, such as facing censorship, and allowing stakeholders, including citizens, to monitor and report fraud (Zuckerman, 2004; Willems 2016). However, these technologically-deterministic and cyber-optimist views have been extensively problematised (see Morozov, 2012). Morozov (2009) uses the term 'slacktivism' to refer to the practice of substituting actual political engagement with social media commentary. Dean (2007) identifies mechanisms inherent to social media, such as the trap of endless reflexivity or the decrease of symbolic efficiency, which risk capturing deliberation and turning it into sterile disputes.

Willems (2012) problematises Eurocentric understandings of the concepts of civil society within the Habermasian public sphere; such understandings may fail to account for the associational life of Africans. Willems (2012:14) supports Maina (1998) by arguing that broadening the definition of civil society would reveal currently invisible forms, such as civil society that is not "defined in opposition to the state [as per Eurocentric assumptions], but organised along the lines of kinship, ethnicity or local tradition". In terms of Mamdani's (1996; see also Ekeh, 1975) theorisation of the bifurcated state of African publics, African "subjects" organised under multiple ethnically defined native authorities have long been

excluded from the mainstream public sphere occupied by “citizens”. Mamdani (1996) saw detribalising the native authority as the required starting point in the reorganisation of the bifurcated power created by colonialism. Neo-tribes may contribute to such reorganisation not simply as forms of online resistance, but also as popular cultural expressions of a convivial relationship with power (Mbembe, 2001).

1.4 Socio-Political Context: Zambia

With the study using the 2021 Zambian elections as a lens, it is necessary to situate the research in the appropriate historical context of the country, and specifically the historical context as it pertains to ethnic identities in Zambia – their origins, evolution and expression – as well as to democracy. Democracies that develop in postcolonial settings require a nuanced understanding that takes into account, among other considerations, their unique trajectories or paths to state construction and the varied cultural conceptions of what the ideal relationship between individual and community is (Koelble & Lipuma, 2008).

1.4.1 Colonial and Post-Colonial Identities

Figure 1: Administrative regions of Zambia. Source: Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022.

Western, Southern, North-Western and Central Provinces represent the Tonga/Lozi language group. Copperbelt, Eastern, Lusaka, Luapula, Muchinga and Northern Provinces represent the Bemba/Nyanja language bloc.

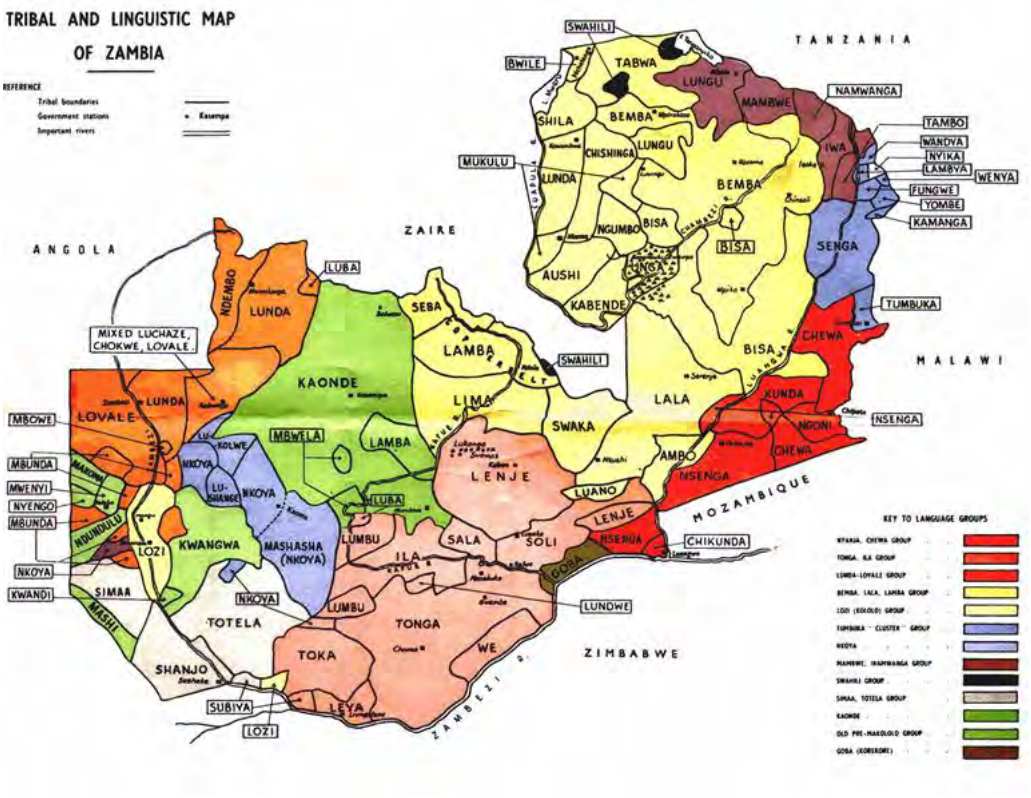

Figure 2: The languages that make up the two language blocs. Source: Brelsford (1965)

Zambia gained independence from British colonial rule on 24 October 1964 (Sishuwa, 2019). Prior to independence, the country was called Northern Rhodesia. The present-day ostensibly traditional tribal institutions in many Zambian rural communities originated both in efforts by the British South Africa (BSA) company to build its authority in the early 1900s and for tax collection purposes (Posner, 2005). The BSA company parcelled up the territory, which was later to be known as Zambia, into tribal areas, recorded the boundaries on official maps and enforced those boundaries on the ground. The enforcement of the imposed boundaries included threatening violence against those who refused to acknowledge the new lines of authority within those boundaries (Posner, 2005). The use of tribal chiefs as rural tax collection agents, and the policies employed to support the status quo significantly impacted

the structure of African society as well as the nature of post-colonial identities (ibid). As Posner (2005:15) elaborates:

These policies transformed chiefs from embodiments of customary authority into agents of European administration, and tribes from communities with fluid boundaries and varying degrees of internal cohesion into entities that, while not entirely fixed or uniform, were far more territory bound and standardized in their social and political organization than in the past.

Prior to the introduction of European administration, most parts of the territory were loosely organised on tribal lines, with loyalties based on village, lineage and clan serving as the key bases of social and political organisation (Posner, 2005). This structure changed under the BSA company where "a more rigid form of expressly tribal organization was imposed as the norm. This standardization and tribalization of rural administration was a momentous first step in the construction of the tribal dimension of Zambia's post-colonial ethnic cleavage structure" (Posner 2005:15). As Posner (2005) further elaborates, by organising local administrative activities around tribal units, the BSA company provided incentives for Africans to invest in their tribal identities and not allow them to fall away. In practice, "a wide range of formal institutions – including land tenure regulations, labor policies, civil service hiring practices, local government structures, and even the organization of the judicial system created incentives for Africans to invest in their identifications as tribespeople and language-speakers" (Posner 2005:13). Another incentive that made subjects seek closer association with their tribes and chiefs was the provision of loans and advances to members by their native treasuries (ibid). Max Gluckman (1960) provides insight into tribe dynamics among Africans in pre-independence Zambia and Malawi, known then as Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, respectively. He shares findings of research on tribes and urban situations in "British Central Africa" spanning 20 years, conducted by 14 researchers based in Northern Rhodesia. In his report, Gluckman (1960:55) discusses what he describes as "the persistence of tribalism into modern times, in spite of the industrial revolution which has produced such great social changes". His main argument is that, for people in rural areas, belonging to a tribe is not just driven by conservatism but also by social and economic needs, as it involves "participation in a working political system, and sharing domestic life with kinsfolk" (Gluckman 1960:55). Gluckman (1960) further observes that tribalism among heterogeneous rural folk who have migrated and now live together in urban areas is an entirely different

phenomenon driven by the desire to meet the needs of urban life, and creates such associations as burial and mutual help. Of particular interest to this study is Gluckman's reference to, and interest in, the new forms of association among the Africans being studied. He states, "in both rural and urban areas, these affiliations to fellow tribesmen have to be analysed as they operate alongside new forms of association, such as Christian sects, political pressure groups, and economic groups" (ibid:55). He concludes that the new groups are obviously more important to the Africans living in the urban areas than to those in the rural areas. Gluckman holds the view that, as Africans migrate to the urban areas and engage in industrial work, their behaviour and associations are determined more by their present circumstances than by their tribal homes and cultures. He asserts that the urban folk would be driven to an association such as a trade union. In pre-independence Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), tribal identities were reinforced (and at times created) on geographical and linguistic grounds as part of the colonial design (Posner, 2005). These tribal boundaries created under colonial rule were maintained post-independence, but deliberate effort was made to foster unity among all tribes. "One Zambia, One Nation" was adopted as the national slogan and promoted as part of ethno-political consolidation and unity efforts (Magasu,Lungu, Chilufya, Mulima, Mboma, Bwalya & Kamboni, 2021). The slogan features on the country's coat of arms (Magasu et al., 2021) but was no longer widely used after the country's return to multi-party politics in 1991. It did, however, experience resurgence after 2015, following the PF government's directive to have it stated at the start and end of each news broadcast on national radio and television. The enduring legacy of colonial decisions is still evident in present-day Zambia. This echoes Habasonda (2018), who asserts that colonial decisions regarding tribes are still alive in post-independence Zambia. It is typical for countries around the world with multi-ethnic political systems to possess multiple dimensions of ethnic cleavages (Posner, 2005). For example, Israel's ethnic division is based on religion, the citizens' place of origin and the extent of secularism, while India is divided by language, religion and caste, and South Africa by race, language and tribe (Posner, 2005:1). In Zambia's case, "political actors identify themselves as members of (and can build political coalitions around) ethnic groups defined either in terms of tribal affiliation or language group membership" (Posner, 2005:4–5). Zambia is divided into about seventy small groups by the tribal cleavage, and four regional coalitions by the linguistic cleavage (ibid). The largest ethnolinguistic groups in Zambia are the Bemba at 34 percent, the Nyanja at 15 percent, the Tonga at 11 percent and the Lozi at 6 percent (Resnick, 2022). Four main languages, namely Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga and Lozi, were promoted in colonial education policies, newspaper

publishing and radio broadcasts (Habasonda, 2018). Habasonda asserts that the emphasis of colonial education policies on linguistic identity formed the basis of Zambia's main ethnic and political cleavages which still exist to this day. He posits that the Bemba and Nyanja on one hand and the Tonga and Lozi on the other share a "tribal cousinship" where they vote as a bloc, along with their associated minor languages (ibid). Resnick (2022) observes that ethnolinguistic identities are an important factor in Zambian politics and, in part, shape partisan preferences among citizens, especially those in rural areas. Available literature confirms the importance of ethnic identity in the mobilisation and eventual distribution of votes from as far back as the post-independence 1960s (Macola, 2008; Siachiwena, 2021). The literature also shows a link between service delivery and the relationships between politicians and traditional leaders (Baldwin, 2013).

1.4.2 Political History

Zambia has had three distinct institutional eras – typically referred to as the first, second and third republics – from independence in 1964 to date (Posner, 2005). The first republic was from 1964 to 1972 when the country had a multi-party political system, before transitioning to the second republic one-party state in 1973 and back to a multi-party state in 1991, marking the start of the third republic (Posner, 2005). The argument for the move to a one-party state in 1973 was that "it was the best antidote for divisive tribalism" (Milimo, 1993:35). The outcome, however, negatively impacted citizens' political rights, politicians' accountability and the national economy (Milimo, 1993). Issues of tribalism had existed even prior to independence. Gluckman (1960), for example, gives insight into inter-tribe relations when he mentions the dissatisfaction among non-Bemba miners at the dominance of the Bemba tribe in union leadership posts. This reported dissatisfaction is one of the earliest references to what has persisted over the decades as concerns over alleged Bemba hegemony. Similarly, Sishuwa (2019) gives an example of early ethnic nationalism in the late 1950s, prior to independence, when a group of Bemba-speakers promoted the idea of a Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe presidency in what was then the Zambia African National Congress (ZANC), the forerunner to the United National Independence Party (UNIP), which eventually formed the first post-colonial government. ZANC had broken away from the African National Congress (ANC), the foremost pre-independence nationalist political organisation in the country (ibid). Kenneth Kaunda took over ZANC leadership from Kapwepwe, eventually becoming the UNIP leader and first president of Zambia. The political rivalry between

Kapwepwe and Kaunda is cited as the point in history when "ethnic politics began to coalesce" (Sishuwa, 2019:516). Interestingly, both Kapwepwe and Kaunda were Bemba-speaking and from the Northern Province of Zambia. Kaunda's political opponents, including an influential member of the Mineworkers Union leadership, sought to delegitimise him as having been born in Nyasaland (Malawi) although he was, in fact, born in Northern Province, to parents who were born in Nyasaland (Sishuwa, 2019). This allegation was to continue throughout Kaunda's political life, including 1996 when the high court declared him Malawian and stateless, effectively disqualifying him from recontesting elections on account of nationality (Ikechukwu, 2014). Post-independence, Kapwepwe's supporters particularly felt aggrieved by what they considered Bemba marginalisation in the new UNIP government (Sishuwa, 2019). In 1967, Kapwepwe ran for the position of UNIP vice-president, putting aside Kaunda's argument that it would not be appropriate for the top two political positions in the country to both be held by Bembas (Sishuwa, 2019). Kapwepwe won the election and consequently became the country's vice-president, a position he held along with three other ministerial positions (Finance, Development Planning, and Justice) that Kaunda appointed him to (ibid). In 1969, Kapwepwe resigned as the country's vice-president, alleging that UNIP had departed from its independence agenda and that the Bemba-speaking people's role in the nationalist struggle had not been sufficiently rewarded (Sishuwa, 2019). Kapwepwe later rescinded his resignation but was removed as the republican vice-president by Kaunda in 1970 and given two ministerial positions, namely Culture and Local Government. As Sishuwa (2019:519) elaborates:

In 1971, he [Kapwepwe] resigned his two ministerial portfolios and left UNIP, forming his own political party known as the United Progressive Party (UPP). A notable feature of this breakaway party was that almost all its leaders were Bemba-speakers drawn from Kapwepwe's faction in UNIP.

The UPP, mobilising on the basis of an ethnic strategy in Bemba-speaking rural areas and populist concerns in urban areas, became the first serious opposition to UNIP (Sishuwa, 2019). The party's existence was, however, short-lived because it was banned in February 1972, over alleged violence (ibid). As Sishuwa (2019) recounts, Kapwepwe was imprisoned for several months until the country was declared a one-party state at the end of 1972. Division arising from tribalism was cited as the reason necessitating the move to a one-party state (Milimo, 1993), a state of affairs that meant UNIP was the only authorised party in the

political space. Beyond this period, the literature makes no reference to active tribal sentiment in contests at the presidential level until post-2000.

After the return to a multi-party system of government in 1991 and the election of the opposition Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) in the same year, power again changed hands in 2011 with the election into office of the opposition PF. The PF remained in office until August 2021. Hinfelaar, Rakner, Sishuwa & van de Walle (2022) argue that Zambia underwent a period of distinct democratic decline during the PF's time in government, from 2011 to 2021. Resnick (2022) echoes this view when she refers to the time of PF in government as a decade of democratic backsliding in Zambia. Hinfelaar et al. (2022) argue that during PF's rule, the country experienced an episode of autocratisation as a result of the government's deliberate use of legal mechanisms to suppress the opposition, enhance executive power, stifle the media and undermine civil society. They argue that lawfare, as employed by the PF government, played a role in the autocratisation processes that took place and, consequently, in the decline of democracy (ibid). In describing Zambia's state of de-democratisation, Beardsworth, Siachiwena and Sishuwa (2023) posit that even the quality of elections declined, and polarisation has increased since the presidential by-election in 2015 and the general election in 2016. Beardsworth et al. (2023:521) assert that "for the 2016 closure of independent media, the 2017 treason charges against the main opposition leader, to the increasing arrests of opposition leaders and citizens for 'insulting the president', Zambia's democratic status was widely seen as compromised".

As part of the country's democratic obligations, elections are held every five years to elect local government representatives, members of parliament and a president. Between 2006 and 2016, however, Zambia held five elections with three routine and two by-elections following the death in office of President Levy Mwanawasa in 2008 and President Michael Sata in 2014 (Banda, Kaaba, Hinfelaar & Ndulo , 2020). At the time of the deaths, the Constitution did not provide for automatic succession within the ruling party as was the case in some other countries. In Zambia, succession could only occur through by-elections held within 90 days of the death, as stipulated (Banda et al., 2020). One of the outcomes of the unusually high frequency of presidential elections in a decade was an extended period of intense political competition that placed "the country's politics in almost constant electoral mode" (Banda et al., 2020:1). Scheduled presidential, parliamentary and local government elections were held in August 2016, alongside a referendum on the Bill of Rights (Electoral Commission of

Zambia, 2016). These elections followed the presidential by-election held in January 2015, which brought Edgar Lungu to power. Lungu's election was disputed by the runner-up, Hichilema, who alleged electoral fraud (Telegraph, 2015). Hichilema raised concerns over the credibility of the process, citing partiality by the Electoral Commission and alleged manipulation of the voter register (The Guardian, 2015). Lungu was re-elected in 2016 and the runner-up, Hichilema, disputed the result again, alleging electoral fraud and commencing a legal challenge in the Constitutional Court (Zambia Daily Mail, 2016). Lungu remained president and the two candidates competed against each other again in the 2021 general elections. Away from the intense rivalry between the two main candidates, the 2016 elections, described by many as the most divisive and violent in Zambia's history, represented a significant departure from the country's characteristic image as a haven of peace (Goldring & Wahman, 2016; Mukunto, 2019). Apart from the violence, there was also a marked departure from some other norms typically associated with Zambian elections and politics in general. For example, the election cycle (pre-, during- and post-election) was characterised by intolerance, violence, hate-based propaganda, general hate speech, polarised media, misinformation, disinformation, fear mongering, tribalism and obscurantism, among others, in both mainstream and social media. Media were polarised and overtly aligned to different political parties and interests. Local and international election observers expressed concern over the public-media bias towards the ruling party, and the little and largely negative coverage of the main opposition. The concerns were exacerbated by a crackdown on private media critical of the government, leading to the country's oldest and main private newspaper *The Post* being shut down and the operating licences of three other private media (one television and two radio stations) being temporarily suspended, further limiting the public's access to alternative news (IPI, 2016; MISA Zambia, 2016). *The Post* newspaper was shut down fewer than two months before election day (Goldring & Wahman, 2016). Given that the supply of information was low due to a constrained media environment, expensive newspapers, and no 24-hour coverage on local media, members of the public turned to Facebook and WhatsApp to meet their information needs (Willems, 2016). Commentary often cites the foregoing developments as indicators of Zambia's democracy declining and spaces for civic participation and public engagement rapidly shrinking. Below is part of a statement issued by the Law Association of Zambia (LAZ) on 9 September, 2016:

LAZ regrets that even the mainstream media has participated in spreading blatant lies according to the particular agenda they serve. Never before has the media been so polarized

and the only losers are the people of Zambia. LAZ would like to urge the public and private media to be professional in the manner in which they report news items or give opinions as the public relies on them to their detriment. This is ever more important in an environment where the space for independent and impartial views is shrinking.

The Carter Center, one of the international election observers, expresses concern in a post-election statement issued in September, 2016. The Carter Center cites electoral violence with some cases resulting in death, interparty tensions, political polarisation, a skewed playing field and harassment of private media, among several other concerns. In concluding the statement, the Carter Center asserts, "Zambia faces great challenges. It is essential that all Zambians, especially governmental authorities and opposition political leaders, engage one another peacefully and work to find constructive ways forward" (2016:7–8).

Given the state of the 2016 elections, concern was expressed that the elections could potentially be a precursor of the same or worse in subsequent elections. There was, therefore, particular public interest in the 2021 elections stemming from that concern. There was also interest stemming from the strained relationship and history of tight competition between the two main contenders, Lungu and Hichilema. The elections were seen as a crucial test for democracy in Zambia, given their potential for democratic erosion, apathy from citizens and election-related violence (Metheney & Lust, 2023). In the lead-up to the said elections on 12 August 2021 (ECZ, 2021), the presidential contest appeared to have become a battle of tribes. Attempts were made to stigmatise the main opposition party, UPND led by Hichilema, as a regional party (Mufaya, 2016; Beardsworth, 2020). As Kapesa et. al (2020:212) note, the mobilisation, most notably by presidential candidates, of both national and tribal communities has become a commonly used tactic in elections. Campaign messages based on tribe were commonplace, as some candidates and/or their teams rallied voters for or against candidates on the basis of a candidate's tribe. Habasonda (2018) writes about tribe-based campaigns in Zambia's elections, particularly citing the 2016 elections when, he states, the opposition candidate Hichilema and his Tonga ethnic tribe were targeted with tribal hate speech and demonisation. In an unprecedented move in Zambia's election history, the Electoral Commission (ECZ) suspended indefinitely Chishimba Kambwili, a member of the ruling party at the time and a former minister of information and chief government spokesperson, for tribal hate speech at rallies and on radio and television interviews (ECZ, 2021; Mwebantu Media, 2021). Since independence, tribalism and other diverging tendencies

have been considered threats to the new country and its project of unity and national identity building (Marten & Kula, 2008; Mufaya, 2016). Gondwe (2021) reaffirms that Zambia was once idolised as a symbol of peaceful democratic transitions of power. However, he asserts that, in the wake of social media and increased individual participation, the country has seen a proliferation of homophily – the tendency for people to bond over similarities – and political polarisation. These, Gondwe further asserts, are characterised by tribal and political partisanship.

Hichilema's 2021 victory under the UPND party represented a third turnover of power in the 30 years of the country's return to a multi-party system (Resnik, 2022). The turnover of power is a distinction that only a few countries in sub-Saharan Africa hold (ibid). Initially, outgoing President Lungu alleged that the 12 August elections were not free and fair but did not lodge a formal challenge and instead conceded on 17 August 2021 (Pruce, Siachiwena & Hinfelaar, 2021; Beardsworth et al., 2023).

Hichilema's election win went against common expectation and widespread predictions, and took place in a context where the electoral environment was deeply skewed against him and his party (Beardsworth et al., 2023). Beardsworth et. al (2023:522) posit that Hichilema's "resounding victory" was "particularly surprising because it came amidst deepening autocratisation and the efforts of an incumbent to secure re-election including manipulating state resources, controlling the media, judiciary, and security forces, and enacting various anti-media laws to intimidate the opposition and suppress voting". The outcome, where a member of a minority tribe won the presidential election by a landslide secured nationally (ECZ, 2021; Resnick, 2022), appears to have been decided by voters who either ignored or rejected tribalist discourses. In contexts where ethnicity is politically salient, the chances of social media messages changing voters' opinions may be particularly slim. Horowitz (2017:901) argues that swing voters tend to be a minor factor in such settings "either because ethnicity creates intense partisan bonds that make voters resistant to change or because voters are immune to elite persuasion, and rely instead on candidates' ethnic identities and the broader ethnic profiles of the competing parties to form preferences". The 2021 elections also took place in a context of citizen dissatisfaction generally with the government's economic performance, a shrinking democratic space and entrenched authoritarianism. At 70.61%, voter turnout was the second highest since Zambia's return to multi-party democracy in 1991, with many in that number being young first-time voters (ECZ, 2021; Siachiwena, 2021).

Social media appears to have played a significant role before, during and after the elections. While the internet and social media had been used increasingly in previous election campaigns in Zambia, the primary platforms had remained physical. As was the case in other parts of Africa, parties tended to be weak, election campaigns often had limited programmatic content and the capacity to communicate messages via television was limited to urban areas; political aspirants thus used to rely heavily on delivering highly targeted messages in face-to-face meetings, to get the votes (Cheeseman, 2016:26). Restrictions on movement and assembly due to the Covid-19 pandemic were weaponised by the then incumbent to bar opposition candidates from conducting countrywide in-person campaigns (Beardsworth et al., 2023), which further increased reliance on social media.

1.5 Methodology

To investigate social media and the emergence of neo-tribes juxtaposed with ethnic tribes, the study adopts a qualitative methodological orientation as it seeks to explain this phenomenon of interest rather than measure it (Bryman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Iorio, 2004). Within an interpretivist paradigm, researchers are important instruments as they bring their own interpretations to observed phenomena (Roger, 2020). The study employs a mixed-methods case study approach comprising content analysis, focus group discussions and individual interviews. Simons (2009:21) defines a case study as an in-depth exploration, from multiple perspectives, of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a "real life" context, allowing for multiple facets of a phenomenon to be revealed and understood (see also Stake 1995; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

I conducted a thematic analysis of Facebook posts and related comments from five pages. Included in my analysis are two overtly UPND-affiliated pages, i.e., President Hakainde Hichilema with [i]1.7 million followers and Zambian Watchdog with 1.2 million followers, and two overtly PF-affiliated pages, i.e., Edgar Chagwa Lungu[1] with 1.4 million followers and Smart Eagles with 1.3 million followers. Also included in my analysis is Mwebantu Media, a page that is not overtly aligned to any political party, with 1.6 million followers. Facebook allows for easy identification of communities of interest, such as private or public groups and pages, which enable ideological polarisation by acting as echo chambers (Fenoll

[1] H.E. Edgar Chagwa Lungu passed on in June 2025, after the data collection and analysis had been concluded.

& Cano-Oron, 2017). I purposively selected a total of 1 000 posts with related replies and comments, that were posted from May 2021, when presidential nominees were named and their campaigns started in earnest, until August 2021, when the elections were held. Purposive sampling refers to the deliberate identification and selection of cases or participants to include in the sample due to their ability to provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015; Etikan et al., 2016).

Using Facebook's in-built ranking feature (or, wherever this was disabled, a manual count of posts with the most engagements), I identified the most relevant 200 posts and related comments from each of the five pages. Whenever one of the initially selected posts was not related to the elections, the next most relevant one was considered instead. To counter researcher bias, which is a recognised limitation when using purposive sampling, I worked in close collaboration with my supervisor. Posts and related comments selected in this way were thematically analysed to enable a detailed and nuanced account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Emerging themes from the thematic content analysis formed the basis for discussion in the two focus groups that I conducted. The focus groups had eight participants each. One group comprised supporters of the UPND who belong to the Bemba/Nyanja bloc and the other group comprised supporters of the UPND who belong to the Tonga/Lozi bloc. A third focus group would have comprised PF supporters who belonged to the Bemba/Nyanja group but, due to privacy concerns expressed by participants, individual interviews were conducted instead. Those swing voters who defied expectations based on their ethnic affiliation deserved particular attention as they were the ones who decided the outcome of the election. Ethnic affiliation was inferred from their names and confirmed in a pre-interview questionnaire before they were included. One of the strengths of focus groups as a data collection method is generating discussion about contested issues (Parker & Tritter, 2007). Focus groups can produce high quality information within a short period of time, but participants can also be prone to a loss of independence in their judgement or a suppression of their real views in preference to acceptable, socially desirable and stereotypical answers (Acocella, 2011). I mitigated this by creating homogenous groups where participants had similar profiles, such as belonging to the same language group, supporting the same candidate in their pre-election Facebook posts, and voting for the same candidate. That way,

their core views were already aligned. I also provided an option for follow-up individual interviews for those that wished to engage after the focus group discussions, but none of the participants requested this option. I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with eight PF/Lungu supporters who belonged to the Bemba/Nyanja language bloc. Semi-structured interviews are the preferred method when the goal is to thoroughly understand the participant's unique perspective (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) and allow for candour, including on less socially accepted views on topics such as tribalism.

1.6 Thesis Outline

In this opening chapter, I have presented a summary of the questions that motivated and guided the research, the significance, and the context – geographical, political, historical and theoretical – of the study. I have expanded on the context with particular focus on Zambia's socio-political environment as it relates to this study. I have outlined how colonial and post-colonial identities were created and continued to be shaped in Zambia and, related to that, the seemingly enduring issue of tribal differences and the different ways it has been handled over the years. I have also outlined the recent political and electoral history of Zambia, the state of mainstream media, social media, and Covid-19 and its impact on the electoral cycle. I have also presented the methodology that I used.

In Chapter Two, I review the literature underpinning this study. I cover digital and mobile technology in Africa in general, and social media and democracy in Africa, citing examples from a number of countries.

In Chapter Three, I present the theoretical framework and, specifically, the relationship between social media and elections. I present three main theoretical positions, namely: the digital public sphere, social media as a tool for political mobilisation and social media as a disruptor. I locate discourses relevant to my study, such as neo-tribalism, polarisation, echo chambers and weaponisation of ethnicity, within the theoretical framework.

In Chapter Four, I list and justify my choice of methodology, methods and procedures. I discuss my data collection processes and ethical considerations. I conclude with a reflection on my bias and positionality in relation to the study.

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I present and analyse the data I collected. In Chapter Five, I describe and present a summary of the collected data through a thematic content analysis

applied to posts and comments from five Facebook pages. In Chapter Six, I present and discuss the data that were collected from the two focus group discussions I conducted. In Chapter Seven, I present my final set of data which I collected through semi-structured individual interviews. In all three chapters, I analyse and discuss the data through the lens of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the theoretical framework presented in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Eight, I conclude the thesis with a summary of my findings and recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presents the literature review that informed my study. The chapter covers digital and mobile technology in Africa, and social media and democracy in Africa.

2.1 Digital and Mobile Technology in Africa

The phrase 'digital media' was first used by Richard A. Lanham in a 1989 essay on the digital revolution in literary studies (Lanham, 1989). Subsequent sources have used digital media and 'new media' interchangeably and defined them in terms of both computer technologies and the cultural forms and contexts in which the technologies are used (Dewdney & Ride, 2006). The growth of digital media has transformed communication, to varying extents and with different consequences, around the world. The transformation includes new ways of disseminating news, music and movies, advertising products and services, and conducting interpersonal and mass communication (Kaul, 2012). As I demonstrate in this section, the transformation enables the convergence of media forms, interactivity, access to large audiences across geographical space and time, and new ways of raising awareness and of encouraging participation in advocacy, among others.

Access to hardware, software and skills, among other factors, enables the use of digital media. Access to mobile phones, for example, enables the use of voice calls, text via SMS, and WhatsApp in the case of smartphones as well as social media, thereby reducing communication barriers and facilitating more connection (Nyabongo & Mayunga, 2020). The mobile phones are used across a variety of functions such as private and public communication, entrepreneurship, weather alerts for farmers, and public health messages, among many other uses. In the rural areas of different African countries, mobile phones represent access to modern telecommunications infrastructure, and connect residents to information, markets, services, and other people (Aker & Mbiti, 2010). Some of the reasons for this widespread use and access are that mobile phones can be used even in poor countries that do not provide universal access to traditional infrastructure such as fixed phone lines or fixed internet connections (Tchekounté et al., 2021); the accommodation of private players in the market as well as lenient regulatory environments (Jentzsch, 2012); and mobile phones are among the quickest and cheapest ways to communicate (Etzo & Collender, 2010; Ajisafe et al., 2016). Different African countries have made significant improvements in such areas as telecommunications, electricity supply,

information and communication technologies (ICT) and mobile banking, to advance the digitalisation of the country (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). De Bruijn et al. (2009) capture the impact of the availability of mobile phones on day-to-day communication in Africa by calling them the new talking drums. Donner and Gitao (2009) observe that for most Africans the internet experience is often mobile-first, mobile-centric and mobile-only. The growing access to mobile phones has, therefore, created several new possibilities for the use and production of media, personal networking and communication, political activism, and economic development (Kreutzer, 2009). Mobile phones are considered to have low entry barriers because of their comparatively low cost and the ease of use (Hermanns, 2008). This, however, is not the universal experience as cost of handsets and internet bundles/mobile data, lack of electricity to charge phones, and low/lack of digital literacy are still barriers for many. As Ndlela and Mano explain, "national factors such as media regulation, social media policies, journalism cultures, political cultures, audiences and consumption patterns affect access to the new media" (2020:2). Notwithstanding the foregoing actual and potential limitations to access, mobile phones are recognised as a primary platform for bridging the digital divide (Forenbacher et al., 2019). The term digital divide refers to inequality in access, use and outcomes of ICT (Lythreatis et al., 2022). Over the years, the concept of digital divide has evolved to digital inequalities in recognition of the nuances that attend the disparities related to digital technologies. The concept of digital inequalities better captures the essence of a continuum, recognising that inequalities go beyond access and may include socio-economic contexts, affordability, skills, and other factors (Warschauer, 2003; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; see Van Dijk, 2020). Fuchs & Horak (2008) assert that the digital divide in Africa is due to the structural inequalities of the global network society which, they argue, is characterised by global social and digital apartheid. They argue that "the global digital divide means unequal material, usage, skills, benefit, and institutional access to new information and communication technologies by different world regions" (Fuchs & Horak, 2008:115). Related to digital inequalities is the concept of the democratic divide which refers to inequalities in participation in, representation by and access to democratic processes and institutions. As Martin asserts, "normative democratic theory suggests that citizens should have equal opportunities to participate in politics … yet ample evidence exists from around the world of systematic differences in political participation based on socioeconomic measures and other demographic indicators of societal privilege" (2015:232). Socioeconomic and other inequalities in access to digital technologies and social media can amplify existing inequalities in political participation and hinder the effective participation of members of marginalised groups (van Dijk, 2012). For

example, Gadjanova et al. (2019) assert that there are inequalities in the use of digital and social media in Ghana's electoral cycle, that in turn exacerbate socio-economic and political participation divides.

In Africa, digital media is often talked about from a developmentalist approach that focuses on how the continent can leapfrog, or catch up with the North, on the presumption that there exists a universal technological trajectory (Wasserman, 2021). Some researchers, including Wasserman (2021), argue against such a narrative and posit that analysis of culture and communication in Africa and the wider Global South requires its own theoretical lenses. Similarly, Schoon et al. argue for "a decolonial approach that privileges qualitative methods in ways that position African digital experiences as 'epistemic sites' of knowledge production in their own right in digital media scholarship" (2020:1). This is not to say the different African experiences of digital media have not been captured in any research; this indicates that there are still gaps to be filled in the scholarship. In a similar approach, the use of mobile phones in Africa was initially discussed in terms of its democratising potential. As Moyo (2010:77) posits, "initial responses to the spread of the mobile phone in Africa fell within the technological determinist paradigm in that NGOs [Non-Governmental Organisations] and Western governments lay emphasis on the capacity of these new technologies to democratise the continent". The discussions have continued, albeit in a more nuanced way. An example of ongoing discourse is of the role mobile phones in Africa play in different forms of civic and political engagement. Martin asserts that the information-sharing use of mobile media "is consistently and positively associated with a variety of measures of political and civic engagement … Notably, citizens with higher levels of mobile phone use for informational exchange tend to be more civically and politically engaged" (2015:235). The impact of mobile technologies on politics and political behaviour has been seen in democratic initiatives such as the building of networks, the provision of information to widen the public sphere, and the mobilisation of activists (Hermanns, 2008:75). Hermanns (2008) asserts that social capital and a lively public sphere are key components of a democracy. According to Hermanns (2008:76)., "the increasing flow of information through mobile devices extends the public sphere. Mobile phones have enlarged the amount of information available and at the same time reduced the role of gatekeepers" Jungherr et al. (2020) credit digital media with "retooling politics", i.e., providing political actors and citizens with new or previously unavailable tools to engage in politics. They cite former United States of America President [now President] Donald Trump, the Arab Spring and the United Kingdom's Brexit Referendum as examples of situations where

digital media retooled politics. The retooling came with the transformation of political environments in ways which led to "the erosion of power and authority of traditional media organisations, allowed for a much more active contestation of political facts, and contributed to the emergence of new voices in political discourse" (Jungherr et al., 2020:4). Ndlela and Mano (2020) state how digital media has retooled political communication in Africa, enabling new forms of campaigning. They describe how, previously, "political campaigning in much of Africa was conducted through low-scale traditional structures, door-to-door canvassing, poster advertising, mass rallies, as well as a few news media outlets, with limited distribution beyond urban centres" (Ndlela & Mano, 2020:2). With mobile phones, particularly in Africa, more people are able to participate in democratic processes other than casting a vote on election day. For example, mobile phones are used to access social media, which enables quick access to content, builds relationships between and among users, allows for interactivity, extends the reach of content, and provides anonymity, which can either aid freedom of expression or lead to abuse (O'Lynn, 2023). Through the access they provide, mobile phones mitigate some of the factors that cause the democratic divide, factors such as the digital divide, geography, socioeconomic inequality, gender barriers, political representation and access to information. Of particular interest to this study is how the media environment for electoral campaigns has been altered by the new communication landscape, driven by the increased use of smartphones and adoption of mobile internet in Africa (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). Mobile phones are considered tools of democracies owing to their deployment in election monitoring by citizens. Examples have been given of stakeholders, including citizens, in Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, among other countries, monitoring elections and reporting electoral fraud using mobile phones (Zuckerman, 2004; Moyo, 2010; Willems, 2016). As Hermanns (2008:77) posits, "mobile technology has led to a behavioural change, turning passive recipients of information into active players". Civil society organisations in different African countries have utilised open-source digital platforms such as Ushahidi and Uchaguzi to collect information from members of the public via SMS (Willems, 2016). Open data, which these platforms enable, have been increasingly hailed as contributing to transparency and accountability in elections. In Zambia, a donor-funded and civil society-run citizen election monitoring project, the Zambia Elections Information Centre (ZEIC), generated reports on election-related incidents from all parts of the country, via SMS and WhatsApp (Willems, 2016).

Digital technology includes mobile and social media, and, in Africa, mobile supports social media. Aichner, Grunfelder, Maurer and Jegeni (2021) define social media as an umbrella term incorporating different online platforms.

Other definitions of social media focus not on the platforms but on the content and activities that the social media facilitate. For example, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Ryan (2014) uses a combination of both definitions when he defines social media as the umbrella term used for web-based software and services that allow users to come together and exchange, discuss, communicate and participate in any form of social interaction online. The online interaction can be in the form of text, audio, image, video and other media. "It can involve the generation of new content; the recommendation of and sharing of existing content; reviewing and rating products, services and brands; discussing the hot topics of the day; pursuing hobbies, interests and passions; sharing experience and expertise" (Ryan, 2014: 151).

O'Lynn (2023) asserts that social media enables quick access to content, builds relationships between and among users, allows for interactivity, extends the reach of content, and provides anonymity which can either aid freedom of expression or lead to abuse. Ryan (2014) asserts that the proliferation of social media is a natural extension of the increase in internet usage and the penetration of always-on broadband access. He asserts that, as more people head online and integrate internet into their daily lives, "it is only natural that they bring with them the very human need to interact and belong" (Ryan, 2014:153). Growing access to mobile phones has created several new possibilities for the use and production of media, personal networking, communication, political activism and economic development (Kreutzer, 2009).

2.2 Social Media and Democracy

A significant amount of literature on democracy in Africa adopts a two-pronged normative ideal of elections as the ultimate marker of democracy, and social media as an enabler of democracy. Citizens' right to vote is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Elections are, therefore, the primary mechanism through which citizens leave their mark on national politics and are treasured for enabling citizens to participate in the election of their leaders (Willems, 2012); elections are the quintessential instrument of democracy. The second prong of this normative ideal is the digitalisation of societies and its perceived creation

of more opportunities and platforms, such as social media, for public deliberation. The rest of this chapter is premised on the second prong, presenting the different ways social media has affected political cultures, activism and electoral experiences in selected African countries.

2.2.1 Democracy

Democracy is a system of governance with varied definitions and indexes of measurement (Knutsen, 2010; Boese, 2019). Modern definitions of representative democracy include "participatory and contested elections, which are perceived as the legitimate procedure for the translation of rule by and for the people into workable executive and legislative power" (Lindberg, 2006:1). Citizens' right to vote is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948: Article 21) which declares that:

> *The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.*

Orr (2022:6) asserts that "elections and voting obviously matter at the level of power. They are the ultimate mechanisms for endorsing formal public power". To be deemed mechanisms of accountability (Simpser, 2013) as per normative expectations, elections are required to meet certain benchmarks that are considered necessary in countries that subscribe to democratic principles; the criteria for declaring elections free and fair have been developed in different contexts (Elklit & Svensson, 1997). Difficult as it may be to translate such theoretical concepts as free and fair elections into one unanimous list of criteria, there exist some set prerequisites of democracy. For example, the prerequisites are not limited to polling day but also prescribe the acceptable environment before, during and after the elections. As Elklit and Svensson (1997) argue, all three stages – before, during and after – are crucial and require assessment. They argue that the polling day itself is just one part of the electoral process, and observation missions that only stay for a short time are, therefore, fundamentally flawed (ibid).

The presence of observation and monitoring missions is considered an essential pre-condition but, in some instances, their endorsements of elections as free and fair have been challenged, and their lack of endorsement does not automatically affect the election result. For example, international observers endorsed the 2017 Kenyan elections, which were later challenged and annulled by the Supreme Court (Odhiambo, 2017). The annulment, which was a first in Africa,

led to a re-run (AFP, 2022). Contestation of election results coupled with post-election violence have been experienced in Kenya since 1992 (AFP, 2022).

A more recent example of the lack of endorsement by observers not affecting the election result was the aftermath of the controversial 2023 Zimbabwean elections. Local, regional and continental observers reported that the electoral process was unfairly skewed in favour of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and the losing opposition candidate alleged fraud (Chingono & du Plessis, 2023), but the declaration and inauguration of the president went ahead.

Historically, Zambia was among the first African countries to respond to both internal and external pressures and subject its one-party-state leader to a test of his political legitimacy; Zambia did this by opening the 1991 elections to observation and monitoring (Geisler, 1993). In 1991 Zambia also had the distinction of becoming the first country in English-speaking Africa to transition peacefully from a single to a multi-party system of governance; Zambia thus both set what was expected to be a standard and provided encouragement for nascent democracies on the continent (Geisler, 1993). This became a continent-wide transition to multi-party democracy. The period 1960 to 1990 had seen Africa's one-party state leaders calling themselves democrats, using the argument that regular holding of elections equalled democracy (Leonard, 2009). Leonard states that elections in that era should be considered as plebiscites for the government in power. He posits that "national unity was considered too precious and the dangers of ethnic violence were held to be too great for genuine contests for the presidency to be risked" (Leonard, 2009:1). Simpser (2013) asserts that elections are not only contests for office but also occasions for the transmission or distortion of information. This is just one of a number of positions within electoral discourse. For example, Daxecker (2012) asserts that elections are held even by countries that are not fully democratic in order to appease international pressure for democratic reforms and, in return, receive international benefits such as aid or investment. She asserts that incumbents in such countries are willing to manipulate election results to ensure consolidation of their power. She further asserts that "since opportunities for political change through such elections are limited, they can actually contribute to protests and violent unrest" (Daxecker 2012:515). Similarly, Bratton and Bhoojedhur (2019) posit that, although almost all African countries have committed to a set of continent-wide electoral standards, more is required for the true institutionalisation of elections. They cite some examples of true institutionalisation in which all political actors make a sincere commitment to transparent elections and protection of the process from any threats. These

authors also assert that a repetitive cycle of elections may be necessary but not sufficient for democratisation. Bratton and Bhoojedhur (2019:8) furthermore argue that, "while a sequence of high-quality contests may well contribute to the construction of democracy, a series of less-than-perfect elections can lend longevity and legitimacy to illiberal or authoritarian rule".

There exists a range of normatively unacceptable practices, such as vote buying, that can be deployed to influence elections (Simpser, 2013). Sishuwa (2023) argues that the victory of the incumbent President Lungu in the 2021 Zambian elections seemed like a foregone conclusion due to his deployment of some normatively unacceptable practices. Sishuwa argues that, firstly, President Lungu had heavily restricted the campaign activities of opposition parties. Secondly, in what seemed to be aimed at disenfranchising rural voters located in opposition strongholds, the president exerted pressure on the electoral body to cancel the existing voters' register and compile a new one within 30 days, just months before election day (Sishuwa, 2023). Sishuwa (2023:659) asserts that "the incumbent had also carefully packed the Constitutional Court – the body with the final say on any post-election petition – with his allies and appeared to be in total control of the military and impervious to international pressure or criticism". Sishuwa argues that the contradiction between the pre-election environment and the election result is testament to the institutionalisation of democratic processes in Zambia, with particular reference to competitive elections. In 2021 there was transfer of power from the incumbent to the opposition for the third time since Zambia's return to multi-party democracy in 1991; according to Sishuwa, this demonstrates that the power of incumbency is in decline and alternation is becoming routine. Simpser, however, calls into question the view that the sole incentive of electoral manipulation is immediate electoral victory. Simpser (2013:3–4) posits that "electoral manipulation ought to be understood not merely as a marginal vote-getting technique, but also as an important tool for consolidating and monopolizing political power".

Losing candidates challenging electoral results is not uncommon in countries that hold elections. Leonard (2009) cites how common such contestation is in sub-Saharan Africa. This has entailed the increasing involvement of courts of law in electoral disputes around the world, even though the challenges are almost never successful in changing election results (Omenma, Ibeanu, & Onyishi, 2017). Grounds for contesting election results may include infringements of either the electoral law or voting procedures. Zambia has had three major election petitions since its return to multiparty politics, relating to the 1996, 2001 and 2016 presidential elections (Kaaba, 2020).

2.2.2 Social Media and Democracy in Africa

There has been an evolution over the years in research on the topic of the internet, social media and democracy. Early research globally, and particularly in Africa, was dominated by optimism about the democratising potential of the internet and social media (see Ndavula & Mberia, 2012; Rensburg, 2012; Salgado, 2012). Within a technologically-deterministic and cyber-optimistic narrative, digitalisation is assumed to create opportunities and platforms, such as social media, for public deliberation (see Morozov, 2012). The cyber-optimists, therefore, consider the internet to be an enabler of enhanced democratic systems and practices. Many internet-democracy advocates posit a deliberative public sphere as the ideal for citizen participation in politics (Dahlberg, 2007). For example, Soriano (2013) posits some reasons for cyber-optimism: the new technologies' ability to circulate information to, and enable the participation of, even previously excluded categories of people, facilitate freedom of expression and extend it to divergent views and promote new connections between individuals and groups, including across geographical borders. This means that common grievances across individuals, groups and borders can be identified and collective action can be taken. As discussed in the previous section, social media has also been praised for allowing stakeholders, including citizens, to monitor and report fraud (Willems, 2016; Zuckerman, 2004).

In recent history, the relationship between media and political communication in Africa can be traced to mass media, which were predominantly government-controlled (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). During that time, radio had both the widest reach and, later, the most private players in the wake of the liberalisation of the media from the late 1980s into the early 1990s (ibid). Ndlela and Mano (2020:2) posit how, prior to the advent of social media, political communication was dominated by "one-to-many communications" and supported by oral forms of communication. Some parallels can be drawn between theories of the public sphere, which foreground the role of public communication in either facilitating or hindering public deliberation and democratic theory, which focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the process of decision-making (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002). A growing body of scholarship critiques the double assumption, firstly, that elections are democratic processes that enable informed deliberations, thus empowering citizens to participate in their governance through the ballot (Chalmers, 2013; Alkopoulou, 2014), and, secondly, that the internet, and social media in particular, is a vehicle for providing space to otherwise excluded voices and enhancing opportunities for democratic participation in the public sphere (Mutsvairo & Sirks,

2015; Hofmann, 2019). In Africa, the concept of democracy has often been deployed to refer to the normative ideal of liberal democracy as conceptualised in the Global North. This ideal includes the periodic holding of free and fair elections, the existence of multiple political parties and respect for basic human rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of association (Willems 2012:92). This understanding of democracy, as Chabal (2009) argues, is universalist, teleological and rooted in modernisation as a variant of Westernisation. It is, therefore, inadequate as a measuring paradigm within postcolonial settings where trajectories towards democracy are different from those in the Global North, which are also regarded as normative contexts (Koelble & Lipuma, 2008). A similar critique is made by Balogun (2022) who argues that a major cause of some of the democratic system challenges experienced by African countries, such as Nigeria, is the uncritical adoption of a Western system of democracy and its accompanying structures of power. Another critique argues for the consideration of elections as rituals (Bennet, 1983; Willems 2012; Orr, 2015, 2022). In this case, rituals are regarded as "any activity that involves its participants symbolically in a common enterprise, calling attention to their relatedness and joint interests in a compelling way" (Edelman, 1964:16 in Orr, 2021). As rituals, elections serve to promote the myth that they are avenues for specifying and resolving issues, whereas the function they serve is to endorse the ruling classes (Bennett, 1988; Willems, 2012). According to Willems, "a ritual approach to elections considers these [elections] not necessarily as true occasions for citizens to participate in political affairs but instead as critical moments in the (re)legitimization of those in power" (2012:99). By their manner of conduct, elections under the secret ballot are both private and public because the actual voting or casting of a ballot is a private act that is conducted in a public and communal setting, such as a polling station, on a public day, namely the election day (Orr, 2004; 2022). Orr (2022:2) further posits:

> *Elections as rituals seem to share something with the (better studied) concept of professional sport as a set of ritual practices involving players and spectators. Both spheres exhibit tribalism. And both ultimately demonstrate the tension that arises when a communally integrative endeavor is simultaneously rooted in intractable, formalized competition.*

Within the normative context, the conditions for free and open political communication are an essential element of ensuring fair and democratic electoral processes. According to La rue (2014), in addition to forming a central pillar of democratic societies, the right to freedom of opinion and expression also guarantees a free and fair electoral process, as well as a

representative public and political discourse. La rue asserts that “it is during times of political change that the right to freedom of expression is most essential, ensuring that a well-informed and empowered public is free to exercise its civil and political rights” (2014:5).

2.2.3 Social Media and Democracy: Examples from African Countries

The Koffi Annan Commission points out that the relationship between the internet, social media, elections and democracy is complex, systemic and still unfolding. As the Commission asserts, “indeed, digital technologies directly affect how citizens take part in democracy, and elections are critical periods when citizens are particularly attentive to public discourse” (2020: 25). One of the roles social media has assumed in African politics is enhancing the visibility of protests against misrule (Mano & Ndlela, 2020). As Mano and Ndlela (2020:2) assert, “increased political change in Africa has coincided with the introduction of new communication technologies and services … The internet, and social media in particular, is arguably having unprecedented implications in the mediation of political culture and power”. Some examples in Africa include citizen protests in Sudan that culminated in a coup in 2019, ending the 30-year rule of President Omar al-Bashir; the continuing protests against Cameroon President Paul Biya who has been in office for over 40 years and is one of the oldest rulers in the world; and youth-driven protests in Algeria that led to the forced resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019 (Mano & Ndlela, 2020). One of the most recent examples is youth-led protests against fiscal legislation in Kenya which, as Omweri (2024) states, significantly influenced policy decisions, actions and reforms. The youth protesters, commonly referred to by media coverage as being from Generation Z or Gen Z, adopted social media, protests and lobbying, among other mobilisation strategies, to drive social change (Omweri, 2024). The protests, which were fuelled by citizen discontent over the high cost of living, corruption and what they considered to be government attempts to stifle dissent, forced the Kenyan government to drop their proposed taxes and to fire a number of ministers (VOA, 2024). Omweri (2024) posits that, although Gen Z typically feels disconnected from traditional politics, it is keen to participate in democratic processes on its terms. Omweri (2024:1) concludes that “Gen Z's mobilization efforts are transforming the political landscape, driving innovation, and shaping the future of democracy and social justice movements in Africa.” De Bruijn and Both (2017:780) posit that ICTs are part of the factors that influence political protests and the contestations of government and state legitimacy by the youth in Africa. Some of the sociopolitical movements cited include Y-en-a-marre of Senegal, Filimbi and Luca of

the Democratic Republic of Congo and Balai Citoyen of Burkina Faso, as well as movements of the nomadic Fulani youth of Mali and the urban youth of Chad (ibid). The authors acknowledge that youth participation in protests is not new in Africa and can be traced back as far as anti-colonial struggles in the different countries. What is new, however, is the number of youth participants in these countries and the unprecedented access to ICT and social media. According to De Bruijn and Both (2017:781), "as a result of their experience of marginalization and exclusion, the younger generations contest the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes on the continent by means of these technologies and media". Still in Africa, Ligtvoet and Oudenhuijsen (2019) highlight the role social media played in the Biafra independence protests between 2014 and 2016 when sentiments, that had been strongly held since 1970 when the Nigerian civil war ended, came to the fore. According to Ligtvoet and Oudenhuijsenn (2019:135), "digital protests turned into regional meet-ups and street demonstrations across the globe. In subsequent months, bloody encounters between the Nigerian military and protesting Igbo youth left at least 150 protesters killed across the south-east of Nigeria".

Other changes that new technologies, and social media in particular, have enabled include online campaigning during elections, online fundraising for election purposes, and re-organisation of power relations with regard to mainstream journalistic gatekeeping (Mano & Ndlela, 2020). In addition, social media has extended the range of platforms on which the wider population can engage in politics. According to Mano and Ndlela (2020), typically marginalised categories, such as youth, women and diasporas, have expressed themselves on electoral issues using social media. These authors assert that social media "is bringing new agency, tactics and strategies to the evolving relationship between politicians and citizens … New technologies have also given birth not only to a variety of new actors, but to more potent forms of influence and control" (Mano & Ndlela, 2020:2). An example is the Pads4Girls campaign in Uganda, where social media was used to demand accountability for campaign promises that had been by politicians (Selnes & Orgeret, 2020). The campaign was initiated by a Ugandan academic Stella Nyanzi who, with the help of volunteers, set up collection points and rallied social media users to donate sanitary pads, eventually collecting over 10 million pads and donating the pads to over 2 000 girls (Selnes & Orgeret, 2020). The online campaign extended offline with some hybrid activities, including media engagements and visits to rural schools. The campaign drew a large following and some unintended consequences; as Selnes and Orgeret (2020:32). elaborate, "opposition politicians joined the movement, calling on the

government to provide the materials promised. The campaign antagonised powerful figures in government and led to Stella Nyanzi's imprisonment".

Student protests across South Africa are another example of social media enabling new political action and bringing new actors to the fore. Malila and Pela (2020) note that, in 2015 and 2016, Rhodes University in South Africa's Eastern Cape was the site of political tension and activities. The #RhodesMustFall (#RMF), #FeesMustFall (#FMF) and #RUReferenceList protests centred on different issues, including the decolonisation of institutions of higher learning, high university fees and the gender-based-violence/rape culture. The protests have been cited by scholars and commentators as examples of "internet-age networked student movements" due to the participants' use of social media to communicate (Malila & Pela, 2020: 97). Different tertiary institutions and private citizens across the country participated in the protests, which were seen as a new way of "mobilising and organising student political power" (Malila & Pela, 2020: 97). #RhodesMustFall started at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and, apart from spreading across the country, this protest against white supremacy in academic spaces resonated with students in places as geographically distant as Oxford in the United Kingdom (Malila & Pela, 2020). Facebook and Twitter [X], the social media platforms that facilitated the protests, operated as a digital counter-public sphere, in the Habermasean sense, because the discussions on these platforms were not mediated by traditional media (ibid). Furthermore, Mutsvairo and Bosch (2017) highlight the Fees Must Fall (#FMF) student protests in South Africa and, using these protests, examine how new technologies and social media are increasingly being used as tools for political mobilisation. These authors posit that "access to social media has allowed for the broadcast of various images, and the construction of competing narratives and counter-narratives with respect to mediatised political events" (Mutsvairo & Bosch, 2017:72).

In Zimbabwe, social media was used to highlight and protest against what were considered ZANU-PF governance failures, under the hashtag #ThisFlag. Initiated in 2016 by a religious leader Pastor Evan Mawarire, #ThisFlag managed to mobilise and bring together Zimbabweans in different geographic locations as well to initiate conversations between citizens and politicians, both online and offline (Mpofu & Mare, 2020). Through the use of social media, #ThisFlag revealed new actors in the political advocacy space. As Mpofu & Mare posit, "the cyber-protests brought to the fore the role of the church (an actor often seen as disengaged and disinterested) in Zimbabwean politics" (2020:153). Mpofu & Mare (2020:170) credit the

initiator of the protest with managing to "de-ethnicize activism and politics through making use of universalizing slogans and self-immolating videos". This is an example of social media being used to rally people on political matters outside the typical frame of ethnicity.

In some contexts, social media is considered to be an alternative to mainstream media. In Algeria, for example, social media has been gaining ground on account of many citizens preferring social media to mainstream media as a source of news and information, a means for participation in public deliberation, and a platform for the emergence of new political actors and practices (Zaghlami, 2020). Opposition politicians have also taken to social media, to reach the electorate in a way impossible for them in the country's constrained mainstream media (ibid). Zaghlami (2020:117) posits that, in Algeria, "the rapid rise of the number of social media and social networks has a correlation with the absence of credible, reliable and independent media". The digital affordances inherent in social media, and more broadly in the new media ecology, find expression in different ways, including user-generated content. In Nigeria, for example, the 2015 general election saw the prominent use of satirical images and the extensive sharing of these images by Nigerians at home and in the diaspora, to the point of images going viral (Uzuegbunam, 2020). The use of humour, such as satirical memes, to communicate political messages on social media enhances the accessibility of the subject matter. In the case of the 2015 Nigerian general election, Uzuegbunam argues that digitally expressive culture, as demonstrated in the viral satirical images, "may have enabled some citizens to exercise political agency in the face of the frustration and bottled-up grievances towards the hegemonic political system" (2020:240). The same digitally expressive culture – satire in this case – represents an aspect of the intersection of Nigerian society, politics and digital media in how this culture serves as a rebellious way for citizens to defy the powerful (ibid). Uzuegbunam (2020:241) argues for recognition of the imagination and effort that went into the production and dissemination of the images, describing them as "semiotic sites of tension, contention and confrontation" that aptly depicted the state of politics at the time. Interestingly, Uzuegbunam argues for the message to be privileged over the messenger, stating that the content needed to be appreciated "even when they may have originated from creative young people, trolls, mischief-makers or ordinary citizens" (2020:241). This point of view is particularly interesting in the context of the Habermasean public sphere and in determining the criteria for which voices one would consider *rational*. In the same accommodative approach to diverse voices, Uzuegbunam (2020:241) further argues that, "although most of the images lacked quality and merely reeked of amateurism, the fact that they circulated within the polity and engaged the

citizens in [more] powerful ways than mere words is very instructive for democratic citizenship in the digital age".

Some recent research seeks to establish the extent to which online experiences may or do affect offline lived experience. Perhaps one of the most visible angles is the continuing debate over and investigation into whether social media affects electoral outcomes and to what extent. For example, some researchers ask whether an individual's online behaviour changes their offline political activity (Cheeseman et al., 2020). Some researchers posit that Twitter played a decisive role in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections and the Brexit Referendum in the United Kingdom (Fujiwara et al., 2021). Fujiwara et al. (2021) assert that election officials around the world are concerned about the increasing influence of social media. These authors assert that they "provide some of the first empirical evidence that social media can affect election outcomes … and that Twitter lowered the Republican party's vote share in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections" (Fujiwara et al., 2021:23). Jungherr et al. (2020:6), on the other hand, argue that "to generally declare digital media to have transformed politics is highly simplistic and risks mistaking the presentation of politics for its substance". These authors do, however, acknowledge that digital media has had some "weak or indirect effects" on politics, such as changing the foundations of public discourse and collective action (Jungherr et al., 2020:6). They caution against over- or under-estimating the role of digital media.

The different benefits and opportunities presented by social media in the foregoing examples fall within the cyber-optimistic narrative. There are, however, other ways that social media impacts democracy in Africa. An important consideration is that social-media reality is largely a reflection of real-world reality. As Wasserman (2018:220) posits, social media are deeply embedded in existing power relations and social dynamics and should be viewed as reflecting and amplifying what exists. This is consistent with how some researchers view social media as a revealer of society as it is. By providing a platform for active citizenship, activism and political engagement, sharing information faster and further, and sharing divergent and otherwise marginalised views, social media is able to reflect the state of society at any given time (Margetts, 2013; Jha & Kodila-Tedika, 2019; Jungherr et al., 2020; Mohammed, 2020). The absence of mainstream gatekeepers makes a strong case for social media's ability to mirror society's true state in the expression of divergent views, concerns and realities, without undue censorship. With just over half of the world's population on social media (DataReportal, 2024), it is not realistic to say that everyone's views are represented online. It is, however, reasonable

to consider user content on social media as an alert to or window into some of the different realities of society at that particular time. Such varied expression enhances public discourse and contributes to a democracy that is more embracing of diversity than before. Social media as a mirror accounts for the large volume of personal information that is willingly shared online, and that allows ease of access to and analysis of public opinion, including the political views of the public (Jaidka et al., 2019). Manzoor (2017) argues that "online social media holds promising potential to predict public opinion on different issues", but acknowledges the limits of the same in ascertaining the possible conclusions that can be drawn about society based on social media data. As a mirror, social media reflects both the positive and negative aspects of its users and their environments. Some of the mirrored content is intolerant and anti-democratic (Hassan, 2023), demonstrating social media's ability to either undermine or positively contribute to democracy, depending on the circumstances. In an election environment, social media as a mirror helps politicians to align their campaign priorities and messaging, as well as to gauge the public reaction. In the everyday workings of democratic societies, social media as a mirror allows policymakers real-time appreciation of public sentiment and emerging issues, thus providing an opportunity for responsive democracy.

Social media has also increasingly been noted for enabling the expression of sentiments and behaviours that may be detrimental to democracy. Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro (2020) cite, as an example, the 2018 Zimbabwean elections and the role social media played in reinforcing, online, the negative gendered attitudes and discourses observable offline. They argue that, rather than fulfilling the expectation of alternative media as critical media, social media – Twitter [X] in particular – did not subvert long-held cultural biases against women in politics but rather reinforced them (ibid). Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro (2020) acknowledge social media's positive contribution to democracy, such as affording the opposition a platform to reach the voting public in a restrictive political environment. These authors do, however, bemoan how, with regard to gender issues, social media were part of the same problematic broader discourses, social and cultural. Mateveke and Chikafa-Chipiro (2020) assert that political violence is not always physical and that there appears to be an increase in verbal violence targeted against women in politics. They further assert that "insults and obscene name calling are typical characteristics of this violence. Offensive labels such as 'witch', 'bitch', 'pathetic', 'dumb' have often been used to describe these women" (2020: 25) who were contenders for political office. Ncube and Yemurai (2020) share a similar example on the negative experiences of female politicians, in the 2018 Zimbabwean election cycle, on social

media, particularly Twitter [X]. These authors contend that, in the case of female politicians, social media did not meet its expected role of political equaliser and, instead, merely reproduced the same patriarchal discrimination women in politics face offline. Ncube and Yemurai (2020: 74) posit that, in spite of the many opportunities it affords politicians, social media in Zimbabwe

> remains a space in which women continue to face misogynist and sexist backlash. Even though there exist different forms of legislative measures that seek to protect different internet users, these remain largely ineffective in patriarchal societies where women are infantilised and considered incapable of holding positions of power, especially if they are unmarried.

These two examples of negative gendered narratives and discourses in the Zimbabwean elections prompt the categorisation of social media as both a mirror and a platform for anti-democratic voices and behaviours.

Another example of the use of social media for the promotion of anti-democratic sentiment is the spread of hate speech in Nigeria. With hate speech already identified as a problem in the country, social media has added to the problem; one of the ways it does so is by enhancing the reach and the pace of the reach of such content (Ogbonna & Okafo, 2020). The Nigerian example also demonstrates social media as a mirror because the highest reported cases of hate speech are related to ethnicity and religion, mirroring offline, real-world dynamics (ibid). Along with facilitating the expression and dissemination of anti-democratic voices, social media is also noted for enhancing the visibility of contested opinions, such as in negative political advertising. Previously, the political advertising industry only had print, radio and television as platforms but, with the evolution of social media, it has become more prominent (Tyali & Mukhudwana, 2020). Negative political advertising usually takes the well-known form of mudslinging, with a dominant tactic being to target the opponent with untrue allegations (ibid). In an election period, social media becomes particularly important in the context of disseminating negative political adverts because it provides “uncensored public sphere platforms” (Tyali & Mukhudwana, 2020:266). Overall, social media has changed the political, activist and electioneering cultures and communication in many African countries, including Zambia.

2.2.4 Social Media Infrastructure and Political Communication

Another pertinent angle of discussion is how social media platforms affect political communication and, in turn, potentially affect election and democracy outcomes. In Africa, political players from different countries have been affected by platform dynamics such as algorithms. Social media platforms can, through the use of algorithms and other recommendation engines, influence the choices users make by, for example, promoting the consumption of certain political news over other options. Ndlela (2020:15) makes an important argument that, by carrying such power,

> algorithms influence the modalities of visibility and invisibility, a phenomenon akin to media institutions. The media industry is built around the parameters of visibility. Media (in)visibility revolves around the power of the media and journalists to select items from the social field, sort them, amplify or marginalize them and decide not just whether to give them visibility but also how they should be presented.

Algorithms reintroduce gatekeeping, one of the practices that social media is praised for eliminating, and, consequently, algorithms restructure the power dynamics within the political communication landscape online. Besides gatekeeping, the media theory of agenda-setting (see McCombs & Shaw, 1972) also applies in the case of algorithms because algorithms decide what to foreground as significant, for platform users. For example, Trielli and Diakopoulos (2022) argue that there was algorithmic agenda-setting in the topics and issues curated by *Google Search* about the two main candidates during the 2020 United States presidential election. These authors argue that the prominence given to issues in the media shaped public opinion, and that is the essence of the agenda-setting theory. According to Trielli and Diakopoulos (2022:45), the agenda-setting theory "states that the salience that the media provides certain topics is associated with the importance that the public attributes to the issues reflected by these topics". As a platform, Facebook's algorithm also determines what is 'relevant' to a user and therefore displayed on their feed (Ndlela, 2020). That visibility created by algorithms is, in turn, likely to be further extended through human agency because users are more likely to share or repost what is visible to them. It is evident that social media infrastructure plays a role in influencing "the movement of political information to the user(s), through recommendations and news feeds" and ultimately the dissemination of political

communication (Ndlela, 2020:19). As Ndlela (2020:14) further asserts, “the power of algorithms in filtering, ranking and selecting media content makes them a significant element in election campaigns, not just in the West but also in emerging democracies in Africa”.

As Ndlela (2020) points out, Africa as a continent is still “characterized by fragile democracies, weak economies, poverty and unequal distribution of [ICT] resources”, but its countries still hold their own particularities and therefore must not be viewed through any form of “digital universalism” lens (2020:13). Closely related to the discussion on algorithms is the use of bots (short for robots), which are automated actors online with the ability to manipulate public opinion. Ndlela defines bots as “software that can execute commands when they receive specific input. Social bots mimic and potentially manipulate humans and their behaviour in social networks” (2020:20). In the same way that algorithms are programmed, bots are also deployed by human actors, and both inherently follow agendas and represent power interests. As Ndlela posits, “behind social media content are some economic, political and cultural agendas and authority that are increasingly expressed algorithmically. Of major concern are actors that deploy social bots to manipulate public opinion and influence the outcome of the vote” (2020:20). Bots have the ability to actively participate on social media through such activities as automatically generating messages and posting them in different fora of choice, interacting with human users by following accounts, responding to posts, advocating points of view or ideas, and liking posts, among others. Ndlela warns about the bots’ ability to initiate “and catalyse online phenomena in order to stir outrage and artificial hypes. In so doing, bots can potentially alter perceptions of political reality by spreading propaganda and false information” (2020:20). Ndlela (2020) further points out the ability of bots to infiltrate groups on social media, to widely circulate messages for malicious purposes, and potentially to influence politics and people. Bots can artificially boost engagement on a post, making it eligible for foregrounding as ‘most relevant’ by algorithms and, in turn, being made more visible than posts with real engagement. Human actors are capable of deploying bot networks and troll factories to “amplify the dissemination of fake news, often as part of deliberate sophisticated disinformation campaign to influence public opinion and election campaigns. These automated activities endanger interaction and participation in social media, thus undermining the very core of democratic processes” (Ndlela, 2020:21). In the case of African elections, the prevalence of bot activity has been researched and documented. For example, Ndlela posits that “African countries experience a surge in bot activities, gradually subsiding

when the election cycle is over" (2020:21). This suggests bots are deployed as part of a deliberate election strategy.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of the literature underpinning my study, tracing the history and impact of digital and mobile technology in Africa, impact of social media and democracy in general and specific to Africa as well as the prevailing dynamics between social media infrastructure and political communication. The next chapter presents the theoretical framework of my study.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

In the previous chapter, I presented the literature review underpinning the study. In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework, particularly focusing on the different ways of thinking about the relationship between social media and elections. I align my own categorisation of social media as mirror, amplifier and disruptor with existing theoretical positions that treat social media as a tool for political mobilisation, as alternative media, and as an extension of the public sphere (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). I also discuss tribalism, neo-tribes, and some concerns about social media with regard to elections and democracy in general, and how they relate to my research.

3.1 Political Mobilisation

One of the theoretical perspectives advanced on the relationship between social media and elections is the use of social media as a tool for political mobilisation (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). Within this theoretical postulation, the Arab Spring is an often-cited example of the way digital media can enable quick collective action by the general population, and at a low cost (Howard & Hussain, 2011). As Howard and Hussain observe, one of the most consistent narratives on political change from civil society leaders in Arab countries has been how the internet, mobile phones and social media made the difference. By using digital media technologies, "people interested in democracy could build extensive networks, leverage social capital, and organize political action with a speed and on a scale never seen before" (Howard & Hussain, 2011:1). Digital technologies have been credited with steering people in different countries to participate in social change. I have cited different examples of how social media has been used for mobilisation in different African countries in Chapter 2. The impact of new communication technologies, however, is not limited to Africa. In China, for example, the mobile phone has increasingly been used to defy authoritarian information blockages and censorship (Liu, 2012). As Liu (2012:996) asserts, "unpredictable and unregulated digital communication enables citizens to breach government censorship; receive information from the outside world; coordinate a wide range of activities, including large-scale protests and create bottom-up, people-based political movements in an aggressive battle for control over information". Critical to this theoretical position is the ability of social media to amplify content and extend its reach beyond its geographical boundaries. Researchers recognise the amplifier effect that social media has, in part through its ability to deliver information faster and to a wider audience than

mainstream media can (DeLuca, Lawson & Sun, 2013; Olaniran & Williams, 2020), and in part for what Popham (2018) refers to as its ubiquity. By providing a platform for individuals to exchange information and views, social media amplifies what would otherwise have been either private or accessible only on a limited scale. In a political context, such amplification creates new ways for mobilisation of voters, for example, and for inclusive public deliberation.

In Zambia, an example of how social media amplifies content is how shows on community radio stations with otherwise limited geographical reach become accessible nationally and internationally through social media. During the electoral cycle, this ability enhances the reach of campaign messages, citizen deliberations about these messages, and the circumvention of censorship and any other strategies aimed at stifling divergent views. Elections, like other major news events, reveal how fast and how far information can move on social media. Movements such as the Arab Spring, #FeesMustFall, #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo are examples of the power of social media, as an amplifier, to spread information, rally masses, support activism and empower individuals to mobilise for different causes. The ability of social media to amplify carries its own risks and challenges, such as extending the reach of problematic content. For example, the ubiquitous nature of social media, and its amplifier potential, means that instances of misinformation or hate speech can quickly go viral and have material effects on the targeted people. The amplifier effect can also reinforce echo chambers and, by extension, contribute to polarisation. None of these scenarios are conducive to a free and fair election environment.

3.2 Social Media as Disruptor

Another theoretical postulation on the relationship between social media and elections is social media as a disruptor or game changer. Ndlela and Mano (2020) explain in detail the different ways that social media is a game changer, and the alternative media role that social media assumes in relation to elections. The disruptive nature of social media is evident in its radical transformation of the way people communicate, collaborate, consume and access information, and create content (Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013; Ghezzi, Gastaldi, Lettieri, & Corso, 2016). As a consequence of this transformation, social media has disrupted traditional hierarchies and their power structures, such as gatekeeping, and has democratised access to information, thus enabling the participation of previously excluded voices. Social media has also allowed the electorate access to their elected leaders, thus enabling more interaction and

accountability. According to Arthur (2020), the disruption enabled by access to digital and mobile media technologies has improved governance, and democratic and electoral processes. The Arab Spring is an example of the disruptive potential of social media. People in the Middle East made use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to organise mass protests and demand political reform (Khondker, 2011). In current deliberations, disruption also refers to the threats to democracy either introduced or exacerbated by social media. Some of the perceived threats to democracy are fake news, hate speech, political manipulation, echo chambers, and undermining privacy (See Pariser, 2011; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Roberts & Jennifer, 2020). This type of disruption may undermine public trust and may have significant real-world consequences, such as when misinformation incites hate speech and violence (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). According to the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age (2020:25)

> digital communication technologies have enabled those who would exploit the fissures of modern democracy to undermine elections and democratic deliberation. In a global environment characterized by increasing polarization and growing levels of distrust, elections have become the frontline in the struggle for democracy.

The Commission cites an example of the weaponisation of social media to spread fake news, and incite hate and violence. These concerns about the weaponisation of elections and about the platforms supporting election communication have materialised, to differing extents, in countries such as Zambia.

Morozov (2011) discusses another way social media disruption has taken place, namely through digital activism. In his discussion of how technology can both aid and derail the effectiveness of activism in the digital age, he introduces the terms “slacktivism” and “spinternet”. Slacktivism is a combination of the words slacker and activism. According to Morozov, slacktivism is a practice where individuals engage in minimal, low-cost and often superficial forms of activism online. These forms of activism may include participation in hashtag campaigns on social media or signing online petitions. He contends that slacktivism provides individuals a false sense of participation and accomplishment but rarely achieves any tangible real-world change. Zohouri, Darvishi and Sarfi (2020: 184–185) summarise some of the prominent criticism of slacktivism as “superficial engagement, substitution for meaningful action, illusion of accomplishment, dilution of serious issues, clicktivism vs. real-world

change, and attention without accountability". Morozov is among those who are highly critical of the phenomenon of slacktivism as he believes it creates a sense of complacency in the participants and undermines the potential of genuine grassroots activism. He argues that slacktivism nurtures clicktivism, which is in reference to the action of clicking buttons or sharing posts online as substitutes for physical civic engagement. Bennet and Segerberg (2012), however, argue that clicktivism may serve a beneficial role for individuals who are just getting into activism, as it may act as a gateway to more meaningful forms of participation. What may start or appear as mere clicktivism could progress into something more substantial. With the use of hashtags, activists online are able to identify fellow users with shared views and causes. This could be a useful step in the formation and mobilisation of online communities that could, eventually, transcend into offline activism. It is also possible for online-only activism to influence policy, for example, or enhance awareness and heighten the monitoring of unwanted behaviour such as corruption or police brutality. During electoral cycles, some activists commit to educating the voting public on what to look for in ideal candidates and/or to subjecting campaign promises by politicians to scrutiny and offering counter-narratives. Such activism may be conducted online and still influence offline behaviour, for example on polling day. On a related note, it is not uncommon for citizens in the diaspora to add their voices to activism efforts in their native countries through online platforms. This form of activism may be critical to mobilising solidarity and sustaining the visibility of causes, especially where locally situated activists may be subject to such constraints as censorship, intimidation and arrest. The concept of clicktivism, therefore, cannot be said to be reflective of the full range and forms of activism present online.

3.2.1 Concerns About Social Media

Within the theoretical consideration of social media as a disruptor, there exist a number of concerns that are deemed potentially harmful to democracy. The internet and social media have increasingly been recognised as enabling and propagating disruptive messages or ideologies. As Olaniran and Williams (2020) and Mihelj and Jiménez-Martinez (2021) highlight, disruptive ideologies include xenophobia, neo-Nazism, anti-immigration, globalisation and cultural homogeneity, nationalism and right-wing populism. Other social media content that could negatively impact democratic deliberation includes disinformation, echo chambers, polarisation, bots, hate speech and political advertising (Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Persily &

Tucker, 2020). The foregoing concerns are recognised as affecting both nascent and established democracies (Tucker, Guess, Barbera, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal & Nyhan, 2018).

3.2.1.1 Fake News

The spread of fake news is one of the ongoing concerns regarding the role of social media in a democracy. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 213) define it as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers". Fake news damages societies and democratic institutions (Shu, Silva, Wang, Tang & Liu, 2017; Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu, 2019;), distorts public discourse and potentially undermines decision-making. As Olan, Jayawickrama, Suklan and Liu (2020:444) posit, fake news "has become a major part of [social media], raising doubts about information credibility, quality, and verification". Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue against the use of the term 'fake news' as they consider it inadequate in conveying the complexity of the phenomena of information pollution, and because of the misappropriation of the term by parties, such as politicians, to describe news media and coverage that they find disagreeable. Instead, these authors propose a conceptual framework for examining information disorder. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017:5) identify three different types of information disorder, namely: mis-, dis- and mal-information, with the following classifications:

> Using the dimensions of harm and falseness, we describe the differences between these three types of information: Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant. Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm. Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

They argue for definitional rigour as an aid in the correct recognition of mis- and dis-information, "whether of form, motivation or dissemination" (ibid:15). In 'Fake News. It's Complicated', Wardle (2017:n.p.) outlines seven types of mis- and dis-information as follows:

> Satire or Parody: No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.
>
> Misleading Content: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual.
>
> Imposter Content: When genuine sources are impersonated.

Fabricated Content: New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.

False Connection: When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content.

False Context: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information.

Manipulated Content: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.

Different researchers agree that fake news, in its different forms, is not new and has existed for a long time. For Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), an early form of fake news is how news media disseminate stories in misleading ways with the aim of gaining from the shock value. These authors assert that digital media has, however, enabled unprecedented reach and challenges (ibid). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) sometimes refer to the phenomena as information pollution, citing how they affect public discourse not just in political deliberations but other areas as well, such as health, medicine and climate change. They argue that the impact of mis- and dis-information must not be considered in isolation but within the context of the new media ecosystem. They assert that the new media ecosystem "is dominated by increasingly partisan radio, television and social media; exaggerated emotional articulations of the world; quick delivery via algorithmically derived feeds on smartphones and audiences that skim headlines to cope with the floods of information before them" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:15). Ndlela (2020) asserts that the impact of fake news differs from one context to another. He argues that there is a worrying connection between online fake news and how it may translate into action in the real world or offline (ibid). Dissemination of fake news and other manipulated information may be by both local and foreign parties (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018), which adds to concerns about electoral integrity. In the United States, fake news was widely discussed as a concern in the aftermath of the 2016 election. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017:212) share different research findings and commentary on, for example, how "the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories". It is estimated that, by the end of the 2016 US election, over one million tweets were related to fake news (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard, 2023). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) cite commentators such as Parkinson (2016), Read (2016) and Dewey (2016) as suggesting that, had it not been for the influence of fake news, Donald Trump would not have won the 2016 election. This claim falls within continuing research on the impact of social media on democracy in terms of how social media shapes elections (Cheeseman, Fisher, Hassan & Hitchen, 2020); social media as a weaponised platform for anti-democratic voices (Hassan, 2023); and misinformation and disinformation, and their implications for democracy (Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Persily &

Tucker, 2020). Newman (2022) posits that Africa and Latin America are the regions causing the highest levels of concern with regard to fake news, and these regions have correspondingly high levels of the use of social media for news. Newman (2022:26) asserts, "this is not to say that social media use causes misinformation, but that usage may generate awareness of and potential exposure to false information, including giving voice to extreme perspectives that previously would not have been widely heard".

The use of deliberate strategies by powerful actors, such as governments, to infiltrate the digital space with propaganda and disinformation is another form of disruption. Morozov (2011) uses the term "spinternet", a combination of spin and internet, to describe such strategies. He posits that governments and corporations use social media to control public discourse, stifle legitimate dissent, undermine genuine activism, disseminate preferred political narratives and manipulate public opinion with either false or misleading information. With the passage of time and the evolution of technology, this conversation can be extended to the use of bots and automation in the dissemination of propaganda, and the implications of this for political communication and public deliberation. In Africa, some governments or their sponsors hire foreign consultants for the purposes of propaganda and public relations (Ndlela, 2020). Some of the hired firms engage in clandestine activities, including fabricating stories, in attempts to influence the election outcome (ibid). As Ndlela (2020:23) states, "the production and dissemination of fake news is driven by different motives, be it economical [sic], ideological or political". There are different interventions, such as post-publication fact-checking, community notes for publicly displayed content, and equipping media consumers with fake-news-recognition skills. The largely unmitigated challenge, however, remains fake news in peer-to-peer platforms such as WhatsApp, which are widely used in Africa. As Ndlela (2020:25) posits,

> WhatsApp is the epicentre of fake news distribution in Africa. It has easily become a battleground in polarized elections, raising concerns that it is distorting political debates, some of which take place in secluded groups, where members feast on unverified content.

He further asserts that, ideally, political debates need to take place within the public sphere (ibid). Inobemhe, Ugber, Ojo and Santas (2020) argue that the dissemination of fake news in Nigeria is an outcome of the proliferation of new media technologies. The examples they cite of the shared misinformation and fake news include political communication, insurgency and

promotion of ethnic sentiment among Nigerians. Hassan (2023) argues that, apart from being a major source of fake news, social media is also used to de-legitimise opposing voices and fan religious and ethnic discord. He argues that disinformation is most effective when it exploits existing narratives and contexts to worsen existing social and religious divides. He adds that the cited disinformation campaigns – "designed and led by Nigerians as well as international firms – aimed to delegitimize institutions, groups, or personalities; glorify a leader; or, during elections, confuse voters, instigate apathy among people, or marginalize women and other vulnerable groups" (Hassan, 2023:7). Fake news is one of the ways social media gets weaponised and the consequences, especially in an election period, may negatively affect democracy.

3.2.2 Political Polarisation

Political polarisation, filter bubbles and echo chambers are some of the other concerns raised with regard to social media and the facilitation of practices that are potentially detrimental to democracy. Social media algorithms typically suggest content based on a user's existing preferences and beliefs, as gathered from past online activity. This tends to reinforce those existing positions, thus potentially creating echo chambers and deepening polarisation, which in turn hinder the constructive deliberations and diversity of opinions necessary for a democracy (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015). Related to algorithms and fake news are the concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers. A filter bubble refers to an algorithmic bias that selects and limits content that an individual sees on the internet. The bias is caused by algorithms used to personalise user experience (see Saxena, 2019). One of the outcomes is that affected users become insulated against content external to their bubble, which reinforces what they already know and believe (TechTarget, 2018). Papakyriakopoulos, Tessono, Narayanan and Kshirsagar (2022) posit that online platforms influence the circulation of political information and, by doing so, play an increasingly important role in shaping democracy. Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2022:532) further posit that, "in recent years, political campaigns have spent heavily on the platforms' algorithmic tools to target voters with online advertising". Ndlela (2020:14) asserts that "the power of algorithms in filtering, ranking and selecting media content makes them a significant element in election campaigns, not just in the West but also in emerging democracies in Africa". He asserts that there is evidence that social media amplifies echo chambers and filter bubbles in African contexts, stating that "echo chambers are evident in the form of Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups, based on different factors

including ideological inclinations, ethnicity, political affiliations and region" (Ndlela, 2020:27). He gives the example of Zimbabwe where WhatsApp connections make up almost half of all the country's internet usage. Ndlela (2020:27) asserts that "in the highly contested 2018 elections, WhatsApp reinforced the deep political polarization between the ruling ZANU-PF and the main opposition, the MDC Alliance". The Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying public health restrictions, that forced more people to go online, also contributed to polarisation. As Chenoweth (2022:314) elaborates, "the lockdowns in the wake of Covid-19 and the reliance on social media for social connections exacerbated the information silos that were already in place, further dividing polarized publics into more calcified views and identities". Political polarisation may have material effects such as reduced delivery of public services. For example, Chigova and Hofisi (2023) argue that political polarisation and political party coalitions in South Africa negatively affect local government service delivery, as they undermine the authority of municipal administrations. These authors further argue that a reduction in political polarisation could lead to improved service delivery by municipalities. Similarly, in Zambia, service delivery is affected by political polarisation or affiliation. For example, research has shown that there is a link between service delivery and the relationships that politicians forge with traditional leaders (Baldwin, 2013).

The social media capabilities that extend opportunities for participation in public discourse and accommodate otherwise marginalised voices are the same social media capabilities that enable the opposite, such as the marginalisation and stifling of expression. For example, online bullying, intimidation and harassment aimed at individuals, including activists, politicians and journalists, creates a hostile environment that may hinder participation and freedom of expression (Roberts & Lincoln, 2018). This creates a false sense of what the prevailing sentiment is on any particular issue, if some voices have been stifled. Another tactic that is used to drown out dissenting voices or opposition online is the deployment of troll armies. In such situations, groups of people using fake identities flood social media or other online forums with a set message and with the aim of drowning out dissenting views (Marchant & Stremlau, 2020). According to Marchant and Stremlau (2020: 4217), "bots, or automated programs, have also been effective at distorting conversations by overwhelming certain platforms with misinformation and fake news".

The cited concerns often also have an impact on democracy. For example, misinformation can distort the public considerations or perceptions that inform affiliation and voting choices, as

well as feed into polarisation and echo chambers. Social media infrastructure and its affordances may also fuel the same concerns. As Triandafyllidou (2020:801) argues,

> While social media may be seen as the epitome of the modern, technological evolution, they bring within them the seed of a return to a tribal, closed understanding of the world. Social media and internet algorithms allow for people … to be confined within their own little echo-chamber, within their digital bubble of like-minded people.

Some of tribalism's detrimental effects include tribal biases that may, for example, lead people to selectively approach only information that supports their tribe's interests (Clark et al., 2019). Similarly, people process information they are exposed to in a biased way and may uncritically accept everything that favours their tribe's interests and be overly sceptical or dismissive of everything that opposes their collective agenda. Clark et al. (2019) argue that such cognitive biases are problematic, as post-Enlightenment societies prefer reason and rationality over overt displays of in-group favouritism. These authors further argue that biases decrease the likelihood of consensus, as groups cannot even agree on facts, which is a necessity in the coordination and function of modern governments. The description by Clark et al. of some of tribalism's negative effects on how people consume information and what information they consume resonates with the broader concept of echo chambers and other information cocoons. The proliferation of information sources, aided in part by social media, that are now available for consumers to choose from raises both criticism and concern with regard to one-sided information diets. These are better captured in the three related concepts of echo chambers, filter bubbles and selective exposure (Guess, Lyons, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018), with echo chambers being of most interest to this study. Echo chambers are social environments where consumers either only choose or are only exposed to content that matches their existing beliefs and views, and contrary views are excluded. Exposure may be by way of social media algorithms or peer-to-peer sharing within in-groups. Social media, particularly, may limit exposure to divergent perspectives and consequently favour echo chambers, i.e., the formation of groups of like-minded users who frame and reinforce shared preferred narratives (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi & Starnini, 2021). Some of the critiques of echo chambers argue that the practice of reinforcing pre-existing ideas and beliefs in turn fuels polarisation and extremism. According to Sunstein, Scala and Quattrociocchi (2016), selective exposure

that arises from only consuming media content that favours preferred narratives leads to the formation and reinforcement of polarised groups. These authors posit that confirmation bias helps account for the content selection decisions of such media users. Similarly, homophily is the tendency to gravitate towards people with matching or shared perspectives and opinions about the world (Gillani, Yuan, Saveski, Vosoughi & Roy, 2018). Gillani et al. (2018) posit that homophily is part of human nature as well as the organising principle behind a number of digital social networks. They note, however, that, "when it comes to politics or culture, homophily can amplify tribal mindsets and produce echo chambers that degrade the quality, safety, and diversity of discourse online" (Gillani et al., 2018: 823). It is interesting to note that the ability of social media to bring together like minds that makes it useful for certain pursuits such as activism is the same ability that can produce echo chambers. The tension in social media's role is evident: It is widely credited with making otherwise excluded voices accessible, and it is increasingly seen as facilitating the exclusion of certain voices within echo chambers. Triandafyllidou (2020) comments on this contradictory reality with the argument that, contrary to the perception of social media as the epitome of the modern technological evolution, social media perpetuate a tribal and closed understanding of the world. This is not a unanimous position, as some authors consider typical discussions to be alarmist, and believe that the actual evidence for echo chambers is more equivocal than is usually acknowledged (Guess, Lyons, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018). Guess et al. (2018: 5) argue that "commentators often neglect how little political news most people consume – much of the public is not attentive to politics and thus unlikely to be in an echo chamber of any sort". These authors argue further that, according to behavioural data, selective exposure tendencies "do not translate into real-world outcomes as often as public discussion would suggest". This may link to the broader debate on the extent to which people's experiences of social media shape or influence their political decisions, including who to vote for, in the real world.

3.3 Digital Public Sphere

The public sphere is a key concept in the social sciences and almost certain to be referenced in discussions on liberal democracy. The term is typically associated with Jurgen Habermas, a German sociologist. Habermas uses the term in his book published in 1962 and titled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. This seminal work was translated from German, its original language of publication, into English in 1989. In this book, Habermas provides a detailed socio-historical account of the

structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, by tracing its rise and decline. This sphere, according to Habermas, was composed of private individuals who came together as a public to table matters of common concern. The rise of the bourgeois public sphere symbolised both an ideological and material transition from pre-modern to modern society, evidenced in the critical discourse targeted at the absolutist state and the arbitrary authority it exercised (Susen, 2011). The bourgeois public sphere was also critical not only of the modern democratic state but also of itself. According to Susen (2011:46), "the public sphere is both a realm of mutually socializing individuals able to create integrative spaces of solidarity and a realm of mutually criticizing individuals able to construct discursive spaces of reflexivity".

The Habermasian concept of the public sphere puts forward, as the normative and precondition for *true* democracy, the open exchange of political views and the participation of citizens in public affairs (Habermas, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Willems, 2012). As a normative concept, a public sphere is a space where citizens can hold rational debates over shared problems which can, in turn, lead to a critically informed public opinion that can scrutinise and guide official decision-making processes (Dahlberg, 2007). Many internet-democracy advocates posit this deliberative public sphere as the ideal for citizen participation in politics. The divergent information and perspectives presented are believed to have the potential to shape and improve both collective and individual decisions (Sunstein, 1995). Further, the amplifier potential of digital media is acknowledged as a benefit to the public sphere ideal. As Soriano (2013:335–336) asserts, the "internet manages to produce a 'densification of the public sphere', something that is necessary in order for a social uprising to consolidate and move on towards a revolution". As an example of the amplifier effect, Soriano posits that the internet allows local activists to circulate information across geographical borders and, consequently, inform international opinion about their experiences. However, this conception of deliberative democracy is not without its critiques. Some critics (see Dean, 1996; Mouffe, 2000; Rabinovitch, 2001; Villa, 1992; Young, 2000 in Dahlberg, 2007) argue that deliberative democracy ignores the normalising coercion and exclusion involved in the designation of a particular form of communication as the rational and democratically legitimate norm. This view provides a useful perspective for an ongoing discourse on what constitutes disruptive or weaponised forms of communication, such as fake news and hate speech. It provides a reminder of the need for awareness of the power dynamics inherent in each situation, as well as the need for reflexivity when determining what communication should be excluded from a rational public sphere. Sophisticated deliberative theorists argue that to support any form of democracy, as critics of

the deliberative public sphere generally do, one always already makes a normative claim as to what democracy is and is not (Dahlberg, 2007). One also makes a normative claim as to what the acceptable mode of democratic communication is and is not. The sophisticated deliberative theorists do, however, accept that democratic norms will require the legitimate exclusion of undemocratic elements from deliberation, and that, in actual practice, there will always be illegitimate exclusions and the associated failures of rational communication. The sophisticated deliberative model, Dahlberg (2007:53–54) argues, fails to theorise the political consequences and democratic role of the excluded elements. In critiquing the Habermasian model, Adut (2012:239) cites the condition of civicness or civility, the conflation of the public sphere with citizenship and the ideal of widespread, egalitarian participation as examples of the paradigm's idealist and normative elements. Particularly relatable to my study is Susen's (2012) assertion that any examination of the transformation of the public sphere has to be within the broader context of the developmental nature of society, or within wider social processes. In African democracies, for example, the constitution and/or examination of a public sphere has to take the broader context, including colonial legacies, into account. This is so because the colonial context cannot be separated from the citizens it produces, how they express themselves, what they consider rational, how they relate and how all these factors inform, for example, what they consider common or shared issues. To further this theoretical position, I draw on Willems (2012: 11), who argues for the consideration of popular culture as "the public sphere of ordinary Africans". She argues that a critical starting point would be to carefully establish the criteria of what is defined as popular culture. Willems (2012: 21) argues that conceptualising sites of popular culture as publics is advantageous because "it avoids Habermas' elitist connotation of his concept of the public sphere".

In a similar vein but preceding Willems, Hermes (2006) argues that the conventional definition of the public sphere is restrictive and forces an increasing number of people to take a cynical distance from both politics and the public sphere. This cynical distance, Hermes (2006:40) argues, is an indication that the modern project aimed at grooming people to be good citizens has reached its extent and that what is now needed is "to turn around our ideal of the public sphere and recognise that it should be open to many forms of literacy and to more claims than truth, and more styles than rational behaviour." Ahmed, Khan, Khan, Kabir and Rasel (2018) argue that Facebook is now a postmodern cultural manifestation. Similarly, Willems (2012:11–12) argues that the debates on the concept of civil society in African studies and the concept of a public sphere in media studies and political science could inform a more rigorous discussion

of the concept of the public sphere in African studies than is currently the case. She problematises Eurocentric understandings of the concepts of civil society within the Habermasian public sphere, which, she states, may fail to account for the associational life of Africans. Willems (2012) and Maina (1998) argue that broadening the definition of civil society would reveal currently invisible forms of civil society, such as civil society that is not "defined in opposition to the state [as per Eurocentric assumptions], but organised along the lines of kinship, ethnicity or local tradition" (Willems 2012:14). Facebook fits Willems's (2012:21) conceptualisation not only as a site of popular culture but also as a site that "often engages, interacts and responds to official debates" The outcome of said engagements and interactions can – and do – foster citizenship among users who, apart from election day, may otherwise not be able to participate in publicly situated civic activities. It is also within reason to consider the possibility of elements of civil society – that is civil society with the broader definition – being revealed within online neo-tribes.

3.3.1 Tribalism and Neo-Tribalism

The word tribe is typically understood as an ethnically homogeneous community organised under the authority of a traditional chief (Posner, 2005). It does, however, also apply to other types of in-groups. Historically, the evolution of humans adapted them to be tribal due to the intense intergroup competition that existed and the success of groups with loyal, cooperative and cohesive members over groups with members lacking these characteristics (Clark, Liu, Winegard & Ditto, 2019). Historical in-groups were driven by their need for connection and survival, as well as their shared sense of identity, beliefs and customs (ibid). Musvosvi (2010:45) defines tribalism as "a consciousness and loyalty to one tribe, leading to exaltation of that tribe above other peoples. Tribalism leads a person to view only the members of his or her own tribe as people, and disparage all others as inferior". He further defines ethnocentrism as centring one's own ethnic group and using one's own culture as the yardstick by which to measure all other groups (Musvosvi, 2010). Tribalism, as a practice, still expresses itself in different societies as a natural human tendency to identify and bond with one's in-groups. The basis of present-day in-groups include ethnicity, nationality, religion, and politics. According to Clark et al. (2019: 587), "modern politics is one of the most salient forms of modern coalitional conflict and elicits substantial cognitive biases". Tribalism can serve as a unifying factor due to its ability to foster a sense of loyalty, identity and belonging in members. It can, however, also trigger or perpetuate tribal or intergroup conflict, polarisation and

discrimination. Clark et al. (2019) point out how, apart from inspiring many noble behaviours, tribal loyalties may compromise a person's reasoning and judgement for the sake of group commitment and belonging. These authors assert that "tribal bias is a natural and nearly ineradicable feature of human cognition" and that "no group – not even one's own – is immune" (Clark et al., 2019:587). The current forms in which tribalism organises itself makes it possible for it to affect policy. This is so because people support particular policy positions according to the political tribes they belong to (Hibbing, 2021). Hibbing (2021) argues that tribalism is particularly ferocious and debilitating when the topics of contention involve identity, immigration, in-groups and out-groups, security from outsiders, homogeneity and diversity, among others.

Citing the practice of identity politics by the left and right in the United States, Fukuyama (2018) argues that the left's embrace of political correctness stifles people's public expression of their beliefs and opinions due to the fear of moral opprobrium. This, he argues, poses a threat to both free speech and the kind of rational discourse required to sustain a democracy. Fukuyama (2018:101) contends that "liberal democracies are committed to protecting the right to say virtually anything in a marketplace of ideas, particularly in the political sphere. But the preoccupation with identity has clashed with the need for civic discourse".

Neo-tribes, on the other hand, can be understood as contemporary social groups or connections that are formed on the basis of shared interests, beliefs or identities. One of their distinctive characteristics is that they are temporarily situated. As Clay (2018:239) posits, the most defining feature of neo-tribes could be their momentary and unstable nature or how "the highly fluid experience of neo-tribalism is highlighted through its temporality – indeed, one depends upon the other". Over the years, authors have revisited the core concepts of neo-tribes as first defined by Maffesoli (1996), namely being fluid, ephemeral and communitas (Hardy, 2020). The revisits have taken the form of unpacking, reconceptualisation and debates, among others (ibid). One of the outcomes of this process is that neo-tribal theory has resonated with and been adopted by various disciplines, providing a multifarious framework for different multi-disciplinary ends (Hardy, Bennett & Robards, 2018). Cova and Cova (2002:67) theorise neo-tribes as postmodern tribes that are "inherently unstable, small-scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society; instead they can be held together through shared emotions". The concept of neo-tribes may help theorise the associational lives of Africans, either revealing what always existed but did not fit any normative theoretical

mould or what they may be transitioning to. In terms of Mamdani's (1996) theorisation of the bifurcated state of African publics, African subjects organised under multiple ethnically defined native authorities have long been excluded from the mainstream public sphere occupied by citizens (see also Ekeh, 1975). Mamdani (1996) sees de-tribalising the native authority as the required starting point in the reorganisation of the bifurcated power that has been created by colonialism. Neo-tribes may contribute to such reorganisation, not simply as forms of online resistance, but rather as popular cultural expressions of a convivial relationship with power (Mbembe, 2001). Neo-tribes have been observed in online communities as well as in different subcultures. Typically, they exhibit tribal-like behaviour, but motivations for their formation, platform of engagement, length of activity and frequency and style of communication differ from group to group. Price and Cybulski (2007) assert that characteristics of tribalism are maintained in modern digital environments despite human beings evolving cognitive abilities, acquiring knowledge and skills, and transforming ancient tribal structures into new and highly organised and political societies. Neo-tribes exhibit characteristics such as in-group bias or favouritism, and out-group discrimination (Fu, Tarnita, Christakis, Wang, Rand & Nowak, 2012; Abbink & Harris, 2019). In-group favouritism occurs when individuals are more inclined to be helpful to members of their own group than to others, and typically occurs in groupings based on common characteristics such as ethnicity, religion and political affiliation (Fu et al., 2012; Hoffman & Long, 2013). According to realistic conflict theory, people are more likely to discriminate against an out-group in such situations as competition for resources or power (Abbink & Harris, 2019). Oc, Moore and Bashshur (2018:2) posit that "an election is an important type of resource competition, as its outcome creates a single winner who then has greater control over resource distribution". They further posit that, as a social identity, being a member of a political party is particularly salient during elections. Like at sporting events, people at elections exhibit tribalism, and both situations demonstrate the tension inherent in communally integrative endeavours that are simultaneously rooted in intractable, formalised competition (Orr, 2022:2).

The concept of neo-tribalism can be used in at least three ways, namely: literal, institutional and sociological (Meling, 2020). The neo-tribalism that informs this study and is defined so far falls within the sociological paradigm. The literal interpretation refers to the supposed revival of literal kinship. This is consistent with Meling's (2020:108) assertion that "in its literal sense, neo-tribalism can refer to tendencies where political or economical [sic] forms of power become more connected to membership in specific ethnic tribes". The institutional

interpretation of neo-tribes, on the other hand, refers to factionalisation or fragmentation within political institutions or corporations, and how difficult it becomes to make common decisions in those spaces, due to deep ideological disagreement. According to Meling (2020:108), neo-tribalism in the sociological sense

> entails that groups emerge around activities, interests or work in ways that remind us of traditional tribes in that the participants establish emotional bonds and a sense of belonging … There is also a metaphorical element … in that it considers neo-tribalism as a fluid force.

Hidler (2004) argues that, psychologically, modern corporate groups cannot be distinguished from historical tribes because they are also obedient to authority figures and driven by peer acknowledgement and acceptance. Hibbing (2021) posits that the intensity of tribalism differs according to the topics that divide a particular polity. He asserts that tribes formed around such issues as identity, in-groups and out-groups, homogeneity, diversity and core institutions evoke ferocious tribalism (ibid). Historically, tribes were geographically bound, and members lived within close proximity of each other. This is not the case with neo-tribes mediated by online platforms, such as Facebook, where members can be in different regions of the country or in different countries and time zones. Price and Cybulski (2007:800) posit that "a shared global communication infrastructure enables members to establish relative proximity. Thus proximity is no longer geographical but communicational". Originally coined with reference to other domains, neo-tribes can also be political. There has been concern in some countries over the relative decline of youth participation in political engagement that is traditionally understood to involve formally organised civic and political activities. Yet, as Riley et al. (2010: 346) point out, a counter-argument is that the seeming decline has "been matched by a rise in new, alternative forms of political and social participation, which are unofficial and located at the individual or informal group level". Alternative forms of participation such as boycotts, flash mobs, and Twitter-led mobilisations can be cited as examples of the broadening of the repertoire of political action and show engagement rather than disengagement (Dalton, 2008). In Zambia, for example, Twitter/X-led mobilisations take the form of hashtags and Spaces (a feature that allows users to have live audio conversations) where users come together informally over common topics such as governance, the cost of living, corruption and the government's response, and big news stories, among others. President Hichilema's Twitter/X

account is usually tagged in such discussions. Twitter/X-led mobilisations sometimes become hybrid events when participants agree to hold physical events such as protests. On Facebook, groups informally gather on comment threads or agree on an action such as changing their display pictures to what they are advocating for. Flinders and Wood (2018) raise a counter-argument that existing research on alternative forms of political participation does not provide an adequate account of why those forms of participation should be defined as political. They posit that Michel Maffesoli's theorisation of neo-tribal politics provides a useful framework "for determining whether non-traditional forms of political engagement can be defined as genuinely distinctive from traditional participation" (Flinders & Wood, 2018:1). Admittedly, the platformisation of politics has consolidated opportunities for participation in a few technologies and the firms behind the technologies (Dommett, McKelvey, & Kefford, 2024), such that online political engagement has also become mainstream. This reality notwithstanding, traditional mainstream forms of political engagement in Zambia, as in the rest of Africa, remain physical, with such activities as attending public rallies being preferred forms of engagement (Cheeseman, 2016). Other traditional political practices include possessing party membership cards and regalia, among other identifiers. Online political engagement and its accompanying activities, therefore, remain non-traditional.

The emphasis on the affective dimension makes the concept of neo-tribes relevant to political communication on social media. Papacharissi (2015) theorises the role of affect in politics, as well as how online media may facilitate affect playing its role in politics. She states that networked "publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be" (Papacharissi, 2015:9). Although often identified as "communities of feeling" (Hetherington 1998:49), neo-tribes are also groups of people who have deliberately "chosen to come together for a particular period of time and place, for a specific reason" (McKerron, 2003:3). The assignment of neo-tribes as communities of feeling aligns with the rhetorical appeal of pathos, which is an appeal to one's emotions. The three appeals of ethos, pathos and logos (see Emmanuel, Rodrigues & Martins, 2015) come strongly into play in neo-tribes, where belonging can be influenced by one appeal or a combination of appeals. As Emanuel et al. (2015:418) posit, "rhetoric concentrates on provoking decisions, which are based on more than logical arguments. By addressing [the] audience's emotions, the speaker can bring them into the appropriate mindset to agree with his arguments". Given the emotive nature of politics, and of elections in particular, feelings can be as strong a rallying point as any other rallying point. The ephemeral nature of neo-tribes aligns

with the practice of voters coming together on social media during an election period, adopting and pushing common agendas, actively participating in public deliberation, and not engaging afterwards. Riley et al. (2010) argue that within neo-tribes there is enactment of cultural rituals characterised by such concepts as sociality and proxemics, and solidarity and belonging. The concepts of sociality and proxemics are based on the idea that sharing a space or an activity leads to a sense of being together and to an emotional attachment to the group. As Riley et al. (2010:348) elaborate, "the 'glue' that brings people together is proxemics (being local, or near to each other in either a physical or virtual way) and the experience and pleasure of solidarity that we gain from being with each other produces a sense of solidarity and belonging". In Zambia, the concept of proxemics plays out in different ways, such as by attending election rallies, which were physical prior to the 2021 campaign period when virtual rallies became inevitable due to Covid-19 restrictions; wearing similar political party regalia; sharing pictures of voters' cards; and, especially, showing off thumbs stained with the electoral indelible ink as proof of voting. In the 2016 elections, the two most prominent hashtags were #ThumbsUpChallenge, where people shared pictures of their inked thumbs, and #ZambiaDecides, which is used every election year.

Dean (2017) applies the concept of acclamation and democracy, as coined by Carl Schmitt in 1927, to social media. The author posits that social media practices are a form of political acclamation – i.e., the voicing of approval, praise, triumph, or disapproval – because it is possible for users to follow, unfollow, friend, unfriend, like and dislike. Acclamation as a practice "forms publics, whether as the direct presence of the 'people', mass-mediated 'public opinion', or a 'public mood' decipherable through countless social media postings" (Dean, 2017:417).

3.3.2 Cyber-Pessimism

Public engagement through social media by politicians comes with its own advantages, such as extended geographical reach at reduced cost, as opposed to physical meetings involving travel for both candidates and voters. Travel may present mobility and schedule constraints for some people. Social media, on the other hand, creates an opportunity for both real-time and ongoing communication because the interaction need not be one-off, as may be the case in physical settings such as campaign rallies. Some of the ways this interaction is facilitated is by politicians creating pages or accounts on different social media platforms and posting updates which the account followers and others react to. According to Bode and Dalrymple (2017),

such interaction, as enabled by social media, has a positive impact on political engagements and civic outcomes. Overall, the use of social media during election periods has been praised, particularly in Africa for its supposed ability to provide space for public deliberation even under unfavourable circumstances such as facing censorship. The possibilities assume added importance in an election period. This is, in part, because individuals have more access to political and election-related information than at other times, and are able to participate in deliberation of the information. Digitalisation, with its amplification potential, also aids political parties and candidates as they seek visibility and access to potential voters for dissemination of their campaign messages and engagement with potential voters.

Contrary to the foregoing and other benevolent views, cyber-pessimists do not believe in the democratising potential of the new technologies. For example, Morozov (2011) argues that the democratising possibilities of the web were exaggerated, and that the technology can, in fact, be used by authoritarian regimes to control citizens and stifle dissent. Soriano (2013) highlights some reasons put forward by cyber-pessimists, including how some of the movements online lack a genuine base offline. He posits that the social ties of groups formed exclusively online are weak and that voices of dissent can vanish off the internet as easily as they appeared. Soriano (2013) further relates another reason advanced by cyber-pessimists, namely that repressive governments use the internet to spy in order to collect intelligence and monitor political dissidence. Another critical question that emerged is the distinction between participation – in the sense of civil society and politics – and mere access to the media or interaction in the sense of the internet offering two-way communication (Dahlgren, 2014). Dahlgren (2014) argues that democratic participation must somehow actualise power relations, regardless of how weak or strong they may appear. He argues that "participation is ultimately about power sharing, and if this is structurally absent or systematically undermined, then whatever is being called participation must be seen with utmost scepticism, or indeed labelled fraudulent" (Dahlgren, 2014:64). This view aligns with elections being seen as rituals to legitimate power (Willems, 2012).

Bosch, Mare and Ncube (2020) offer two contending positions to the stated social media benefit of facilitating interaction between elected office holders and their constituents (Pierskalla, 2013), and its positive impact on political engagements and civic outcomes (Bode & Dalrymple, 2017). Firstly, they argue that access to social media does not automatically impact civic outcomes because those who are not active participants outside social media platforms

do not necessarily become participants just because they now have access. Secondly, Bosch et al. point out how inadequate the interaction between politicians and the public can be. These authors cite, as an example, the Facebook page of Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa where he posts, members of the public react to his posts, and the conversation ends as there is no further engagement on the page. The authors point out how the Mnangagwa page does not appear to learn about the interests and needs of the members of the public attempting to engage. These authors argue that such an approach "raises serious problems with regard to posting political posts, yet the administrator(s) of the page never responds to comments or actively engages with the users" (Bosch et al., 2020:359). The authors make a similar observation about the Facebook page of then Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and how the many comments from the public went unacknowledged. Bosch et al. (2020) assert that the lack of dialogue between citizens and the Kenyan presidency represents a missed opportunity for dialogue with citizens. These authors argue that "the absence of 'active listening' through feedback and answers to questions raised by citizens makes it difficult for citizens to trust the efficacy of social media to mediate transformative and progressive politics" (Bosch et al., 2020:360). They further argue that such a situation is an example of how "social media pages mutate into monological spaces where citizens engage with other citizens on platforms created by politicians" (Bosch et al., 2020:360). One of the questions that such a situation raises is the extent to which real-world realities differ when experienced online. Does the limited access to politicians by the voting public, and the power dynamics that restrict such interactions in the real-world, cease once a social media platform is introduced? In the two foregoing examples, social media can be said to mirror real-world lived dynamics and relationships between citizens and political leaders. Another practice that goes against the narrative that social media facilitates interaction between politicians and constituents is the moderation of user content. Some comments by members of the public that are considered unfavourable to the politicians are deleted off the page. This is a form of censorship. One of the currently active debates on whether social media does indeed provide a counter to censorship refers to the implementation of content moderation policies. Some social media platforms have defended their move to limit certain content as hate speech or misinformation, while some political entities have alleged that, in the process, there is censorship of their speech by "Big Tech" (Buckley & Schafer, 2022).

Social media provides an opportunity to aggregate and analyse public opinion in an unobtrusive manner due to the volume of personal information, including political views, voluntarily shared

online (Jaidka; Ahmed; Skoric; & Hilbert, 2019). As Jaidka et al. (2019) point out, research using social media to infer political opinion has previously focused on economically, technologically and politically mature countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Ireland. These countries also tend to have a two-party or a multi-party system with low fragmentation (Jaidka et al., 2019). There is no unanimity on which analysis, be it of volume, sentiment or social networks, would yield the most accurate predictions of election outcomes from social media, or why (Skoric, Liu, & Lampe, 2015). Unlike in politically mature countries where it has become routine to infer public opinion from social media, nascent democracies have largely used social media for pre-election campaigns. Ndlela and Mano (2020) assert that social media has become an important element in political campaigning and may be a game-changer. They assert that social media is reshaping much of political communication in Africa, is setting up new rules, and is determining winners and losers. According to Ndlela and Mano (2020:8), social media is changing "the way political parties and candidates campaign for public office; how they raise funds, mobilize support and establish and maintain relationships with the electorate; and how they fight their adversaries". Amenyeawu (2021) cites how social media has proven to be an effective political communication and campaign tool in Ghana by enhancing political stakeholder engagement, capturing the interest of the younger population, and achieving optimal political mobilisation. Still in Ghana, Gadjanova, Lynch, Reifler, and Saibu (2019) observe that social media is both used and abused in the country's electoral cycle. They state that some of the ways that social media positively impacts politics in Ghana are faster and wider mobilisation, information dissemination, larger voter turn-out, and inclusion of otherwise marginalised voices. A negative aspect that they highlight is the additional cost given that social media enhances rather than replaces existing campaign strategies. This, the authors argue, disadvantages smaller political parties who are unable to afford the extra cost of running social media campaigns. These authors list further negative aspects, namely social media's ability to spread misinformation targeted at political opponents further and faster, and the facilitation of fake accounts. Gadjanova et al. (2019) point out three potential problems, albeit not emphasised by their research respondents, that are inherent in social media. Firstly, big data could be used to spread divisive messaging or misinformation to micro-targeted groups. Secondly, spyware could be employed to compromise seemingly secure private messaging services such as WhatsApp. Finally, social media could interfere with domestic political processes and outcomes.

In recent years, deliberate blockages have become part of the conversation about access to social media. Internet and social media shutdowns have been reported in different countries, including during election cycles. A network shutdown – also referred to as internet shutdown, network disruption, blackout or kill switch – "is a deliberate, significant disruption of entire channels of electronic communication within a given geographical area and/or affecting a predetermined group of citizens" (Rydzak, Karanja, & Opiyo, 2020:4265; see also Roberts & Anthonio, 2023). Governments are typically behind network shutdowns, with the two most cited justifications being public security and managing the spread of misinformation (Marchant & Stremlau, 2020). Ryng, Guicherd, Al Saman, Choudhury and Kellet (2022) posit that the internet is a double-edged sword: On the one hand, civilians can assemble and express legitimate dissent. On the other hand, illiberal regimes can weaponise the same internet to consolidate their power and suppress dissent. Ryng et al. (2022:50) assert that "internet shutdowns – intentional disruptions of internet services – represent one method used to limit citizens' freedom of expression, information, peaceful assembly and other associated rights in the name of national security". With social media functioning as a protest tool (Bosch, 2019) and increasing the visibility of dissenting parties, different governments have attempted to curtail public access. Ndlela and Mano (2020: 4) assert that governments fear social media because of its increasing role in political protests and, therefore, attempt "to diminish its powers, by either deliberately slowing it down or even shutting it down completely. Shutting down social media is also driven by the general desire to curtail freedom of expression and the spread of negative information". In Africa, network shutdowns during elections are increasingly being experienced, particularly when the different governments are faced with competitive or contentious elections, or any other times of political upheaval (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Ndlela & Mano, 2020; Stremlau & Dobson, 2022). As Roberts and Anthonio (2023:94) observe, "shutdowns are frequently timed to coincide with elections or protests and have the effect of silencing digital citizenship and peaceful opposition". Eichhorn and Linhart (2023) argue that internet shutdowns are part of autocrats' manipulative instruments to skew the playing field in their favour by limiting their opponents' access to public media while they themselves exploit state media. Eichhorn and Linhart (2023) also argue that internet shutdowns could be indirect supporting measures to cover up other manipulative measures such as stuffing ballot boxes with pre-marked papers or the arrest of opposition politicians. These authors argue that, "while the freedom to cast a ballot might be granted, informational freedom is restricted when this tool [internet shutdown] is applied (Eichhorn & Linhart, 2023:708). Different African countries, including Chad, Gabon, Gambia, Cameroon, Uganda, Burundi, Mali and

Ethiopia, have experienced deliberate internet shutdowns during the electoral cycle (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). In Zambia, the internet was shut down on 12 August 2021, which was election day (Roberts & Anthonio, 2023). Like citizens in a number of other countries had done before and still do, many Zambians used virtual private networks (VPNs) as circumvention tools during the shutdown and continued accessing social media. As Roberts and Anthonio state (2023:102), "VPNs allow individuals to redirect their internet connection through a remote server in another country to bypass the internet shutdown in their own country". Network shutdowns represent a human rights violation and, on that account, some citizens and activists around the world resort to the law for recourse. As Rydzak, Karanja & Opiyo (2020:4273) report,

> legal challenges have been filed in national courts in Cameroon, Chad, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. Although advocates often face administrative barriers and delays, the shutdown in Zimbabwe was declared illegal by the country's high court, potentially creating a new paradigm for legal action against disruptions.

In Zambia, a civil society activist brought a lawsuit against the government over the network shutdown on election day and, in its ruling, the High Court ordered the government to restore internet services (Robert & Anthonio, 2023).

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the theoretical framework underpinning the study. It has presented different theoretical postulations on the relationship between social media and elections, such as social media as a tool for political mobilisation, as alternative media, and as an extension of the public sphere. The chapter has also presented a discussion on tribalism, neo-tribes, and some social media concerns with regard to elections and democracy, and how they relate to my research.

The next chapter presents the methodology, methods and procedures employed in the study.

Chapter Four: Methodology, Methods and Procedures

In the previous chapter, I discussed the theoretical framework underpinning this study. In this chapter, I present the methodology, methods and procedures employed to investigate neo-tribalism on social media in relation to the 2021 Zambian elections. I start by outlining the broad philosophical, theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of the qualitative research paradigm and justifying its suitability for this study. Within the qualitative research methodology, I move to the particular and highlight the case study approach, within which my study is situated. I also present and discuss my sampling techniques, data collection and analysis tools, my bias and positionality in relation to the study, and the ethical considerations I made in the process.

4.1 Research Design and Procedure

In this section, I present the research design and procedure adopted in the study. I present the qualitative research approach, the case study approach, and the selection of case.

4.1.1 Qualitative Research

This study adopts a qualitative methodological orientation as it seeks to explain the phenomenon of interest, i.e. social media and the emergence of neo-tribes compared to ethnic tribes, rather than measure it (Bryman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Iorio, 2004). As a scientific inquiry approach, qualitative research seeks to understand human lived experiences and behaviour from the perspective of the research subjects (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020). In qualitative research, meaning is not fixed but rather constructed by individuals through their own interactions with their world (Merriam, 2002). There are multiple such constructions of meaning and interpretation which change over time. Understanding what those interpretations are at particular points in time and in particular contexts is of importance and interest to qualitative researchers. This understanding is a key characteristic of qualitative research. As Merriam (2002:4) posits, “learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them, is considered an interpretive qualitative approach”. Qualitative research has different philosophical orientations, such as the critical qualitative approach, which draws on critical social theory and a poststructural/postmodern approach. According to Lather (1992), there are three overarching theoretical stances, which can be categorised as emancipation (critical and feminist), deconstruction (postmodern) and

understanding (interpretive). At the centre of the interpretivist paradigm is the idea of varied understandings and how reality is constructed through individual perceptions and interpretations (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2018). This study is, therefore, best conducted within the interpretivist paradigm as, among other objectives, it seeks to understand how different voters in the Zambian election of 2021 who used social media made sense of campaign messages based on tribe. The present study also seeks to understand how members of online neo-tribes make sense of their participation. The qualitative methodological approach allows an in-depth understanding of the different experiences of these voters, and the different perspectives and meanings they apply to their experiences. Qualitative research lends itself well to developing or expanding knowledge of a new phenomenon. It also lends itself to thick or detailed descriptions of the research participants' views and experiences, as well as to the interpretation of their actions (Denzin, 1989). Merriam (2002:5) points out that "often qualitative researchers undertake a qualitative study because there is a lack of theory or an existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon", which correctly describes the motivation behind this study. The use of social media during elections is not new, but the formation of neo-tribes and the presence of swing voters in a country where ethnicity has historically been a salient factor in vote distribution (Macola, 2008; Siachiwena, 2021) are new angles and, therefore, merit research.

Within qualitative research, the process of investigation is inductive, in that theories, concepts or hypotheses are developed through the data gathered and analysed. This is a key difference between the interpretivist approach and the positivist approach, which deductively arrives at hypotheses then tests them. It is not, however, unusual for a hybrid inductive/deductive thematic analysis to be conducted, but its use in mixed methods research is still being explored (Proudfoot, 2023). For my research design, I had the choice of phenomenology, which investigates individuals' varied realities from a subjective perspective; grounded theory, which emphasises investigation of data, detection of emerging patterns and development of data-based theories; ethnography, which focuses on understanding the social and cultural context of the subject under enquiry; and a case study, which focuses on in-depth analysis and rich description of a bounded phenomenon (see Merriam, 1998, 2002; Luthfiandana, Santioso, Febrian, Soehaditama, & Sani, 2024). I opted for a case study using an interpretive approach in order to gain deep insight, from multiple viewpoints, into my phenomenon of interest. I further justify my choice of case study as methodology in 4.1.2.

In this study, I employ a mixed-methods (content analysis, focus group discussions and individual interviews) case study approach. All these methods are commonly used within the qualitative research tradition, and my approach fits within the paradigm's practice of considering multiple sources and interpretations (Walsham, 1995). As Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002:730:731) posit, "the ways in which qualitative research questions are posed, methods are chosen to address these questions, and qualitative research is conducted are each visibly informed by their underlying research paradigm". I use Facebook not only for the qualitative content analysis part of the research but also to identify participants and respondents for the focus group discussions and individual interviews, respectively. This is consistent with Fuchs' (2017: 39) argument that critical social media studies are more advantageous than statistical and computational methods that neglect "analysis of human meanings, interpretations, experiences, attitudes, moral values, ethical dilemmas, uses, contradictions and macro-sociological implications of social media". Adding focus group discussions and individual interviews to the data collected on Facebook achieves a thickening of data as posited by Latzko-Toth, Bonneau and Millette (2017). Latzko-Toh et al. (2017) propose a layer that captures the experiences of users and the meaning they attribute to them. As Latzko-Toh et al. (2017:6) elaborate, "the content of this layer is produced through direct interactions with the subjects whose practices are the object of study, in an effort to make explicit their understanding of what they do online and the value they attach to it". Gaskell (2000:39) reaffirms the importance of the qualitative interview when he states its objective as being "a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts". The quality of any particular qualitative research is judged by the extent of alignment between the paradigm or perspective that informs the research questions, and the research methods used to carry out the investigation. According to Fossey et al. (2002), central both to the quality of qualitative research and to meeting the standards of ethics is the question of whether the subjective meaning, actions and social context of the research subjects are represented faithfully.

One of the challenges I faced was the time-intensive nature of the processes of data collection, transcription and analysis. This is a commonly experienced disadvantage of qualitative research, and it translates into the research being likely to take longer to complete than quantitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Given the nature of the study and the socio-political context within which it was conducted, I anticipated a level of unwillingness from some possible participants due to their fear of stigma, hostility or victimisation, or due to a

change in political affiliation that may occur post-election, among other reasons. To mitigate this, I created homogeneous focus groups with regard to how the participants voted and their respective language groups. That way, none of the participants had to meet their political opponents in the discussions. In Facebook content generated during the election period, hostility was typically observed between rival camps and, by keeping them apart using a deliberate composition of the focus groups, I believed I was avoiding a potential problem. And by keeping the groups homogeneous, none of the participants were placed in a position where their vote choice was made known to their political opponent. This was important because some people had not publicly declared how they voted. Overall, I ensured anonymity by referring to all respondents by code names in this thesis. I anticipated that even with the foregoing measures in place, some people would still be unwilling to participate. In order to accommodate that, I identified more potential subjects than I needed, in order to create a matching list of alternatives to fall back on if necessary.

4.1.2 Case Study

By way of differentiation between methodology and method, methodology refers to "the frame of reference in which the method of inquiry is based and is typically subjected to a specific set of guiding principles. It provides the justification for using a particular research method" (Lucas, Fleming & Bhosale, 2018:215). Depending on the underpinning philosophy, a qualitative case study can be defined as either a method or a methodology (Lucas et al., 2018). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), when taken as a methodology, a case study uses multiple sources of data and data collection methods to explore and critique a bounded phenomenon. When taken as a method, a case study investigates particular cases, which may include individuals and events (Lucas et al., 2018). According to these definitions, my research falls within the scope of a qualitative case study methodology. A case study is an in-depth exploration, from multiple perspectives, of the complexity and uniqueness of a situation, project or phenomenon (Simons, 2009). According to Gerring (2004:342, emphasis in original), "the case study is *an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units*". He defines a unit as connoting a spatially bounded phenomenon, and cites such examples as "a nation-state, revolution, political party, election, or person – observed at a single point in time or over a delimited period of time" (Gerring, 2004:342). The choice of case study for my research was, therefore, justified by the consideration that my phenomenon of interest falls within a real life context, the phenomenon needs to be revealed and understood from its multiple facets and, although based on social

media, the phenomenon is spatially bounded as I investigate it through the lens of a country's national elections (Stake, 1995; Gerring, 2004; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake (1995) warns against taking case study research as sampling research. He asserts that the real business of case study research is particularisation rather than generalisation. As such, "we do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case … The first criterion [in selection of cases] should be to maximise what we can learn" (Stake, 1995:4). Stake (1995) reiterates this point when he differentiates between three categories of case studies a researcher may use, namely: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. He points out that his categorisation is not intended for use in sorting case studies but that the categories do influence the choice of methods used for each one. My research combines two of the three categories. It borrows, to a small extent, from the intrinsic case study approach because it is pre-selected and its particularity is of interest to me (Stake, 1995). This, however, is the extent to which I borrow from the intrinsic category because the purpose of a typical intrinsic case is not to understand a generic phenomenon or build theory (Stake, 1995), both of which my research seeks to do. As Baxter and Jack (2008:548) posit, an intrinsic case "is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because in all its particularity and ordinariness, the case itself is of interest". My research also borrows from the instrumental case study approach in that it seeks to accomplish more than just the understanding of a particular issue. An instrumental case can either provide insight into a phenomenon or refine a theory (Stake, 1995). Beyond seeking to understand the role that social media played in the 2021 Zambian elections with regard to the weaponisation of tribe and the transition of associational forms to neo-tribes, the research also seeks to understand how anti-democratic voices on social media affect nascent democracies. This makes the 2021 Zambian elections an ideal instrumental case. As Baxter and Jack (2008:549) comment, the instrumental case is of secondary interest as "it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else. The case is often looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed…because it helps the researcher pursue the external interest". The third of Stake's (1995) categories is the collective case study. Unrelated to my research, the collective case study seeks to explore differences between and within cases, with the goal of being able to replicate findings across cases (Yin, 2003).

My research qualifies as a retrospective case study on account of my looking back at the 2021 Zambian election and studying that particular event in its historical integrity (Starman, 2013);

however, the phenomena that my research focuses on, namely the transition of political affiliation to neo-tribes and the weaponisation of social media, remain current. The case study approach has a number of advantages, among them conceptual validity, which is the ease with which indicators of the best theoretical concepts can be identified and measured (Starman, 2013). This is an important element in a study like mine which includes some difficult-to-measure variables, such as democracy. For example, in order to answer my research question of how anti-democratic voices on social media affect nascent democracies, I have had to employ "contextualised comparison, which automatically searches for analytically equivalent phenomena even if they are expressed in different terms and contexts" (Starman, 2013:36). This means that, in order to analyse democracy, I have to analyse such markers of democracy as freedom of expression, media freedom, routinely held elections, and so on. A second advantage of the case study approach is the case study's suitability for deriving new hypotheses, and inductively identifying additional variables (George & Bennett, 2005; Starman, 2013). My research has also benefited from the eclecticism that the case study approach allows, through my mixed methods.

4.1.3 Selection of Case

My research goals were informed, in large part, by my constant use of social media and existing interest in political content – both local and foreign. Through that exposure, I was aware of a diverse range of discourses such as the rise of anti-democratic voices online and how governments in different countries were responding to the same; the rise of populist and nativist sentiment; the prevalence of fake news, echo chambers, bots and algorithms, among others; and the ongoing discussions on the implications of these developments for democracy. Locally, I was aware that similar discourses and developments had assumed increasing visibility over the years, with some unique angles, such as ethnic tribalism in political discourse, taking prominence. National elections in Zambia evoke intense public deliberation, both on different media platforms and in person. With intense deliberation comes the public expression of diverse, sometimes emotive or contentious, views that may not be expressed at such scale during a non-election period. My involvement in the 2016 elections, which I discuss in detail in 4.6.1, enhanced both my appreciation of and curiosity about the shifting political discourses and practices in the country and the possible role social media was playing. The 2021 election period followed the typical pattern of evoking intense political communication and public deliberation, this time with an unprecedented focus on social media due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting public health guidelines that limited physical interaction. Given this

background, I selected the 2021 elections as the lens through which I would explore my research goals.

4.2 Data Collection Techniques and Sampling Procedures

My research design comprises three stages of data collection, namely: a Facebook search and qualitative thematic content analysis, focus group discussions, and semi-structured individual interviews. I employed a qualitative content analysis of selected posts and associated comments from five Facebook pages. I then conducted focus group discussions and individual interviews with participants identified from the Facebook content analysis in my second and third phases, respectively.

4.2.1 Thematic Content Analysis

The first step in my data collection was conducting a qualitative thematic content analysis of posts and associated comments from five Facebook pages. Initially, I planned to use the pages of the two leading presidential candidates and an additional page affiliated to either party/candidate then take a non-affiliated page as the fifth. However, this became impossible by the time I started my data collection because the former President's page – Edgar Chagwa Lungu – was deactivated around 30th August, 2021, shortly after he lost the election. I, therefore, included the Patriotic Front page as a replacement. On 4th April, 2024, I became aware that the page had been reactivated and the first post shared the previous day, 3rd April, 2024. I proceeded to remove the Patriotic Front page from the sample and re-do the thematic analysis with the Edgar Chagwa Lungu page included.

The pages included in my final sample are: Edgar Chagwa Lungu, Smart Eagles, Hakainde Hichilema, Zambian Watchdog, and Mwebantu Media. Facebook allows for easy identification of communities of interest such as private or public groups and pages, which enable ideological polarisation by acting as echo chambers (Fenoll & Cano-Oron, 2017). The PF and UPND parties fielded the two leading presidential candidates in the elections and, consequently, dominated the public discourse and attention. In the sample, I included two politically affiliated Facebook pages belonging to each PF and UPND, due to their dominance of election-related discourse online. The fifth page in the sample was an independent online media outlet with no publicly stated political party affiliation. This inclusion was intended to give me a holistic sense of the deliberations as they happened during the election period. The independent page was selected on account of having the largest following among all local online media.

Table 1 below shows the pages selected, the other (short form) names they go by, affiliation, and number of followers at the point of data collection.

Table 1: Facebook Pages

Page	Affiliation	Following
Edgar Chagwa Lungu (ECL)	PF	1.4 million
Smart Eagles	PF	1.3 million
Hakainde Hichilema (HH)	UPND	1.8 million
Zambian Watchdog (ZWD/Watchdog)	UPND	1.3 million
Mwebantu Media (Mwebantu)	NONE	2.7 million

The analysis considered 1, 000 purposively selected comments – 200 from each page – and some accompanying comments. I discuss the criteria under point 4.5. Content analysis allows for the review of large quantities of text, as is the case in this study. The focus of the study, however, is not the number of comments per category but rather the content therein. As Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold, 1998: 95 posit:

> Content analysis can help provide some indication of relative prominences and absences of key characteristics in media texts, but the inferences that can be drawn from such indications depend entirely on the context and framework of interpretation by which the texts analysed are circumscribed.

Posts and related comments thus selected were thematically analysed to enable a detailed and nuanced account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The content analysis at this stage served two purposes, namely, prima facie understanding of the content in the posts and comments, and identification of participants for the subsequent focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews.

Below is a brief description of the five Facebook pages from which the texts for the qualitative thematic content analysis interviews were drawn:

1. *Edgar Chagwa Lungu*

This page belongs to Mr. Edgar Chagwa Lungu, who was the PF presidential candidate, incumbent president and immediate past president of Zambia during the focus period. I chose the page because it belonged to the candidate of one of the two leading parties in the election and was, consequently, at the centre of active debate throughout the electoral cycle. The page had an average of 10 posts per day. Typical posts were updates on government deliverables, presidential day-to-day engagements such as local and international meetings, and the launching of projects; religious messages; football commentary; Covid-19 updates; notices of public engagements such as for distributing face masks; and messages of condolences, among others. Some items were posted multiple times on the same day but in different formats such as pictures, videos, live streams, infographics, and so on.

2. *Smart Eagles*

This page is affiliated to the Patriotic Front and was, during the electoral cycle, part of President Lungu's main online campaign channels. I included it because, among the other pro-PF Facebook pages, it had the highest number of followers and activity after the Lungu page. The page had an average of 25 – 35 plus posts per day. The daily posts were typically posted in bits, for example, six clips at different points of the same live event posted separately. Different pictures of the same event would also be posted separately. The typical content on the page was coverage of President Lungu and PF campaign activities, such as those conducted by parliamentary candidates in their different constituencies; anti-UPND content; and user-generated content, such as a dancing challenge [videos of supporters from different parts of the country dancing to PF campaign songs] or a who-wore-it-best challenge [pictures and videos of supporters wearing PF regalia].

3. *Hakainde Hichilema*

This page belongs to Mr. Hakainde Hichilema who was the UPND presidential candidate, main opposition leader, and newly elected President of Zambia during the focus period. As with Edgar Chagwa Lungu, I chose the HH page because it belonged to one of the two leading candidates in the elections and had consistent posts and discussions throughout the electoral cycle. The page had an average of 10 posts per day. Typical content included campaign messages of what the UPND government would do if elected; what President Lungu and the

PF government were supposedly doing wrong and what UPND would do about it if elected; coverage of Hichilema's day-to-day activities; interactions with members of the public; and religious messages. Some of the content was posted multiple times on the same day, in different formats such as pictures and videos.

4. *Zambian Watchdog*

This page was pro-UPND during the focus period. I selected it because, besides the Hichilema page, it had the highest following and activity among the pro-UPND pages. The page had an average of 10 – 15 posts per day. Typical content included campaign messages for UPND; severe criticism of the PF; exposés of alleged PF party and government wrongdoing; commentary/Dear Editor/guest opinion pieces; and coverage of Hichilema's and other UPND candidates' campaign engagements.

5. *Mwebantu Media*

This page did not have any official political affiliation during the focus period. I included it because it had the highest following among all local media pages on Facebook and consistently featured election-related updates and discussions. The page had an average of 30 posts per day. Typical content included general local and international news; paid-for political, campaign and other advertisements; posts shared from other pages such as Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Hakainde Hichilema; jokes; commentary; and Bible scriptures. Different political parties, including PF and UPND, placed paid-for campaign material on the page.

4.3 Focus Group Discussions

Emerging themes from the thematic content analysis formed the basis for discussion in two focus groups that I conducted in the second phase of my data collection. Each focus group had eight participants. The first focus group, coded *BN* in this thesis, had participants who belong to the Bemba/Nyanja bloc and who voted for Hichilema as presidential candidate. In the normative assumption of people voting on ethnic/tribal lines, this group of people can be considered potential swing voters who defied expectations and, to a large extent, decided the outcome of the election. It was, therefore, of particular interest to my study. The second focus group, coded *TL* in this thesis, had participants who belong to the Tonga/Lozi group and voted for Hichilema as presidential candidate. The third group was to have participants who belong to the Bemba/Nyanja group and voted for Lungu, but I could not form this group due to privacy concerns expressed by some of the people I asked to participate, and their preference for

anonymity. Instead, I conducted in-depth individual interviews with each of these people. I decided against a fourth group comprising participants from the Tonga/Lozi group who voted for Lungu. This decision was based on the fact that this group was not of interest to my research in the way that the pro-UPND Bemba/Nyanja group – believed to be swing voters – was. In addition, the history of voting patterns showed how this particular demography of pro-PF Tonga/Lozi was negligible. I initially inferred ethnic affiliation of participants from their names as posted in the comments sections of the five Facebook pages. After establishing contact, I asked each participant to confirm their ethnic affiliation/language group before they were included in the focus groups and individual interviews. One of the strengths of focus groups as a data collection method is that discussions about contested issues are generated (Parker & Tritter, 2007). This made focus groups an ideal method for a topic as contested as tribalism is in Zambia. The method is also useful for gaining in-depth understanding of social issues from a purposively selected group (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee, 2018). I am aware that, while focus groups can produce high quality information within a short period of time, participants can also be prone to a loss of independence in judgement or a suppression of their real views in preference for more socially desirable, stereotypical 'acceptable' answers (Acocella, 2011). Initially, I had planned to mitigate this possible loss of independence by conducting follow-up semi-structured interviews with three members from each of the focus groups. However, I did not proceed with those interviews due to what I assessed to be satisfactory contributions by all participants in the two focus groups. Additionally, I believe the concern was taken care of by the fact that focus groups were the second layer of data collection from the same people, with the first layer being the content analysis. Through some of their Facebook comments, the participants had already established independent voices and positions on a range of topics covered in the focus group discussions. The constitution of homogenous focus groups – that is, comprising participants who hail from the same ethnic/ linguistic group and who voted for the same candidate – also helped mitigate the risk of loss of independent judgement or self-censorship. This is because homogenous focus groups represented in-groups and, therefore, afforded participants a sense of community based on shared characteristics (Fu et al., 2012; Abbink & Harris, 2019). As a final measure, I invited participants of both focus groups to contact me individually after the discussions if they wished to have a further conversation with me or remembered anything they would have liked to share earlier. None of the participants responded to my invitation.

I used Zoom Workplace for both focus group discussions. At the beginning of each discussion, I introduced myself and presented a summary of the research. This is information I had already shared in writing at the time of asking them to participate. I then asked them to introduce themselves using the name they wanted to be addressed by during the discussion. Some gave their actual first names while others gave pseudonyms. Scheduling the focus group discussions presented a challenge due to the participants' different preferences. I shared potential meeting times and asked the participants to choose. With my data collection taking place amidst extended load-shedding (electricity rationing) nationwide, each participant was aligning their choice of day and time to their area's electricity schedule. Once the dates were decided through this simple poll, some people who had chosen different times could not make it and fell off the list. I conducted two focus groups, each comprising eight participants.

4.4 Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with eight Facebook users who belong to the Bemba/Nyanja bloc and voted for PF presidential candidate Edgar Lungu, who belongs to the same bloc. This group was therefore pro-incumbent in the pre-election period and later transitioned to the opposition with their candidate when he lost the elections of 12th August 2021. I had initially intended to have them in a third focus group but changed course due to privacy and security concerns expressed by some participants. Some participants alleged that they had become government targets for victimisation due to their pro-PF views during the electoral cycle. They added that they, therefore, no longer publicly express political views or draw attention to themselves by being vocal on any issues that might be considered anti-government. Some participants believed that being part of a focus group might expose them to undercover government agents pretending to be part of the discussion when, in fact, they were monitoring opposition sentiment. Some not only alleged that they had been threatened before on account of their pre-election views, but also alleged that some of their fellow PF supporters who had been active on social media had been jailed. Given these concerns, I opted for semi-structured interviews as they would achieve my data needs while maintaining the privacy of respondents. Semi-structured interviews are the preferred method when the goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) and allow for candour, including on less socially accepted views on topics such as tribalism.

I used Zoom Workplace for the interviews and voice calls for respondents with poor internet connectivity. At the beginning of each call, I requested the respondent to introduce themself

and confirm that I had reached the right person. I then introduced myself and shared my research goals, which I had already shared in writing at the point of asking them to participate in the interview.

4.5 Sampling and Analysis

For the thematic content analysis, I purposively selected a total of 1, 000 Facebook posts, 200 for each page, and included replies and comments to the selected posts. I also purposively selected participants for both the focus groups and the individual interviews. Purposive sampling refers to the deliberate identification and selection of posts or participants to include in the sample due to their ability to provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas, Horwitz & Hoagwood, 2015; Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). My choice of purposive sampling for selecting Facebook posts and participants was informed by my overall research goals and the need to select content and respondents that were most likely to yield the required information (Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, Bywaters & Walker, 2020). In that way, purposive sampling enhances the rigour of the study and credibility of the data collected (ibid). My choice of sample size was also informed by the present study's overall goal, which is to achieve an in-depth, as opposed to broad, understanding of my phenomena of interest (Campbell et al., 2020). There are no prescribed numbers in terms of sample size in qualitative research because the goal is generation of insights and deep understanding (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). There are, however, factors to consider when selecting sample size, such as the purpose and design of the study, and the composition of the population – whether heterogenous or homogenous – from which the sample is drawn (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). One of my main considerations when selecting the 1,000 posts and relevant comments, and 24 respondents, was ensuring that the range of themes and perspectives relevant to the study would be covered in depth, and from diverse points of view and experiences (Campbell et al., 2020). It is important to choose a manageable sample size that will yield appropriate information in the most efficient way and prevent situations where a researcher reaches data saturation long before getting to the rest of the sample (Campbell et al., 2020; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). I applied a combination of a manual search and the inbuilt Facebook analytics to select the 200 posts and relative comments. I started by conducting a search of all content posted from 1st May, 2021 to 31st August 2021, and read through all the posts on the five pages. I used the Facebook search function and applied a timeframe/date filter. I specifically put the first day of

a month of interest – i.e. May to August 2021 – as the start date and the last day of that particular month as the end date, allowing me to see all the posts. This approach was critical to ensuring that my sample was not based on limited and/or skewed algorithmic visibility, as can be the case on Facebook. I broke the content down to one month at a time per page for ease of navigation and management. As per my research goals, I was interested to see how social media was used within the election cycle, what conversations and activities either brought Facebook users together or polarised them, how political affiliation was expressed, how users made sense of their online participation, how tribe was deployed in deliberations, and how anti-democratic content, if any, was shared and received. In my first layer of selection, I purposively sought out posts and related comments that reflected at least one of the themes in these research goals. To reduce the number of eligible posts to my desired sample size, I applied a second filter using Facebook's inbuilt and publicly observable analytics feature. Specifically, I used Facebook reactions (number of likes, shares, comments) to select the posts and comments to include in my sample for analysis. I was mindful of the filters Facebook applies when displaying comments on a post, namely: most relevant, newest, and all comments. I, therefore, manually selected "all comments", whenever a different filter was automatically applied, to ensure I did not miss any comments of interest to my study. At the level of comments, the first criterion was that the comments had to be on a post that was included in the sample. After meeting that requirement, the comments were then selected on account of having the most interactions on the thread. At that point, I purposively checked for relevance to my topic and research goals, and, if comments with the highest interactions did not align, then I dropped them and instead selected the most relevant comments with the highest number of interactions. Relevance, in this case, was considered in relation to the topic at hand and the research goals I listed in this section. If, for example, the post was either advocating or condemning tribalism and the comments with the most interactions were about a car wash announcing a discount on services or an unrelated joke, then I would put the irrelevant comments aside and consider the next eligible comments. The sample period was from 1st May 2021, the month presidential nominees were announced and their campaigns started in earnest, to 31st August 2021, the month in which the elections were held. The elections were held on 12th August 2021; therefore, the sample includes some post-election data.

During the purposive sampling of Facebook posts and comments, I conducted a prima facie analysis of the data in order to assign it correctly as relevant to the present study or not. I then used the process of prima facie analysis for a second purpose of identifying potential

respondents for focus group discussions and individual interviews, which were the second and third phases of my data collection, respectively. Both focus group participants and individual interview respondents were included to help answer some of my research questions, such as how they, as members of online neo-tribes, made sense of their online participation as well as how they made sense of campaign messages based on tribe. I sought to gain insights into the emergence of neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation, and the role social media played in the transition. I also sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues that united and polarised users, and how anti-democratic voices and practices, if any, were deployed and received in public deliberation online. I purposively selected respondents from three sub-groups, namely: Facebook users who belong to the Tonga/Lozi cleavage and voted for Hichilema, a member of their cleavage; Bemba/Nyanja users who voted for Lungu, a member of their cleavage; and Bemba/Nyanja users who voted for Hichilema, a member of a different cleavage/against their own cleavage. In addition to their linguistic cleavages and preferred presidential candidates, potential respondents were also selected for commenting on at least one of the themes defined in my research goals in this section. Some of the respondents' comments had a lot of reactions in the comment threads but I did not apply that particular filter to this stage. Instead, I based selection on their comments' relevance to the present study, their ethnic affiliation and the candidate they voted for. At the point of data collection and prima facie analysis, I was able to tell the language groups some commenters came from based on their names. It was, however, not possible to infer commenters' ethnic tribes from their names because it is possible either to have a name in one language and belong to another tribe or for people of the same name to belong to different language groups and tribes. A common example of such a name is Mumba, which is found not only in different Zambian languages and tribes but also in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I drew on Posner's (2005) important insights into understanding identity in Zambia, and, in particular, how one's ethnic identity could be categorised either through linguistic or tribal codes. This is so because some languages – and their variations – are shared across several tribes. It is also possible and common for people to be identified by the language they speak rather than their ethnic tribe (Posner, 2005). I was not able to infer either language or tribe in the case of pseudonyms, unless the users expressly stated their identity in the comments. As tribal affiliation was a key criterion in my composition of focus groups and individual interviews, I circulated a pre-interview questionnaire to respondents, for them to confirm their ethnic and political affiliation. The responses to the questionnaire enabled accurate assignment of both linguistic cleavage and the presidential candidate voted for.

After identifying my potential respondents as explained, I constituted two focus groups of eight participants each and generated a list of eight individual interviewees. In order to do that, I first conducted a respondent recruitment exercise via Facebook. There is no prescribed number of participants for focus group discussions, and different authors have proposed different ranges from four minimum to five maximum, three minimum to 12 maximum, six to eight, and six to 12 (see Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). I adopted the six to 12 range and settled for eight participants. I chose eight for my number of participants because I believed that eight would give me richer information than six would, and more manageable data than 12 would. I was, however, open to extending the number to 12 participants if the selection process revealed many people with unique experiences that would add to the depth and thickness of my data. I was not, however, open to reducing the number from eight.

I contacted potential respondents from all three categories (three focus groups, at that time) through Facebook Messenger between 5th and 10th January, 2024. I first wrote to 24 people, eight from each of the three categories. Thirteen responded, with five agreeing and eight refusing. Facebook Messenger indicated that of the remaining 11 that had not responded, three had read my message and seven had not. Of the five that agreed, two were selected for group one and three for group two. Of the eight that refused, five were selected for group three at the time, and three for group one. Some of the reasons cited for refusing were lack of interest in the subject matter: "I am not interested" and "I no longer participate in political commentary"; and security concerns: "we are laying low because the Government is after us", "My job would be at risk if my identity came out", "Government agents may infiltrate the focus groups and take our names afterwards" and "How did you find me? This is making me uncomfortable". Another reason given was a change of political party affiliation from the one voted for in 2021. The security concerns are cited here for context but did not form part of the data for analysis as the speakers were not recruited as respondents and did not sign the necessary consent forms. Seven days after my initial message, I sent a second message to the 11 who had not yet responded and still did not get a response. I checked the profiles of all the people I wrote to and noticed a number of them had been inactive from the period immediately after the elections. As I was viewing their profiles as a non-friend on Facebook, it is possible that they have remained active but changed their privacy settings after elections to restrict the visibility of their content to Facebook friends only. It is also possible that they had, indeed, become inactive on Facebook since the elections passed.

Two weeks after my follow-up, I sent out fresh participant requests. I selected these from the remaining list of potential participants I had drawn as per criteria shared earlier in this section. Anticipating a poor response like the one I got on my first attempt, I increased the number and sent out 40 requests. Twenty-seven people responded, with 19 agreeing and eight refusing, while 13 did not respond. Four read my request and did not respond, while nine did not read the message, according to the status shown by Facebook Messenger. I thought at the time that perhaps they had not read my request because Facebook sends messages from non-friends to a different folder from the default folder/inbox, where the recipient has to navigate to and either accept or deny the message request. This turned out to be the case for some of them, as they responded to me months after I had concluded my data collection, informing me that they had only just seen my message. Of the 19 that agreed, nine were selected for group one, giving it a total of 11 participants; seven were selected for group two, giving it a total of 10, and four for group three, the first to agree. My intention was to constitute groups of eight, but to have some alternates in case some of the primary participants withdrew. Two of the group three participants did later withdraw by not responding to follow-up messages. Recognising the low response rate and the persistence of security concerns as likely to continue impacting participation, I decided to drop the pro-PF Bemba/Nyanja category from the focus groups and moved it instead to semi-structured individual interviews. With the change from focus group to individual interview, I sent out 20 requests, some to new potential participants and others to those I had contacted before and who had expressed concern at the format of the focus group interview. From this round of requests, 13 agreed, bringing the total number to 15. After I sent them the participant consent form, two were not comfortable with the interview being recorded (I needed that for transcription and reference/confirmation purposes), three stopped responding and two could not fit the interview into their schedules. I proceeded to interview eight people. I reached data saturation at the fifth interview and did not expect any new data to emerge as the submissions, at that point, suggested that "the range of opinions [and] the different representations of the issue" had been exhausted (Gaskell, 2000:41), but I continued the interviews up to the eighth participant.

For my data analysis, I used an eclectic approach of rhetorical analysis and thematic content analysis. I employed rhetorical analysis to allow me a close reading of the Facebook posts and commentary as well as an interpretation of the persuasive strategies in the language used (Posch, 2017). My premise was that political communication and in particular election campaigning, like rhetorical argumentation, seeks to persuade others to believe in particular

points of view through communication. For example, the use of tribalism as a campaign tool required campaigners to convince voters to buy into the message of either embracing or shunning a candidate on the basis of their tribe. Facebook pages were also sites of public debate and persuasion due to the divergent views presented there. Rhetorical analysis provides the best approach to read how such persuasion may have occurred/been delivered. Historically, Aristotle stands out as the most influential thinker in this approach as he "offered a systematic theory of the means of persuasion" (Zachry, 2009:71). Aristotle offers three modes of persuasion, also known as rhetorical appeals, that people use, namely: ethos, pathos and logos (Zachry, 2009). In summary, people persuade others through the following means: "the character or credibility of the source of communication (ethos), the stirring of emotion in the individual(s) being persuaded (pathos), or proof of truth (or apparent truth) through reasonable argument (logos)" (Zachry, 2009:71).

In addition, I also use the present study's theoretical framework to analyse the data. Three of the key concepts of the theoretical and analytical frameworks are the digital public sphere, tribalism, and neo-tribalism.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Before commencing my data collection, I applied for ethical clearance; I was granted ethical clearance by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC) on 26th May, 2023. The clearance was valid for one year. I shared the Rhodes University Participant Informed Consent Declaration form with all participants beforehand. In this form, I stated the objectives of the research, the participants' expected contribution, the likely risks to participants and how I intended to mitigate them, among other details. As the moderator, I was conscious of my involvement in the discussions, and took care not to skew the conversation or allow prolonged unproductive discussions to continue without steering them back to the topic (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). For example, if a discussion moved to an angle unrelated to my research, I asked either a follow-up or new question that directly related to the topic. I conducted the focus group discussions and individual interviews virtually. Virtual meetings allowed for the inclusion of participants who were in different cities around Zambia. The meetings also allowed for participants to choose their own environments where they were most comfortable, and for the discussions to be easily recorded for transcription purposes (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). I covered data costs for 21 of the 24 participants by sending airtime directly from my banking app to their phones. Three of the participants

preferred not to receive mobile data support. Mobile internet is often slow and the cost is prohibitive for many (Donner & Gitao, 2009; Wyche & Baumer, 2015), and provision of data bundles was a necessary intervention in my case. The airtime could be converted to a minimum of 10GB across networks, which was more than was required for the meeting.

All interviews were recorded, and participants were informed of this beforehand, both in the informed consent form and in my opening remarks in each focus group and individual interview. Audio recordings are an accepted way of generating individual and group interview transcripts, and can contribute to ensuring rigour and validity in a qualitative study like mine (Seale & Silverman, 1997; Nordstrom, 2015; Rutakumwa, Mugisha, Bernays, Kabunga, Tumwekwase, Mbonye & Seeley, 2020).

4.6.1 Bias and Positionality

Within the interpretivist paradigm, researchers are important instruments as they can immediately be responsive and adaptive in the data collecting and analysing process, and they bring their own interpretations to observed phenomena (Merriam, 2002; Roger, 2020). Two of the noted concerns with the researcher being a human instrument are potential biases and subjective interpretation, which may raise ethical issues within the research process (Merriam, 2002; Silverman, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Beyond acknowledging that, as an interpretive researcher, I am the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I also reflected on my bias and positionality within this study. With this awareness of my subjectivities, I was particularly alert to any potential researcher bias. As detailed in section 4.5, I purposively selected the first layer of posts to include in the sample and I used my judgement, informed by my research goals and theoretical framework, to determine the relevance of posts or their lack of relevance. Similarly, I purposively selected user comments to include in the sample. I was aware that the sampling stage could be affected by my bias as I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, and I took due care to avoid bias. One of the ways was by ensuring both parties were represented in the Facebook pages I looked at, as well as in the voters I interviewed. The risk of bias has, therefore, been mitigated by my reflexivity and rigorous documentation of all data collection and analysis techniques, inclusion of both political parties, as well as by my close collaboration with my supervisor. I am aware that the research may not be replicated by a different researcher due to the different purposive choices each individual may make at sample selection of posts and comments, but the same themes are likely to emerge.

My position as a member of the Bemba/Nyanja language group, a voter in the 2021 elections, and an active follower of election-related events and commentary on social media, in mainstream media and in face-to-face world interactions all had a bearing on my data collection, interpretation and meaning-making processes. I kept an audio reflexive journal in the form of voice notes. An example of one of my journal entries was a reflection on whether to limit all discussions and interviews to English – which is the official language in Zambia – or to accommodate vernacular languages as well. I have native proficiency in Bemba and can hold basic conversation in Nyanja. However, I neither speak nor understand any of the Tonga/Lozi group languages, save for a few words and phrases that have been adopted in popular culture. My reflection, therefore, was on the practicality of including vernacular languages and the inherent advantage it would give the Bemba/Nyanja speakers, who I would be able to converse with directly, over Tonga/Lozi speakers who I would only be able to converse with through a translator. I chose to limit the discussions and interviews to English, which was also the primary language the participants used in the Facebook comments I identified them from. Other factors that informed my positionality within the study included me being a woman, my level of education (postgraduate), my employment, my middle-class background and my exposure to politics and democratic processes in other countries due to personal and professional networks, social media and/or travel.

My positionality played a significant role in my selection of a case for this study. I have been an active social media user for over 10 years, having joined Facebook and X, formerly known as Twitter, in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Over the years, I participated in public deliberation either as the initiator of a particular topic or by responding to other people's posts and comments. I also live-tweeted events of public interest, such as state of the nation addresses, budget speech presentations to parliament by the Minister of Finance, and political campaign rallies or town halls. I also developed content to aid voter education on their rights and obligations, and other content such as biographies of and commentary on selected candidates. The biography content was not limited to candidates but also included other eminent people, both Zambian and non-Zambian, such as Kenneth Kaunda or Nelson Mandela under the hashtag #KK101, #Mandela101 or a hashtag of whoever the subject was. This was part of a larger initiative by then Twitter users of different African countries who took turns posting about eminent public figures on the 101 hashtag or engaging with what was created by others. This hashtag was an early example of how social media was reconstituting time and space, allowing different nationalities a shared platform. In 2016, I was Social Media Lead on Zambia

Elections Information Centre (ZEIC), which was a project co-founded by Hivos Southern Africa and the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). The purpose of the project was "to facilitate effective information management for a credible, peaceful, free and fair 2016 general election in Zambia, taking place on 11th August, 2016" (Hivos website, 2016). My day-to-day responsibilities included running ZEIC's official Twitter account and responding to public enquiries. This was part of my exposure to citizen deliberation online during successive election periods over the years and it motivated my selection of the 2021 elections as my case study. Through my previous experience, I was aware that national elections typically lead to intense public deliberation online. I was familiar with and interested in the subject matter, as well as in several angles through which the research questions could be explored and answered. This presented the risks of me conflating my role as researcher with that of a voter actively participating in public deliberation, and of me influencing the discussions to suit my research. I mitigated this risk by not participating in any election-related deliberations, both publicly (on Twitter) and privately (WhatsApp groups) as I did in previous elections. For the 2021 election cycle (pre-, during- and post-election), I kept a low social media profile for the first time and I observed more than I spoke, due to the academic reasons that I have just stated, as well as professional reasons.

On the academic side, my reticence in the election cycle came from my knowledge that I would later be analysing online commentary on the same elections and did not wish to potentially skew the discussion by introducing topics or perspectives that would have, otherwise, been absent or perhaps been put forward differently. A second layer of bias mitigation here is that I was previously active on Twitter but conducted my research on Facebook, thus limiting the possibility of old debates I may have participated in being brought into current discussions and potentially skewing my objectivity during analysis. It can be debated whether or not it is possible for a qualitative researcher to be completely free of bias. I argue that it is possible depending on the context, and where not completely possible, it is enough to make one's potential bias explicit. On the professional side, my current employer - the Central Bank of Zambia - requires all relevant stakeholders, such as employees, to maintain political neutrality in public fora, including peer-to-peer platforms such as WhatsApp groups. The Social Media Guidelines that govern these stakeholders also require non-participation in social media commentary on issues that relate to the Bank's business (the national economy being one. The economy is also one of the biggest points of deliberation in election periods, including 2021) and that of its stakeholders. Part of my duties in my current role include monitoring

compliance/adherence to the same Social Media Guidelines, by all relevant stakeholders. It was, therefore, important for me not to breach any of the provisions through my social media activity. These circumstances meant I became (remained) a keen yet mostly silent follower of election related content, allowing me an appreciation of the topic's rich potential for academic inquiry. My participation was limited to sharing official information; for example, I live-tweeted all the results of the presidential election as they were announced by the Electoral Commission.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the methodology, methods and procedures employed in this study. It presented the broad philosophical, theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of the qualitative research paradigm and its suitability for this study. The chapter also presented the case study approach, and a discussion of my sampling techniques, data collection and analysis tools, my bias and positionality in relation to the study, and the ethical considerations I made in the process.

The next three chapters present summaries of the data collected, starting with the Facebook sample used in the analysis.

Chapter Five: Data Presentation and Analysis – Facebook Posts and Comments

The previous chapter presented the methodology, methods and procedures employed in this study. The next three chapters present the data as gathered through a Facebook content analysis, focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews. The current chapter presents a summary and discussion of the data collected from five Facebook pages, namely: Edgar Chagwa Lungu, Smart Eagles, Hakainde Hichilema, Zambian Watchdog and Mwebantu Media. Pro-incumbent and pro-opposition commenters dominated conversations on the pages affiliated to their respective political parties, but both opposing and neutral commenters were also present on the same pages. I identified two main themes in the posts and comments across all pages, namely tribe, and the state of the nation. I further identified sub-themes such as governance, economy, and service delivery, which I discuss as I present them. I identified these themes on the basis of how frequently they appeared in the comments. For analysis and presentation purposes, I included 'other' as a third category to cover all other themes that emerged but were not repeated frequently enough to warrant an independent theme, as well as content that was not clear or was incomprehensible. The theme that most aligns with the weaponisation of tribe on social media in the 2021 elections, which is one of the focus areas of this study, is tribe. The other themes and sub-themes are also necessary for understanding what topics brought commentators together in neo-tribes, another focus area of the study.

When using direct quotes, I code the authors with FB (denoting Facebook), a number, e.g. *FB1*, indicating the sequence/point at which their quote is appearing in the text in relation to others, and BN (denoting Bemba/Nyanja), TL (denoting Tonga/Lozi) or A (denoting ambiguous), depending on the language group that can be inferred from their name (e.g., FB1-BN). I also state the pages on which the various posts and comments appeared. An exception to the coding/anonymity rule is politicians and other newsmakers whose views I quote from the original post as opposed to the comments section. My reasons for this exception are that, firstly, these views were published as news and, secondly, the views of their fellow politicians, Lungu and Hichilema, are cited by name. In this thesis, I adopt the linguistic cleavage and categorise all research subjects as either belonging to the Bemba/Nyanja bloc or the Tonga/Lozi bloc. This is informed in part by what emerged in the data I collected and analysed, and in part by standard categorisation methods (see Posner, 2005; Habasonda, 2018; Resnick, 2022). I

reiterate that there are several tribes represented in each linguistic bloc and, therefore, a reference such as Tonga/Lozi bloc in this thesis represents both the language group membership and the tribal affiliation of more than just the two named tribes. Pro-incumbent and pro-opposition commenters dominated conversations on the pages affiliated to their respective political parties, but both opposing and neutral commenters were also present on the same pages.

5.1 Tribe

One of the prominent sub-themes was the rallying of voters for and against candidates on the basis of tribe. Mobilising political support on grounds of ethnicity is common in African elections (see Posner, 2005; Ndhlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Adeyanju, 2020).

5.1.1 Accusations of Tribalism

The data reveal a common thread of political opponents – the PF and UPND – accusing each other of tribalism. In both camps, tribalism is portrayed as a negative practice and voters are urged to shun candidates and parties that perpetuate it. For example, there is a recurrent accusation of Hichilema as being tribalist and, therefore, a risk to both the nation's unity and citizen welfare. In one example, a prominent politician, who is a former minister of finance and presidential candidate, accuses Hichilema of being tribal and divisive, and warns members of the public against voting for him. Ms. Edith Nawakwi[2], who belongs to the Bemba/Nyanja bloc, is quoted in a post on the pro-PF (pro-incumbent) page Smart Eagles, on the eve of election day, alleging that Hichilema did not have the blessing of the country's founding president, Kenneth Kaunda. She is quoted as saying the late President Kaunda had been fearful of a potential Hichilema presidency as he knew he would create division among the people. Although it is not a requirement to be endorsed by a former president, having reservations attached to one's candidacy can be understood as an act of rallying voters against the affected candidate. Nawakwi evokes the late president's national hero status as well as her own to advance an ethos appeal against Hichilema's candidacy. Kaunda led the country's post-independence ethno-political consolidation and unity efforts, and was strongly associated with such national unity rallying points as the song "Tiyende pamodzi ndi'mtima umo" (let us move together with one heart) and the slogan "One Zambia, One Nation" (Magasu et al., 2021).

[2] Ms. Edith Nawakwi passed on in April, 2025, after data collection and analysis had been concluded.

Kaunda's views on tribalism, therefore, carry significant weight. Nawakwi's message reflects Hidler's (2004) assertion that, psychologically, modern groups match historical tribes in their obedience to authority figures, which is driven by the acknowledgement and acceptance of peers. President Kaunda, in this case, is the authority figure likely to motivate obedience. A second example of tribalism accusations is an accusation that Hichilema practised tribal discrimination in his party. A story published, also on the eve of election day, on the Smart Eagles page alleges that Hichilema and UPND had sidelined senior party and coalition officials on the grounds of them being Bemba. The post alleges that Hichilema had promised to discard the members after they helped the party with election campaigns, because he no longer trusted Bembas. This post casts Hichilema as a tribalist, othering team members and seeking to discard them on the basis of their tribe, Bemba. It also suggests that Hichilema had assumed an opportunistic strategy when he at first allowed the Bemba members to help with the campaign, before discarding them. The allegation is an act of promoting ethnic discord through what may be fake news (Inobemhe et al., 2020). In both examples cited, tribalism is cast as a bad thing and reason enough to not vote for someone. In a different example, a prominent politician and former PF minister of information and chief government spokesperson, Mr. Chishimba Kambwili, addresses a campaign rally in Bemba, which is streamed live on the Smart Eagles page on 6th August, 2021. In the video, Kambwili repeatedly warns the crowd against voting for Hichilema, accusing him of being a tribalist and leading a tribal party, UPND. He mentions the names of several non-Tonga politicians, including himself, who had joined UPND but left due to what he describes as tribal discrimination. He stresses to the audience that one of the people who once served as vice president in the UPND and subsequently left was their "fellow Namwanga", a native of the area he was speaking in. In this message, Kambwili is evoking the historical in-group characteristic of the need for members to have a sense of shared identity through ethnicity (Clark et al., 2019). He is, in essence, using an allegation of tribalism against Hichilema to rally his own in-group on the basis of ethnic affiliation. Kambwili warns the crowd that if they were to make the mistake of voting for Hichilema, they would suffer because he would cast them aside and only give jobs and other opportunities to his fellow Tongas. He warns that non-Tonga people like the ones in the audience would become so desperate for opportunities that they would resort to adopting Tonga-sounding names in order to be considered. For context, 'ha' and 'hi' prefixes are added in the formation of many Tonga names and may serve to modify the meaning of the base word (see Hang'ombe, 2015). It is, therefore, not uncommon to find Tonga names with these prefixes such as in the case of President Hakainde Hichilema's name. In the video, Kambwili demonstrates his claim, in what can be

considered a derogatory manner, by adding ‘ha’ and ‘hi’ prefixes to Bemba names. This is an example of hyperbole deployed to enhance a pathos appeal (Zachry, 2009; Golubeva, 2019) and stir people against Hichilema. In the same example, Kambwili exploits realistic conflict theory by presenting Hichilema as a tribalist who is likely to discriminate against people outside his tribe – those who can be considered members of out-groups – in the competition for resources (Abbink & Harris, 2019), such as jobs and other economic opportunities. Elections are recognised as a type of competition for resources, because the winner gains greater control over how those resources are distributed (Oc et al., 2018). Alleging that Hichilema, if elected, would deprive non-Tonga citizens of employment and other opportunities appears deliberate and informed by the knowledge that issues such as employment and other areas of service delivery are typically contentious in electoral cycles (Kapesa et al., 2020; Resnick, 2022). Kambwili utilises rhetorical argumentation, including ethos, when he talks about how he had once been a member of the UPND. This, and claiming an association with several other high-profile former members, positions him as a UPND insider and, therefore, a credible source. Kambwili also includes a logos appeal by presenting his previous membership and what he says he experienced within the party as evidence and a basis for his warnings to the Bemba/Nyanja population of what would happen if they were to vote for Hichilema. Such messaging is an appeal to the voting public’s tribal instincts of intergroup competition and their need for survival (Musvosvi, 2010; Clark et al., 2019). An excerpt from the same video of Kambwili originally live-streamed on the pro-PF Smart Eagles page is shared on the pro-UPND Zambian Watchdog page. The excerpt shows the part where Kambwili warns non-Tongas against voting for Hichilema as they would lose employment and other opportunities. The high number of views and interactions in the form of comments, likes, and shares, on Facebook can be cited as an example of the amplifier effect of social media. Social media extended the reach of a political message that was shared to a limited number of people in a set location to a much larger audience across time and space (DeLuca et al. 2013; Olaniran & Williams, 2020). The excerpt also shows Kambwili corrupting Bemba names by adding prefixes typical of Tonga names, in what can be considered a derogatory manner. Some commenters on the Watchdog page react to the video excerpt by labelling Kambwili a lunatic. While physical rallies are predominantly attended by supporters of the politicians speaking or hosting, some Facebook reactions to this particular video excerpt suggest that social media has enabled the construction of opposing and counter-narratives (Mutsvairo & Bosch, 2017).

In another video, Kambwili mocks Hichilema's supporters from the Bemba region, saying Hichilema has rejected them because they are not Tonga but they continue forcing association with Hichilema and the UPND. He warns of what he terms Tonga people's greed and intolerance of other tribes. Like before, Kambwili exploits commonly held beliefs on tribal discrimination against members of out-groups in the competition for resources of power (Abbink & Harris, 2019). He uses pathos, firstly to make the Bemba/Nyanja bloc members of the UPND feel othered and unwanted, and secondly to cast Tongas as a threatening other (Michlic, 2006). His assertions can be read as fake/unverified news shared with the intention of worsening existing divides (Hassan, 2023). Furthermore, he repeatedly conflates Tonga the tribe with UPND the party and Hichilema the candidate. For example, he would warn about a supposed bad trait and proceed to attribute it to Hichilema, UPND and Tongas in different sentences of the same video. I read this conflation through the dual lens of Zambia's colonial identities (Posner, 2005) and ethnocentrism (Musvosvi, 2010). Kambwili adopts an ethnocentric attitude in his conflated address of Hichilema, UPND party and the Tonga people in his use of language that may be understood as derogatory and dehumanising (Musvosvi, 2010). The comments on the examples I have cited and several other posts with similar content are varied but feature two distinct positions: agreement and disagreement with the messaging. Some of the commenters who agree state that posts accusing Hichilema and the UPND of tribalism are important for the enlightenment of voters. They argue that members of the public need to hear such messages and appreciate the gravity of the mistake they would be making if they voted for a Tonga candidate. For example, *FB1-BN*, a commenter on the Smart Eagles page, praises Kambwili: "you're doing the right thing by opening eyes for many Zambians who are blind, otherwise Zambia can end up being run by conman". Several commenters encourage fellow voters to heed the warnings about Hichilema and vote for Lungu and PF instead. Some of the commenters disagree and, instead, allege that the messaging amounts to tribalism and hate speech. A common sentiment among those who subscribe to this position is that the PF spends too much time attacking Hichilema and the UPND over their alleged tribalism instead of telling voters what they would deliver if re-elected. Some allege that the PF is practising tribal politics and targeting Tongas. Another Smart Eagles commenter, *FB2-A*, condemns the messages: "Zambia should be above this type of politics that can easily divide our people based on tribal lines. This needs to stop". The sentiment is echoed by *FB3-BN*: "The days are long gone for the politics of hatred, personal and tribal attack". Citizens publicly expressing their disagreement with positions taken by politicians is an example of social media enhancing the visibility of protests and contestations against the status quo (Mano & Ndlela, 2020; De Bruijn

& Both, 2017). The comments cited are also an example of how voters used social media – Facebook in particular – as a platform for presenting competing and counter-narratives (Mutsvairo & Bosch, 2017:72).

Reactions to the prominence of tribe in campaign messages account for another common discussion in comment threads across all five pages. Some of the comments are against the messaging, while others are in favour. Reacting to videos by Kambwili (cited in earlier examples) and another former minister Geoffrey Bwalya Mwamba, some commenters on the Mwebantu Media page condemn the two and accuse them of being the face of tribalism in the 2021 election campaigns. The commenters argue that Zambians are above tribal hate speech and pettiness in politics, and would rather vote for credible leaders conducting issue-based campaigns. Other commenters, however, defend the messages based on tribe, with some arguing that the same messaging was, in fact, serving an important purpose of exposing tribalism. This is an example of citizens finding expression on electoral issues through social media (Mano & Ndlela, 2020) and using Facebook, in particular, as a platform to engage, interact and respond to official debates (Willems, 2012:21).

In one of several exchanges between the anti- and pro-tribal messaging, a user with a Tonga/Lozi name alleges that the messages by the former ministers of information and defence, respectively, amount to tribal hate speech against Tongas. In response to this allegation, Mwebantu Media page commenter, *FB4-BN* argues, "we can tell your bitterness from your name because they have managed to expose how tribal your region is and we don't expect u to like it". Through this comment, *FB4-BN* dismisses a fellow user's grievance as bitterness and attributes it to their tribe, inferred – correctly or incorrectly – from their name. One of the characteristics of tribalism is the uncritical adoption of information that favours the interests of one's own tribe and the overly sceptical or dismissive attitude of everything that does not align with the in-group agenda (Clark et al., 2019). *FB4-BN*'s views fit within such tribe-motivated cognitive biases (ibid). Several users – mostly with Bemba/Nyanja bloc names and a few with Tonga/Lozi bloc names – join this particular debate, expressing solidarity with the initial commenter and criticising *FB4-BN*. Some of the critics accuse *FB4-BN* of brainwashed and retrogressive thinking. An interesting dynamic in this particular debate is that a user with a Tonga/Lozi bloc name is defended from *FB4-BN* by several users who also have Bemba/Nyanja bloc names. The foregoing interaction can be cited as reflecting an affective dimension where feelings of belonging and solidarity, no matter how fleeting, were activated

(Papacharissi, 2015: 9). That some commenters had come together across tribal lines (and were willing to go against speakers of their own language) is an example of a relational pattern shift from ethnic tribe to neo-tribe. The shift represented in this interaction is revealed by the establishment in the literature of a long history of tribal in-groups in Zambian politics and elections (Sishuwa, 2019; Posner, 2005; Marten & Kula, 2008). Some of the commenters criticising *FB4-BN*'s comment argue that those supporting it would react differently if places were switched and Tonga politicians were openly campaigning on the basis of tribe the way Bemba politicians were doing. Those agreeing with *FB4-BN* and the politicians in the original post argue that the messages are not tribal hate speech but mere statements of fact. They reiterate that the messages are fair warnings because Zambians would end up in a bad place if they made the mistake of voting for a Tonga President. Both sides of this argument utilise a combination of pathos and logos appeals (Emmanuel et al., 2015) with the former suggesting double standards and portraying the Tonga as victims, and the latter portraying the Tonga as a threat to be avoided. The view of "a Tonga President", as expressed by different commenters, conflates Hichilema with his tribe, generalising the perceived risks of his potential presidency to "a Tonga President". The view sparks its own debate, with some challenging the commenters to state whether being Tonga automatically precludes one from being the president of Zambia. In justifying campaign messages based on tribe, *FB5-BN* argues that the politicians are merely pointing out Hichilema's and the UPND's tribalism, and that it is their obligation as leaders to speak up when wrong things are happening. *FB5-BN* states in part,

> so having only tonga MPs from southern [province] is normal? or only adopting tongas in Lusaka province for 2021 MPs or just look at the voting patterns for 2016,is it normal for you? or what do call that apart from tribalism, any way truth pains.

FB5-BN refers to UPND having only Tonga MPs from the province that represents their native home and traditional political stronghold, as well as to the party's historical landslides in the area; these references as proof of tribalism neglect to apply the same lens of analysis to other regions such as Bemba/Nyanja native and political strongholds. This can be argued to be an example of Clark et al.'s (2019: 587) assertion of modern politics as a salient form of coalitional conflict and that it, in turn, "elicits substantial cognitive biases". Ethnic politics and the different ways they manifest – such as the concept of *wako ni wako* which I discuss in 5.1.2 below – can be traced to pre-independence days (Sishuwa, 2019). Others on *FB5-BN*'s thread

and related threads argue that tribalism should not be promoted under the guise of exposing tribalism, because the two actions are not the same. Notable on this particular comment thread is the dominance of Bemba/Nyanja names and absence of Tonga/Lozi names on the side supporting tribalist campaigns targeted at Tongas. This suggests that tribalism has either triggered or perpetuated intergroup conflict, polarisation, and discrimination (Clark et al., 2019). It is also interesting to observe that some of the opposing commenters attribute *FB4-BN*'s views to a political party – PF – and not to, say, the Bemba tribe that can be inferred from his name. This is different from *FB*4-*BN*'s own thinking and approach on the thread, where he assumes and assigns tribe based on a point of view.

5.1.2 Vote for your Own

Wako ni wako is a Nyanja phrase which literally translates as 'your own is your own'. In Zambia, the phrase is used to evoke solidarity among in-groups, typically ethnic tribes. The concept of wako ni wako has been used in some campaign messages over the years. An example is a live broadcast on the Smart Eagles page of a special programme on a community radio station located in Petauke, Eastern Province. Eastern Province is the native region of the Nyanja side of the Bemba/Nyanja bloc and the region where the then incumbent President Lungu hails from. The programme, which was held on 7th August, 2021, features a politician who once served as Hichilema's vice president in the UPND. The interview was in Chewa, one of the languages represented in the Nyanja bloc, and English. The politician, Dr. Canisius Banda, emphasises to the listeners not to forget that President Lungu is from their area, Petauke, and they must support him in the elections as "their own". He also introduces himself as hailing from the same province and an area called Vubwi. He points out projects done so far and promises continued delivery of development to the area. By emphasising that both the speaker and the candidate, Lungu, hail from the same area and share the same tribe, Banda seeks to evoke a sense of intra-tribe allegiance in the voters and create an 'us' vs 'them' comradeship. This is an example of political mobilisation on ethnic and regional grounds (Siachiwena, 2021). It is also an example of tribalism organising on the premise of shared sense of identity, and loyalty to one tribe (Clark et al, 2019; Musvosvi, 2010). Part of the commentary agrees that Lungu and the PF have delivered development and must be given another term in office. Some commenters, such as *FB6-BN,* are of the view that voting for a native of the area would enhance opportunities for development. *FB6-BN* asserts in his comment: "For betterment of eastern province is to vote our very own President Edgar Chagwa LUNGU. Zambia is in good hands of President LUNGU and prof Luo [Lungu's running mate]". Like part of Banda's message,

FB6-BN's and other related comments link tribe to public service delivery (Baldwin, 2013). These comments also utilise a logos appeal by foregrounding opportunities for development as a benefit of voting for Lungu.

5.1.3 Conversations on Tribe

The assignment of assumed tribe on the basis of views expressed (for example, *FB4-BN's* comment in 5.1.1 and similar comments), and on the basis of name or party affiliation, was observed across the five pages, including instances of mis-assignment of tribe. For example, part of the exchange I share below started when a commenter, *FB7-A*, criticised pictures of President Lungu engaging a large crowd, posted on his page. The commenter cited a Ministry of Health announcement of 56 Covid-19 deaths the previous day and argued that it was a bad time to allow such large crowds to gather, especially in such a poor community where people could not afford quality treatment. FB7-A's comment uses a combination of logos – by citing publicly accessible statistics from an authoritative source – and pathos arguments by pointing out how the action placed "a poor community" with no access to quality healthcare at increased risk of Covid-19 infection. In response to this comment, *FB8-A* alleges that only a Tonga could be against the crowds gathering. *FB8-A* ends with a statement that Tongas would not go anywhere with their "Satanism hearts". Apart from trying to dismiss a verifiable different point of view on account of perceived tribe, *FB8-A* also references satanism, a longstanding public accusation against Hichilema. This is an ethos argument that seeks to dismiss a point of view by calling the credibility and objectivity of the speaker into question (Zachry, 2009). By ignoring the logic in FB7-A's submission and foregrounding their perceived tribe instead, FB8-A moves the focus of the argument from material facts to identity, tribe in particular. FB8-A also generalises an allegation against Hichilema, an individual, to the whole Tonga tribe. This kind of generalisation is rooted in ethnocentric thinking which inclines people to make wrong assumptions about their own and other people's groups (Musvoski, 2010). Ethnocentrism also affects people's perception of other groups, generalising the perceived weaknesses of a few members to characterise their entire group, as well as exaggerating the perceived evil of members of other groups (ibid:45). The exchange continues with the initial commenter, *FB7-A*, refuting his assignment as Tonga: "You think I'm Tonga? You should have asked first. Stop being tribal, I'm from Nothern [Province; Bemba region] just like Mr [President] Lungu. Shame on you. Stop being Tribal. You wont gain anything from being Tribal". According to the allegation and this response, *FB7-A* is wrongly assumed to be Tonga on the basis of his point

of view, i.e., criticising President Lungu who belongs to the Bemba/Nyanja group. This suggests that *FB8-A*'s expectation is that people express particular positions according to their ethnic affiliation in relation to the candidate(s) they are commenting on. It can be argued to reflect an expectation of tribal and cognitive biases that uncritically accept everything that favours the interests of one's tribe while being overly sceptical or dismissive of everything that opposes the tribe's/in-group's agenda (Clark et al., 2019). Another angle of interest in *FB7-A*'s response is how he also mis-assigns the president's tribe by saying he is from the Northern Province. Although the local language President Lungu primarily uses in public and in the media is Bemba (native to the Bemba of Northern Province), he is from the Eastern Province (native to the Nyanja side of the language bloc). This mis-assignment of tribe, therefore, suggests a genuinely held belief by *FB7-A* that Lungu is from Northern Province. The belief could probably be based on the local language Lungu is associated with or the fact that there is a tribe called Lungu in the North. Posner (2005) recounting research he conducted in Zambia, cites an example of his interview respondents complaining about what they considered Bemba domination in the country's politics as well as economy. When Posner approached the people named on the lists of Bemba beneficiaries accused of getting more than their fair share of opportunities in the new government at that time, he was surprised to learn that many did not self-identify as Bemba. As it turned out, the said beneficiaries were drawn from different tribes such as Bisa, Mambwe, Chishinga and Lunda with the common thread being that they are Bemba-speaking tribes. Interestingly, some of these tribes are highly underrepresented ethnic communities which do not share in the domination of public life commonly attributed to the Bemba. In day-to-day life, language differences are easier to identify than tribal differences. This creates room for mis-assignment of ethnic identity because some people speak the vernacular language(s) of their geographical location and not necessarily of their tribe. And others, as explained in 1.2, belong to the same or similar language groups but different tribes. Regardless of what informed *FB7-A*'s mis-assignment of Lungu's tribe, it is interesting to consider the possibility that some citizens pay so little attention to the issue of ethnicity that they do not even know the tribe the president belongs to. Further, *FB7-A* claims tribal kinship with the president when he announces Northern Province as his region of origin, "just like Mr. Lungu". Expressed this way, one may argue that claiming to be the same tribe as President Lungu, the person he had criticised, was *FB7-A*'s attempt at proving that his criticism was not motivated by tribe.

In a similar way, some commenters would justify their views by saying they belonged to the same tribe that was the subject of their comment. An example is the following comment by *FB9-A* who posted on a comment thread on the Edgar Lungu page:

> If you are not tonga and you vote for chilema [*Hichilema; when corrupted this way, the name means a disabled person] i bet you won't regret in future because we're greedy and selfish i wouldn't want anyone to regret, at least with president lungu we're only suffering from economy chapwa mule tasha [Bemba, lit.: be grateful that we are only suffering from the economy], do what you want and never regret. My Vote goes to president lungu for safety reasons, Long live mr president

FB9-A uses a well-known negative stereotype of Tongas as greedy and selfish to make their point. This can, in part, be considered an ethos argument because they are using their claim of being Tonga to convey their supposed credibility and knowledge of the tribe. They then claim goodwill or concern for others by using their supposed knowledge of the Tonga to warn them. Part of the comment can also be considered a logos argument because they do acknowledge that the economy under President Lungu's administration is hard on citizens, but they rationalise this by stating that the situation could be worse and urge people to, in fact, be grateful. They conclude with a statement on why they are voting for President Lungu. Some Mwebantu Media commenters – with Bemba/Nyanja names – state that the best way to protest against tribalism in politics is to vote Lungu and the PF out of office so they can learn the extent to which their messages of tribal hate had angered people. One commenter, *FB10-A* cites the global reaction to the "racial killing" of George Floyd in the United States and wonders why tribal hate is being accepted by Zambian leaders and their followers. She states, in part: "There is no superior tribe in Zambia. As the popular phrase, 'Black Lives Matter', in Zambia it is now Tonga (or any other tribe's) Matter. President Lungu please!!" The two examples cited demonstrate the use of social media for political mobilisation and, potentially, as a tool for protest (Bosch, 2019; Ndlela & Mano, 2020) with citizens gathering on a Facebook page and motivating for, as well as planning, political action in the form of a protest vote against the PF on election day.

On the pro-UPND, opposition, Hakainde Hichilema page, conversations on tribe were typically not linked to the posts shared and were instead initiated in the comment sections. For example, some comments on tribe emerged on Hichilema's posts during a campaign drive, dubbed a facemask

distribution exercise, in Southern Province. The commenters stated that the country now needed a president from the Southern Province or a similar view that it was now a Tonga's turn to rule the country. This is another example of conflating Hichilema's candidature with Tonga his tribe, with the only difference being that it is applied in a pro-Hichilema context. It begs the questions of whether the commenters wanted Hichilema to be president because of the person or because of his tribe and if, by that logic, *any* Tonga contender would have the commenters' support. These particular conversations suggest a normalisation of tribe as an election issue and potential basis for voting for a candidate, something that, in prior years, would have been frowned upon or at least kept private. Viewed through the historical lens of the overt presence of tribe in Zambian politics pre- and post-independence (Sishuwa, 2019) to its perceived management through declaration of a one-party state (Milimo, 1993) and absence from public discourse, the comments cited in this section of the thesis can be read as a normalised resurgence of the tribe narrative. The comments further prove Kapesa et al.'s (2020) assertion that mobilising both national and tribal communities has become a commonplace election strategy in Zambia, notably by presidential candidates. Also common in the comments was the sentiment of belonging. For example, *FB11-A* saying it was important for Hichilema to pull the large crowds he was pulling in the province because one could not be expected to lead the country "if your own people have rejected you". This sentiment was shared by a number of other commenters who felt Hichilema had his tribe's blessing and would also be representing them on the ballot, and not just himself and his party. This was another example of the conflation of tribe, party and candidate that was only applied to Hichilema and not the other candidate, Lungu. The reference to Hichilema having his tribe's blessing and backing in the presidential race reflects Mamdani's (2012) theorisation of the native as a political identity created by colonialism. Other commenters on the thread were, however, of the view that there was nothing special or unusual about Hichilema pulling crowds in areas native to the Tonga as those were considered traditional UPND strongholds. *FB12-A*, with an ambiguous name, argues "...if this was luapula [Luapula Province] or kopala [Copperbelt Province] I would have agreed that there's wind of change but not in choma [Choma, Southern Province] where your puppets are". Some argue that the crowds represent what they consider a typical Tonga response to a candidate of their own tribe. These views can be argued to convey as norm, the expectation of tribal loyalty among the Tonga and, in turn, its expression as an inevitable political in-group (Musvosvi, 2010; Clark et al., 2019). The view is shared in several comments, including by *FB13-BN* who asserts, "Some of us can't [be] surprise[d] coz it's not new that's how those [Tonga] guys are"; this is echoed by *FB14-A*'s "Even the [Facebook] comments shows that Tonga's have gathered". Both *FB12-BN* and *FB13-BN* use, what I would argue, is othering language such as referring to the Tonga as "*those* guys". The tone in both

comments is also dismissive of individual agency as it assumes the only basis for Tonga solidarity, or a gathering, is their tribe. Some commenters debate over what they consider inconsequential Tonga numbers because the crowds form part of the three provinces already known to be UPND strongholds and which, the commenters argue, cannot win UPND a national election. This line of argument deploys a logos strategy by referencing previous electoral patterns that are publicly known. Others challenge this view and argue that Hichilema is no longer only popular in three provinces, and his candidacy has taken on a national character. This counterview is also reflected in reactions to similar posts of Hichilema drawing large crowds in Luapula Province (part of the Bemba bloc) on the Mwebantu Media page. In the discussions, some argue that Hichilema pulling crowds in Luapula Province was unprecedented and a sign that his popularity was now national. Others argue that the crowds came out because the people in other provinces are accommodating of candidates from other tribes, unlike the provinces that form part of the traditional UPND strongholds. An example is a comment by *FB14-A*: "Luapula are not tribalists!!! Now the reverse [if the situation were reversed] of this for any candidate, like ECL [Lungu] or Kalaba [Bemba/Nyanja] in southern province!!!" Some argue that the crowds Hichilema was attracting in provinces such as Luapula would not translate into votes, as only the people of Southern Province were interested in voting for their fellow Tonga. In retrospect, it appears that commenters in this discussion were trying to make sense of the emergence of what were later to become swing voters, i.e., people who did not vote in line with their ethnic affiliation as generally expected but instead gave Hichilema, a Tonga, votes in traditional Bemba/Nyanja strongholds. Other discussions included references to voting patterns in previous elections and to how the UPND completely dominated in areas native to the Tonga and affiliated tribes. This, some argue, shows that the Tonga are not open to voting for candidates from other tribes and should, therefore, not expect other tribes to vote for a Tonga candidate. Such a position can be understood as endorsing in-group favouritism – where members are more inclined to be helpful to their own group than others – which typically occurs in groups formed on the basis of such common characteristics as ethnicity (Fu et al., 2012).

One of the most frequent ways that tribe came up in the comments on the pro-PF, incumbent, Edgar Chagwa Lungu page was by commenters bringing tribe-based campaigns by the PF to the president's attention and either calling for his intervention or attempting to hold him accountable. These comments were shared by both pro- and anti-Lungu supporters as well as Tonga/Lozi and Bemba/Nyanja Facebook users. The dynamic represented here hints at neo-tribalism (Cova & Cova, 2002) where an ephemeral group, with different ethnic and political affiliations, comes together on Facebook and pursues a common cause, in this case anti-tribalism in Zambian politics. Several other

commenters sought to hold the President accountable over what they believed was hypocrisy. The comments were found on different posts, such as the prayers and bible scriptures the president shared, any of the president's statements on peace or national unity, some pictures of him at his day-to-day engagements. A frequent example cited was Kambwili, the former minister of information who was now a senior member of President Lungu's campaign team and had, at one point during the campaign period, been suspended by the Electoral Commission on account of spreading tribal hate speech. What can also be observed here is how social media, Facebook in this case, enabled the electorate to engage their elected leaders and seek accountability. Even though the Edgar Lungu page was not responding to these comments, as is often the case with political pages (Bosch et al.,2020), Facebook did assume the role of a disruptor or game changer in electoral discourse (Ndlela & Mano, 2020).An example of the comments addressing President Lungu is the following by *FB15-BN* responding to a scripture posted on the president's page:

> But on the other side you dividing this country here you are quoting bible versus day and night but you using chishimba kambwili and GBM to attack the tongas forgetting that Tonga is a tribe not a political party what image are you send to the nation is that one Zambia one nation of kk?

The comment problematises the conflation of party and tribe and points out that Tonga is a tribe and not a political party. This statement motivates an interrogation of why the tribe was being targeted on the political front. A similar sentiment regarding the president's seeming inaction in the wake of tribal campaigns championed by his party is expressed in another comment on the Lungu page, this time by *FB16-BN*:

> Words but no deeds. **Our** relatives the Tongas are being attacked by **your** party members but **you** are not censoring them, His Excellency. Zambians are waiting to see you act on Chishimba Kambwili, Nkandu Luo, Chanda Nyela, Munia Zulu, Yamfwa Mukanga and many of **your** PF leaders & members who continue sowing seeds of division by preaching hate against Tongas. Zambia is for **all of us**. Let **us** not be so selfish to think that others don't deserve to govern or participate in **our** politics. **We** deny them appointments to public service positions no matter how good they are. When **they** participate in politics **we** are quick to label them tribal. **Let's** practice the unity that **we** preach about.

In their appeal, *FB16-BN* foregrounds solidarity calling the Tonga "our relatives" and raising some of the common grievances. They then utilise an 'us' *and* 'them' as distinct from an '*us'* and 'you' approach. As I marked in bold in the original comment, the commenter assigns different positions in terms of belonging and responsibility, making a combination of logos, ethos and pathos arguments. The foregoing examples also represent the ways that social media facilitates citizens' access to elected leaders and their expression of views that may otherwise be excluded (Soriano, 2013; Dzisah, 2020).

Some commenters express frustration at the government and the Electoral Commission for what they term, 'turning a blind eye to the tribal hate speech'. One commenter wonders why the Electoral Commission had, at one point, suspended Kambwili from campaigning due to tribal hate speech but then proceeded to lift the suspension and allow him to continue as before, but with no intervention this time. There were several anti-tribalism appeals from members of the public in the comment sections as well as from public figures on the five Facebook pages under analysis. One of the high-profile anti-tribalism messages was a video appeal by Lt. Col. Panji Kaunda, published on the Zambian Watchdog page on 6th July, 2021. Lt. Col. Kaunda is a politician, diplomat and son to the founding president, Kenneth Kaunda. The stand against tribalism represented in the foregoing and similar comments were expressed by people with Tonga/Lozi names as well as Bemba/Nyanja names. This represented agreement and solidarity – temporary as these may have been – across tribal lines and, in some cases, political affiliation as well, in what can be argued to be a neo-tribal manner (Clay, 2018).

As per the summary presented in this section, the discussions on tribe across the five pages had different angles. Some pages had content that was rallying voters on the basis of tribe, specifically asking sections of the electorate to vote for candidates from their own tribes and to avoid voting for Hichilema, a Tonga candidate. The comment sections of the different pages had wide-ranging discussions and arguments, with some comments condemning tribe-based campaign messages and others justifying and supporting them. The national slogan "One Zambia, One Nation" appeared several times in arguments against tribalism and tribe-based campaign messages.

5.2 State of the Nation

Heated discussions revolve around a few contentious issues. The overall sub-themes are governance, service delivery and economy, which form the topics of this section. The

discussions highlight a characteristic of neo-tribes where Facebook users form temporary connections on the basis of shared interests and beliefs (Maffesoli, 1996; Clay, 2018). The connections exhibited in this section fall outside the typical fault lines of ethnic and political affiliation, suggesting the presence of neo-tribes. Like ethnicity, political affiliation gives rise to in-groups or tribes that support particular positions merely on the basis of their affiliation (Hibbing, 2021). Political affiliation is also a salient form of social identity during elections (Oc et al., 2018), which makes the connections across ethnic and political affiliation observed in this section particularly significant.

5.2.1 Governance

One of the frequently discussed topics under this sub-theme was religion. Both the Lungu and Hichilema pages routinely shared religious posts, such as Bible verses and devotions. Religion was frequently referenced as what set President Lungu apart as a good leader, and what made Hichilema unsuitable. A long-standing allegation that Hichilema has links to satanism and freemasonry sustained debate throughout the sample period, with some commenters accusing him, and others proclaiming his innocence. A third position, apparently tongue-in-cheek, emerged with several commenters saying they were ready for the leadership of a Satanist since a Christian president had failed them. Several other commenters considered President Lungu to be God's choice for Zambia and warned about the consequences of going against such divine will. An example is a comment on the Edgar Lungu page by *FB17-BN* who asserts, "There is no other politician that has ever been a pastor, father, mentor, motivator and most of all caring president ever. Happy unity day Adada [father]". They end their comment by pledging their own, their family's and their community's support to Lungu in his re-election bid. This example reflects politics informed by patriarchy, one of several practices Munemo (2019) categorises as part of the legacy of colonialism. Pledging other people's support could be read as a hyperbolic show of solidarity since Zambia operates a secret ballot system and one cannot be sure how another person would vote (Friesen, 2019). The foregoing example and several other similar comments evoke pathos in their praise of the president and their pledges to vote for him, which can be read as a show of solidarity as well as an attempt to influence other users on the page to vote for the commenters' preferred candidate, Lungu. Still within the topic of religion, several comments bemoan the prevalence of tribalism, corruption, violence and hate, among a number of concerns, which they consider contradictory to the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation. An example is a comment expressing disappointment at a PF

spokesperson for stating in a radio broadcast that he wished someone could shoot Hichilema and getting away with it, in what ought to be a Christian nation. Some allege hypocrisy and state that displays of religion are meant to delude the masses into accepting their poverty and not demanding accountability. The discussions here reveal some of the shared beliefs and sentiments that brought commenters temporarily together in neo-tribes, outside of the historical forms of affiliation such as ethnicity and political party membership (Meling, 2020). Some commenters allege that President Lungu's actions are the opposite of his words. For example, they allege that Lungu's presidency has been defined by PF members getting away with lawlessness. A comment by *FB18-A* dismisses a post by the President on the rule of law. *FB18-A* asserts in this quote extracted from his longer comment: "High level of chief insultants, high number of Cadres, high number of unexplained and disrespectful actions from his MP, high level of crimes and even high levels of people being killed but we don't hear any arrest". Several commenters point out what they believe to be inconsistencies between the President's words and the reality on the ground. An example is *FB19-A* who challenges President Lungu's post thanking health workers and calling them "heroes" on National Heroes Day by asking what Lungu did when health workers demanded better working conditions. The commenter refers to the Honeybee scandal[3] and alleges that it put health workers at risk. They conclude their comment with, "anyway boss we know its campaign time you need to post something its routine but you can pick something else otherwise stop mocking us with your mediocrity of leadership". This example reflects one of the roles social media played in the 2021 elections, particularly what Jungherr et al. (2020) term as retooling politics. In this example, a citizen engages in political discourse in a manner that was not possible before the advent of social media (ibid). The Edgar Chagwa Lungu page had a number of posts – pictures and videos – of the president at what were dubbed 'mask distribution exercises' in different provinces, as well as at other public activities. These posts gave rise to one of the most frequent debates within this sub-theme, namely the ban on political rallies on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some commenters felt the ban was only targeting the opposition and Hichilema, and the president was still conducting physical campaigns. *FB20-TL* alleges that President Lungu might be the "custodian of unprecedented breakdown" in the country. The commenters argue that Lungu's government had banned campaign roadshows and any huge gatherings but kept doing the opposite of what was banned by its own directive. This view appears in several comments on different pages, with some commenters questioning why PF was conducting the same events

[3] Honeybee Scandal is explained in 5.2.2

that the opposition was not allowed to, and others demanding that either the PF candidates adhere to the ban or the opposition candidates also be allowed to campaign in the same manner. These comments combine logos and pathos appeals where they reference lived and observable experiences that can be verified, while also emphasising the double standards inherent in the situation, and potentially provoking anger or opposition. The commenters' accusations of the President weaponising Covid-19 against his political opponents by restricting their movements while he continued holding physical meetings align with the literature (Sishuwa, 2022). Some commenters allege that Lungu was breaking public health guidelines and potentially contributing to the further spread of Covid-19 by continuing to hold physical meetings. FB21-A raises a variety of issues in his comment:

> Very funny, you're good at saying very good things but what obtains on the ground is contrary. You're a super spreader of covid through your project inspections, you have allowed your people to engage in tribal politics and you do not castigate them. Your attitude will cost you a lot come next month [August/election month].

FB21-A's comment is a typical example of how some commenters were bundling their grievances when addressing President Lungu through his page. *FB21-A* also expresses dissatisfaction with the President's handling of tribal politics in his party. The warning that Lungu's attitude would cost him in election month had also been expressed by other commenters and can be read as citizens' recognition of elections allowing them a say in their governance in fulfilment of democracy as rule by the people (Lindberg, 2006; Ojo, 2007). Additionally, it can be read as a recognition of elections as mechanisms of accountability (Simpser, 2013). Some comments question the seriousness of Covid-19 and argue that, if it was as deadly as being communicated, there would have been complete adherence to public health guidelines. A number of comments speculate that the severity of the pandemic was probably exaggerated and just a campaign tactic to skew the playing field in favour of the ruling party. These comments are examples of the ways citizens were attempting to hold the president and his administration accountable. The interactions in the examples cited align with Ndlela and Mano's (2020) theorisation of social media as alternative media, and Mano's (2020) elaboration on citizens' use of social media to challenge politicians. The mainstream media agenda is skewed towards commercial and political interests, leaving little room for the expression of such counter-narratives by citizens (Ndlela, 2020). In the examples cited, social media also

plays a disruptive role by facilitating citizen access to an elected representative without going through traditional gatekeepers (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). The collective expression of dissatisfaction at perceived inconsistencies fits into the theorisation of neo-tribes as affectual and held together by shared emotions (Cova & Cova, 2002). Although these commenters were not all interacting on the different threads, they had gathered on the same platform and were expressing similar views. Based on the names, the commenters appeared to be from both Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi language blocs. It was, however, not clear which political parties they supported. Another notable topic was the funeral of Zambia's first president, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda, after his death on 17th June, 2021. Dr. Kaunda was accorded 21 days of national mourning, within which period his body was taken to all the country's 10 provinces. All five pages carried this news and received many reactions, with the Edgar Chagwa Lungu page carrying the most regular updates and reflections during and after the funeral and national mourning period. The posts on the different pages evoked an outpouring of messages of solidarity, reflection, praise, grief and condolences, from people in Zambia and abroad. The funeral and the reactions to it reflect neo-tribal conceptions of events and rituals. The funeral was a ritual that drew its participants – commenters on all five pages – to be symbolically involved in a common activity, showing solidarity, relatedness and commonality of interests (Edelman, 1964 in Orr, 2021). The funeral, as a ritual, highlighted the affectual nature of neo-tribes, and it temporarily held commenters together through shared emotions (Cova & Cova, 2002). As Summers-Effler (2006:135) posits, "rituals generate group emotions that are linked to symbols [President Kaunda, in this case], forming the basis for beliefs, thinking, morality, and culture. People use the capacity for thought, beliefs, and strategy to create emotion-generating interactions in the future". Comments on President Kaunda's passing also generated and sustained a significant amount of debate on tribalism, unity and leadership throughout the mourning period and the weeks that followed. Two of the most recurrent commentaries on these posts were about Dr. Kaunda's legacy of non-tribalism and a unified Zambia, and his role in the liberation of other African countries. These particular posts also received many comments by non-Zambians who were following proceedings from other countries. For example, a number of South Africans applauded Dr. Kaunda for his contribution to their country's fight against apartheid. Comments from various countries praised his commitment to pan-Africanism, African unity and dignity for all. A point of divergence within the neo-tribe that established itself around the funeral was the sentiment that President Lungu's leadership was inspired by and a reflection of Dr. Kaunda's. Opponents of this view contended that the Kaunda and Lungu leadership-styles were opposites.

FB22-TL, a proponent of the comparison, asserts that Lungu, like Kaunda, is a hero:

> Your Excellency you're another living hero. Your uniqueness kind of leadership is what is uniting us now hence deserving another term as you restore love to this country. You're the best president this country has ever had, we are voting you back in office again.

Some commenters encouraged Lungu to emulate Dr. Kaunda's example and reject tribalism and lawlessness. Going by their names, these commenters are from both the Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi blocs. This reflects the fact that commenters have come together not according to their ethnic tribes but as an emerging neo-tribe. Another point of division was the fact that Hichilema, the main opposition leader at the time, was not present at the official state funeral because he was allegedly not invited by the government through the Cabinet Office. Some commenters agreed with this position while others disagreed and condemned it. A picture of Hichilema following the funeral proceedings on TV in his home – first posted on his page and re-posted by many other pages – sparked emotive debate on the different pages under analysis. Some commenters expressed their disappointment at what they considered a politicisation of Dr. Kaunda's funeral. They questioned why so many PF members were present at what was a state, and therefore non-partisan, event, while other relevant stakeholders, like Hichilema, were not invited. The practice in Zambia is for different stakeholders to be invited, as explained by the Cabinet Office: "Government always invites all stakeholders, including diplomats, political leaders, the Clergy, senior citizens and others to all state, national and official functions" (Smart Eagles Facebook page, 2021). The commenters condemning Hichilema's absence stated that using the funeral of one whose main legacy was unity to divide the country was an affront to the memory of Dr. Kaunda. One commenter alleges that President Lungu's "political tribalism" had been exposed. In defence of the situation, some commenters argue that there was no evidence that the reason for Hichilema's absence was a lack of invitation and not, perhaps, a personal decision. Others argue that Hichilema had a history of shunning invitations to state events, such as the National Prayer Day, and, therefore, had no moral right to complain if invitations were no longer extended to him. Some argue that it was for Hichilema's safety because there was no way of being sure that the PF cadres present at the funeral would not turn violent and attack him.

Below is a comment by *FB23-TL/BN* (Tonga/Lozi first name and Bemba/Nyanja last name), challenging President Lungu's post that he had learned a lot from Dr. Kaunda:

> Are you sure ? I don't think so Mr ,,if indeed you have learnt a lot from Dr kaunda may his soul rest in peace,, why didn't you invite Hakainde Hichilema for a state funeral ? Dr kaunda believed in unity Mr but you don't show that to us,, look at kambwili he was busy promoting tribalism and you remainder quiet upto now...to be honest with you I don't like your caders they harrass us in bus stations, markets , streets etc,, what do you do ,,you decide to remain silence...so Dr kaundas values you can't compare.

The foregoing examples of debates on the Kaunda funeral reflect the neo-tribal characteristics of in-group bias and out-group discrimination (Abbink & Harris, 2019; Fu et al., 2012). The pro-opposition commenters feel that their candidate, Hichilema, was discriminated against by not being invited to the state funeral, despite being eligible as a political party leader. They also feel that President Lungu exhibited in-group bias or favouritism on the basis of political affiliation as members of his party allegedly outnumbered other stakeholders at the state funeral. The pro-incumbent commenters, on the other hand, dispute all allegations of discrimination and bias because they do not see the situation in the same way. Both the pro-incumbent and pro-opposition commenters were perceiving the situation through the neo-tribal lens of in-group bias and out-group discrimination and could, therefore, not see their own group as capable of wrongdoing. It is not unusual for people to assume particular points of view according to their political tribes (Hibbing, 2021). The debate, with its different angles and points of view, represented an active digital deliberative public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007). The debate particularly represented a public sphere where participants can mutually socialise and build solidarity as well as mutually criticise and build "discursive spaces of reflexivity" (Susen, 2011:46). A number of commenters seek to separate President Lungu from some of his government's unpopular decisions and actions. For example, *FB24-BN* urges Lungu to pick a different team to work with if re-elected. *FB24-BN* states: "Your [you are] a good person BUT most people working under you DON'T MEAN WELL. they preach hatred and tribalism hence removing the union and love Zambians have for one another". He asserts that Lungu possesses the spirit of a peacemaker, but he is surrounded by the wrong people, essentially ignoring his

agency as both an individual and authority figure. These comments can be read as examples of political acclamation (Schmitt, 1927; Dean, 2017) – where approval, praise and disapproval are voiced – as well as [political] tribal loyalties that may compromise a person's reasoning for the sake of group commitment and belonging (Clark et al., 2019). The comments also use an ethos appeal by attempting to dissociate Lungu from unpopular decisions and actions, and instead portraying him as free of blame. Other commenters argue along similar lines of tribalism, political polarisation, cadre violence and intolerance of divergent views. Several references were made to a spate of gas attacks in the country, more commonly referred to as gassing, as an example of governance failure. Some other discussions within this sub-theme were on corruption, political violence, President Lungu's eligibility to re-contest another election, selection of the PF and UPND presidential running-mates and government debt. The range of angles and views covered represent the role that social media played as an enabler of citizen deliberation on matters of public interest. The debates also reveal some of the topics that brought Facebook users together in neo-tribes.

5.2.2 Service Delivery

Service delivery formed a large component of both the PF and the UPND campaign messages, with PF showing its record of delivery and UPND promising better. The two PF-aligned pages, Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Smart Eagles, carried a significant number of posts about President Lungu making policy announcements, commissioning or inspecting projects, officiating events, and so on. The pages also had campaign adverts – songs, videos, pictures, still banners and write-ups – that showcased different areas that were considered the PF party's successes, such as infrastructure development. For example, the president commissioned two international airports, hospitals in different provinces, police stations, roads and bridges, among others, within the sample period. The content reflects the way social media has affected political communication, including by providing an avenue for election campaigning (Mano & Ndlela, 2020) and visibility of perceived deliverables. Such posts had numerous comments, with many praising the government and others either criticising or complaining about the high cost of living, unemployment, low wages, government debt to build the same infrastructure, and so on. The infrastructure projects were also featured in PF campaign songs and slogans such as "sonta epo wabomba" (Bemba, lit.: Point at your work/where you have worked), which over time became interchangeably used with just "sonta" (point), and were frequently used by commenters. The slogans were used to shape narratives, persuade, aid memorisation, appeal to

emotions, and create relationships based on shared beliefs and experiences (Mangad, Gaston & Ulla, 2024). The rhetorical appeal, accessibility and relatability of campaign slogans make them a compelling ritual within neo-tribes.

The UPND-aligned pages, Hakainde Hichilema and Zambian Watchdog, pointed out what they considered PF failures and why the PF should be voted out of office. One of the criticisms, for example, was that the PF government had contracted substantial debt for the infrastructure that was being commissioned. The infrastructure, they alleged, was not even owned by Zambians but by the Chinese, as part of financing conditions. Anti-Chinese sentiment and populism are common rallying points in Zambian elections, and politics in general (Negi, 2008; Hess & Aidoo, 2014). The Hichilema page posted a significant amount of campaign promises focused on overhauling the economy, creating more employment opportunities, managing fiscal matters prudently, enhancing investor confidence, restructuring the pension scheme to allow for partial withdrawal of contributions before retirement, and enhancing citizens' spending ability, among many others. The campaign messages typically included the slogan "Bally will fix it" with Bally (father, in Zambian slang) being Hichilema's nickname coined on social media. The slogan underscored the main premise of Hichilema's message that Zambia was broken under the PF and, if elected, Hichilema would fix it under the UPND government. Political slogans were used as a political communication tool to rally supporters, build shared political identities and influence public perception (Mangad et al., 2024). Basing a campaign slogan on the promise to "fix" is consistent with the typical use of campaign slogans to "elicit emotional responses that align with voters' hopes and ideals, whether by appealing to patriotism, solidarity, or advancement" (Mangad et al., 2024). This mobilises the affectual nature of neo-tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002). The slogan, which was routinely used as a hashtag on Hichilema and UPND posts, was also a visible ritual shared among pro-opposition neo-tribe members. The use of 'bally' in the slogan draws on the patriarchal nature of leadership in Zambia (Munemo, 2019) and the psychological affinity of neo-tribes to obey authority figures (Hidler, 2004).

The comments argued for and against the different topics raised on the five pages. For example, while many commenters praised the PF government's work in the area of infrastructure development, others argued that it was a misplaced priority given that the majority of the population was living in poverty. An example is a comment by *FB25-TL* who states: "As Long as I'm broke , unemployed and not managing 3 meals daily ... nothing will change my mind pa

August 12 ni  [Original comment has seven waving hands] … Moreover that's his job as a president but playing with our tummies mulandu [Bemba, lit.: is a crime]".

Other frequently discussed issues were the alleged corruption, nepotism and cronyism in public service, as well as economic opportunities such as the awarding of government contracts. The Zambian Watchdog posted pictures and videos of PF supporters flaunting flashy lifestyles, huge sums of cash, etc., and very lively discussions followed. Many commenters frequently complained that it was frustrating to remain unemployed despite possessing degrees and diplomas, and having to watch uneducated cadres flaunt money due to their political connections. Both Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi commenters agreed that they were being affected in the same way by issues like unemployment, unequal access to economic opportunities, and the high cost of living. The sentiments here can be read as recognition of, and dissatisfaction with, the neo-tribal tendencies of political or economic forms of power becoming more connected to members in specific tribes – ethnic or political (Meiling, 2020) at the exclusion of regular voters. Some PF supporters also agreed, while others attempted to explain the situation, including by attributing these issues to the global state of affairs, as well as by stating that President Lungu needed more time to sort all the issues out. An example is *FB26*-BN who shares the following advice on President Lungu's page:

> Mr President, dont forget during campaigns to emphasize on why our economy is not performing as expected. There are a lot of reasons why this is so. This issue affects all economies worldover. Yes we can talk about infrastructure but very few explain to our people about what the causes of the poor economic performance, which of course you doing everything possible to bring it to where it was before Covid19 and the droughts that devastated our agriculture sectot.

The comment demonstrates in-group loyalty, and attempts to contribute to advancing the interests of the in-group, in this case by trying to support campaign efforts so that the PF could win the election. A common reference in commentary on the high cost of living and people's failure to afford basic meals was, "If bread is too expensive, eat kandolo [sweet potatoes]", which was a statement attributed to a senior PF official in response to public complaints about

rising food costs. Many argued that the statement was reminiscent of French Queen Marie Antionette's infamous "let them eat cake", and showed how disconnected from the people's reality the PF government had become. Others, however, argued that the statement was being unnecessarily politicised to aggravate people and turn them against the PF. They argued that sweet potatoes were a healthier alternative to bread and there was, therefore, nothing wrong with the statement. In response, those opposed to the statement insisted that it was mocking the public and disrespecting their right to choose what they want to eat without being dictated to. This example reflects cognitive biases where people may uncritically accept what aligns with their tribe or neo-tribe's interests while being dismissive of everything that does not support their agenda (Clark et al., 2019). Discussions about corruption were prevalent in the commentary on all the pages. Examples of extensively discussed corruption topics were the 'Honeybee scandal' and the '48 houses', among several others. The Honeybee scandal (Mwebantu, 2021; Zambian Watchdog, 2021; Anti-Corruption Commission, 2021), as it came to be known, involved a contract worth over US$17 million in which a private company, Honeybee Pharmaceuticals, delivered to the Ministry of Health defective medical supplies such as expired drugs, and defective condoms and gloves. The case, which was investigated by the Anti-Corruption Commission, resulted in court processes and an appearance before the Public Accounts Parliamentary Committee. The Minister of Health was among the people who got fired. Many of the comments on the issue expressed anger at the number of lives endangered due to corruption, with some citing possible infection by sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV, and unplanned pregnancies, of members of the public who accessed the supplies in public health facilities. The reactions were largely united in condemning the delivery as well as the irregular manner in which the contract was awarded. It had emerged, during the investigation and eventual prosecution, that the nearly US$18 million contract was awarded before the company was registered and therefore the company did not exist at the time of being awarded the contract. Differing views defended certain individuals alleged to have participated, by arguing that these individuals were merely victims of political persecution and being set up. Another topical issue was a case of 48 houses, that the Anti-Corruption Commission investigated on suspicion of being proceeds of corruption. The case was later halted due to what the Commission said was its failure to find the owner. The '48 houses', as the case came to be infamously known as, was frequently cited as an example of corruption in the PF government and its lack of commitment to the eradication of corruption. These views – many expressed in strong terms – are an example of the volume of information people willingly share online and how that, in turn, allows easy access to and analysis of public opinion on a range of

issues, including political views of the voting public (Jaidka et al., 2019). Also prevalent in the discussions was Hichilema's role in the country's privatisation process; he was repeatedly accused of fraudulently enriching himself at the expense of the country. Hichilema had served as Lead Negotiator and Advisor to the government during the privatisation of state-owned enterprises in the early 1990s. He was accused by Nawakwi, a former minister of finance, of misleading the government and failing to declare interest when obtaining shares in privatised entities. The former minister made the allegations in several media appearances. More recent allegations against Hichilema in some posts and commentaries were that he was a "Western puppet" and would prioritise the interests of his foreign business partners over those of Zambians. The posts and associated comments deployed ethos arguments, questioning Hichilema's integrity and, in turn, suitability for the office of the President. The counter-arguments combined ethos and logos, defending Hichilema's character as well as presenting alternative explanations of the turn of events. Related to this line of debate, several commenters also alleged that Hichilema was seeking US$300,000 in campaign finance from a foreign mining conglomerate [Vedanta] in exchange for a local mine once he was elected. For context, the Copperbelt Province had 1,025, 897 registered voters in 2021, only second to Lusaka Province which had the highest number in the country at 1,243, 619 registered voters (Electoral Commission of Zambia, 2021). A summary of events that led to the protracted debate on mining is that on 7th August, 2021, just days before the elections on 12th August, President Lungu addressed miners in Kitwe, on the Copperbelt Province. In his address, Lungu accused Hichilema of soliciting USD$300,000 from Vedanta in exchange for giving them back Konkola Copper Mines (KCM) once elected. Lungu accused Hichilema of being unrepentant about his role in the country's privatisation exercise (another contentious topic) as seen from his alleged attempt to sell the country's mines again for his personal benefit. Lungu alleged that Hichilema was "determined to sell this country" and warned that once re-elected, he would arrest him if his role in the privatisation exercise was confirmed.

In 2019, Lungu's government took legal action to take over operations of KCM from Vedanta alleging tax evasion and failure to honour earlier promise of expansion plans (Sguazzin & Hill, 2019). The development was polarising with some calling it a populist move to use resource nationalism to distract citizens from prevailing economic woes and others, including labour unions, praising the decision (ibid). Soliciting money to rescind this decision as Hichilema was accused of was, therefore, capable of breaking a candidate. On 10th August, 2021, Hichilema issued a statement refuting Lungu's allegations and accusing him, instead, of preaching hatred

and lies as well as inciting people against him [Hichilema]. Hichilema alleged that the main problems in the mining sector were poor working conditions of locals, low production in the sector due to policy inconsistencies, poor leadership, and lack of supervision by President Lungu and his government. The posts and comments combined ethos and pathos arguments (Zachry, 2009), showing the emotive nature of mining as a topic and its deep connection to Zambian livelihoods, as well as reflecting Oc et al.'s (2018:2) assertion that "an election is an important type of resource competition". The allegations evoked extensive discussions and debates, with some commenters arguing that his business practices showed that he was not fit for public office while others argued that he was simply a victim of mudslinging. The latter argued that, given how desperate the PF government was to get rid of Hichilema, the government would have used the allegations to jail Hichilema had there been any truth to them. Here again, the commenters' names suggested that they were drawn from both Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi language blocs. Their political party affiliation, however, was not evident.

The many examples cited across the pages reflect Facebook both as alternative media and as an extension of the digital public sphere (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). The diverse comments and robust deliberations reflected a range of concepts that are of interest to the present study, such as Facebook as an extension of the public sphere, Facebook as an enabler of the circulation of fake news, Facebook as disruptive media, Facebook as a weaponised platform, and Facebook as a site for the formation of neo-tribes.

5.3 Conclusion

All other themes that did not fit in the two most recurrent listed above form a third category of posts. Some of the posts with the most interactions within this mixed category include Covid-19 updates, death notices, messages of condolences and football updates, particularly about Zambian football stars playing abroad. Also included in this category are comments that aligned with neither the post nor any of the discussions on the thread, such as people advertising their products and services, people posting the same comments praising their candidate repeatedly on multiple threads in a manner that suggested spamming, as well as grammatically incomprehensible comments. A prima facie analysis of the repetitive comments suggested deliberate deployment in, perhaps, the same way social bots are deployed to manipulate public opinion, artificially boost engagement on the post, and potentially alter audience perceptions

of political reality (Ndlela, 2020). The sample period had an uncharacteristically high number of deaths of citizens and public personalities, including the country's first president, the Chief Justice, and current and former members of Parliament. Some deaths were announced as Covid-19-related deaths while others were not.

This chapter presented a summary of data collected from five Facebook pages, namely: Edgar Chagwa Lungu, Smart Eagles, Mwebantu Media, Hakainde Hichilema, and Zambian Watchdog. The next chapter presents a description and discussion of the data collected in the focus group discussions.

Chapter Six: Data Presentation and Analysis – Focus Group Discussions

The previous chapter presented a summary and discussion of the Facebook posts and accompanying comments that formed the sample for the thematic content analysis. This chapter presents a summary and discussion of the two focus group discussions I conducted. One group comprised pro-UPND/Hichilema voters who belong to the Bemba/Nyanja language group, also referred to in this thesis as swing voters, while the other comprised pro-UPND/Hichilema voters who belong to the Tonga/Lozi language group. The third focus group was to comprise pro-PF/Lungu supporters who belonged to the Bemba/Nyanja language group. This group, however, could not be convened due to privacy and security concerns raised by the selected participants, as explained in Chapter Four. Consequently, the participants were interviewed individually, and the relevant data and discussion are presented in the next chapter.

In the following account of the discussions held in the two pro-UPND focus groups, participants from the Bemba/Nyanja language group are coded as BN and are numbered 1 to 8 according to the order in which they first spoke. Participants from the Tonga/Lozi language group are coded as TL and are similarly numbered 1 to 8. The responses, some paraphrased and others quoted verbatim, are consolidated under each question, with similar themes clustered in sections. After I clustered the responses, the sequence in which participants appear is different from when they first spoke and how they were numbered. I opted to present and discuss the data from both groups jointly, on the assumption that they are a political neo-tribe and to see the extent of similarities and differences in this neo-tribe beyond the similarity in political affiliation and the difference in ethnic affiliation.

6.1 Facebook

This section presents discussions on why participants followed the Facebook pages they did, what criteria participants used to decide which Facebook pages to comment on, and how participants related with other Facebook users. The reasons for why participants followed the Facebook pages they did fell within one of four themes, namely: information-seeking; community/belonging; engagement/influencing; and resonance. These four themes were identified in responses from both focus groups. Some responses fell under more than one theme and are captured as such. One of the themes that emerged from the responses was the

participants' desire to get information in real-time as well as stay up-to-date with what was unfolding on the electoral and political front in general. *BN-1, BN-2, TL-1, and TL-4* shared that they followed the Facebook pages they did in order to access credible news and other election-related updates in one place. *TL-1* cited "the convenience of getting all updates in one place and not having to go from source to source in order to know what was going on" as a key determining factor in his decision. *BN-1* explained that one of his key requirements for following a page was first ensuring that the page posted credible news and took verification and fact-checking seriously. *BN-3* and *TL-5* followed the pages they did in order to get real-time updates and know what was going on. *TL-5* explained that Facebook pages were consistently breaking news and sharing updates as they happened, unlike traditional media channels such as radio and TV which had scheduled times for news broadcasts. The use of a social media platform as a primary source of information on elections and other breaking news, as shared by some focus group participants, highlights the game-changing role of social media in political communication (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). In Zambia, members of the public responded particularly to the severely restricted mainstream media environment during the 2016 elections by turning to social media for their information needs during the election cycle (Goldring & Wahman, 2016; Willems, 2016). In a different set of circumstances, the 2021 elections were held during the Covid-19 pandemic and in a political environment where the incumbent, President Lungu, severely restricted the campaign activities of the main opposition leader, Hichilema (Sishuwa, 2022). Restrictions on movement and face-to-face interactions due to Covid-19 forced an increased reliance on social media for information (Chenoweth, 2022).

Part of the appeal of getting news and other updates in real time is found in citizens' ability to interact directly with different candidates, which is an example of social media's disruption of traditional gatekeeping (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). *TL-7* cites her ability to get information directly from the different presidential and parliamentary candidates, and engage them where necessary, as the main reason for following the pages she did. She says she was aware that the candidates "were not always the ones posting and interacting with us but I believe they were involved in some way. I believe they read our comments and whenever they could not respond themselves, they told their assistants what to say." *TL-7* feels this was progressive as candidates could get a real sense of what the electorate's expectations were and the electorate could have more opportunities to assess if the candidates were up to the office they sought or not. Disintermediation, as reflected by *TL-7*'s experience, falls within the cyber-optimistic narrative

where social media is hailed for its ability to facilitate interaction between candidates and their electorate (Pierskalla, 2013). This interaction between candidates and the electorate has a positive impact on political engagements and civic outcomes (Bode & Dalrymple, 2017), as noted by *TL-7*. The consequences of such access and direct interaction between politicians and citizens are, however, not always positive. For example, disintermediation of political communication means a political actor can disseminate populist propaganda directly to citizens, without a traditional gatekeeper, such as mainstream media, providing possible counters to the propaganda. There are several accounts in the literature of the connection between social media and populism, with the election of Donald Trump as president of the US typically cited as an example (Gerbaudo, 2018). Unlike *TL-7*'s positive experience, candidates do not always respond to user comments and questions (Bosch et al., 2020). For example, on many posts there was an observable pattern on both Lungu and Hichilema's Facebook pages of users just interacting amongst themselves in the comments with neither the participation of nor acknowledgement by the candidates.

Some of the focus group discussants acknowledge social media as a meeting place for diverse people and views, providing opportunities for quick access to information, learning and interaction (O'Lynn, 2023). *BN-2* says she followed the pages she did because they were very active in terms of updates and commentary and, as such, there was always something to learn and comment on. As she notes, "Information assumes extra importance during an election period so I was particularly interested in those pages that were very active, posting real-time updates and giving the kind of news and analyses that I wanted to hear." *BN-2*'s comment on choosing what she wanted to hear resonates with a broader discussion on the role of social media in the proliferation of information sources that citizens can choose from and, in the process, potentially insulate themselves from perspectives that do not favour their choice (Cinelli, 2021). *TL-6,* on the other hand, says he followed both the UPND – the party he supported in the elections – and PF pages in order to gauge public sentiment on the two leading presidential candidates. He says the comments by members of the public were "the real opinion polls" and could be used to tell how people were likely to vote in August 2021. In the literature, Jaidka et al. (2019) posit that social media provides an opportunity to aggregate and analyse public opinion in an unobtrusive manner due to the volume of personal information, including political views, voluntarily shared online. The extent to which public opinion gathered in this manner can be used to predict election outcomes remains uncertain. Not all voters are on social media and among those that are, not everyone publicly states their affiliation or shares political

views from which a position may be inferred. Participants whose responses fell within the information-seeking theme cited Facebook as a leading source of useful election-related news, a meeting place for the expression and consumption of different views, as well as a platform for direct interaction between the electorate and candidates. These sentiments fall within the broader narrative of cyber-optimism and social media as an enabler of democracy (Ndlela & Mano, 2020).

Some participants, in both the Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi pro-opposition focus groups, recognise Facebook's ability to connect them to users with shared interests. They cite the reason for following the different Facebook pages they did as their desire to belong to, as well as forge, a community. This is indicative of individuals deliberately seeking out neo-tribes mediated by social media. The participants cite public deliberation through Facebook and like-mindedness as the basis of the community they sought to belong to. *BN-5, BN-8, TL-2* and *TL-4* say they followed the different pages they did to connect with like-minded people. *BN-5* explains that it was important for him to identify a community where the content could be trusted, especially in light of the widespread propaganda being pushed out at the time. He asserts, "I joined a community of like-minds and together we shared a space where the content was independent, critical and uncensored. I avoided following any propaganda pages." *TL-2* shares that he followed UPND pages to be part of a community of supporters like himself. He also followed PF pages "to check what they were posting and challenge them when necessary". *BN-8,* a first-time voter, says he needed motivation to vote for UPND. As he recalls, Facebook was the only place where he could be part of a UPND community. He recalls, "I needed that motivation and solidarity because my parents were against my candidate. Seeing more experienced voters support HH on Facebook gave me confidence in my choice. I felt a strong sense of belonging in that [Facebook] community." The dynamic of parents of one ethnic group not supporting their child's candidate of a different ethnic group is also shared by another participant. The dynamic, and how participants navigate it by seeking out a tribe of shared interests, highlights one of the key differences between ethnic tribes and neo-tribes, where belonging to the former is by birth and the latter by choice. BN-4 and TL-5 followed the pages they did because of the community created in the comment sections. *BN-4* followed pages belonging to different political parties because she enjoyed both following and contributing to the comment section. Similarly, *TL-5* found participating in discussions with like-minded, and sometimes more knowledgeable, people enlightening. As a number of respondents said, some of the discussions in Facebook communities evolved into networks of people who would

discuss topics privately, invite each other to political events and even hold physical meetings. On this point, *TL-5* recalled how people he had met through the comment sections on Facebook pages would identify a subject of interest, such as a politician holding a Facebook Live broadcast and they would tag him so he too could watch and comment. He notes,

> I think many of the people in the different citizen-led political fora we had in the country at the time got together through Facebook. Sometimes you would have an extended debate or discussion with someone on a comment thread only to later receive a private message from them inviting you to a WhatsApp group.

The theme of community – as well as references to belonging and solidarity – particularly resonates in this study with my interest in online neo-tribes. The experiences of focus group participants whose responses fall in this theme suggest that Facebook served as a platform for the conduct of affectual politics where participants bonded over feelings of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi, 2015). It is standard neo-tribal practice for groups to form around shared interests or activities (Meling, 2020). In some instances, participants from different language groups identify the Facebook pages as communities of "like-minds". For these participants, ethnic tribe was neither a qualifying nor disqualifying factor in their identification of "like-minds".

According to responses in the two focus group discussions, some of the participants were online to engage with fellow Facebook users and to actively support and campaign for their parties and candidates of choice. *BN-7* says, "I followed the pages to market my candidates by sharing their posts to my own profile and networks, tagging different people in posts, comments and live videos. I also used to invite people to follow the pages." *BN-6* asserts that politics is a game of numbers and it was important for supporters to be visible in large numbers on Facebook. According to him, "Following the pages in large numbers was an important show of solidarity to our candidates and party. The same high numbers served a second purpose of giving confidence to more people from other parties to also follow." These points align with social media's disruptive influence on political communication and campaigning (Ndlela & Mano, 2020), enabling private individuals to occupy public digital spaces and spread their messages. *TL-2* also states how important it was for parties to actively influence users online, either by setting down narratives favourable to their interests or by challenging what was initiated by other parties. He recalls, "I followed the opposition pages to monitor what they were posting

about UPND and correct any false information. This was as good as a full-time job because PF was posting a lot of fake news about UPND and HH." Both pro-incumbent and pro-opposition participants accuse each other of spreading fake news (the pro-incumbent interview data are presented in the next chapter). The use of Facebook to spread fake news is an example of weaponising social media for political ends (Hassan, 2023). Sometimes powerful actors adopt the strategy by infiltrating social media with a favoured agenda, propaganda and disinformation, in what Morozov (2011) terms spinternet. One of the participants in this category says they were paid to promote the UPND party on social media while the others said they were not paid. The participants recognised and utilised Facebook as a platform for political acclamation where public opinion can be mass-mediated and where approval and disapproval of political figures can be voiced (see Dean, 2017). *BN-2, BN-5* and *TL-3* share that they followed the Facebook pages they did because the messaging resonated with their own preference. *BN-2* says the information shared on the pages was relatable. *BN-5* observes, "The pages I followed did not post propaganda, unlike the typical pages run by political parties." *TL-3* says the pages she followed portrayed her party and candidates in the way she wanted. This, she says, was important because "many other pages were posting exaggerated and intentionally offensive content about HH and I made it a point not to give them an audience". This point of view reflects what Triandafyllidou (2020) argues is social media's role in taking users back to a tribal and closed understanding of the world. It represents a form of tribal bias that may motivate people to only select information favourable to their tribe's interests, potentially creating echo chambers and deepening polarisation (Bakshy et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2019).

The participants whose responses fell in the theme of engaging with fellow users and campaigning for their candidates were also driven by a sense of relatability and, to an extent, belonging. All the responses illustrate that the act of following a Facebook page was motivated by different reasons. As Kearney (2017:4) posits, "Different reasons for political use of social media have been linked to different activities with different purposes, including information-seeking (e.g., following political candidates), social interaction (e.g., online discussion) and political participation (e.g., contacting officials or organizing events)".

The second question in this section probed the criteria participants used to decide which Facebook page(s) to comment on. The responses established two main criteria for commenting, namely: topics of interest published on pages that the participants followed; and topics of interest published on any page, whether followed by the participants or not. *BN-3* says she

limited her comments to pages she followed, which she considered an existing network. She says sometimes she would see an interesting post on a Facebook page she did not follow and would not comment but she would, instead, share the same post on her WhatsApp status and hold a discussion there. She elaborates:

> The election period was an emotional time and many people were easily triggered so I avoided commenting on pages I did not follow and only engaged people I knew through previous interactions. If a post was interesting but I was not familiar with the source, I would take it to my network on WhatsApp and have a discussion from there instead.

BN-3's description of not commenting publicly on certain posts, and instead doing so in a smaller private group, suggests an element of self-censorship due to a fear of backlash (Fukuyama, 2018). This raises an interesting thought on the number of comments that may have been withheld from public view in a similar manner, and the implications for public deliberation in a democracy. Secondly, *BN-3*'s submission points to trust, a critical element in how neo-tribes and other in-groups interact with each other. As Chodak (2016:278) elaborates, "the process of constructing collective identity [such as neo-tribes] involves the emergence of new relations of trust between actors from different social environments". This building of trust is accompanied by the development of informal networks of communication, interaction and mutual support. In this example, *BN-3* trusts her smaller private network more than public Facebook pages that she did not follow. BN-8 recounts a similar experience of "tempers easily flaring" in comment sections on Facebook and his decision to only discuss certain posts in the privacy of his own networks. The scenario shared by *BN-8* reflects an aspect of affective publics where expression is not limited to solidarity and empathy but also includes outrage at times (Lünenborg, 2019). Papacharissi (2015), who introduced the term 'affective publics', posits that, while technology may network users, it is narratives that connect users to each other, and make individuals feel close to some and distance from others. TL-4 shares a similar view: "Pages had their own communities and it was easy to be misunderstood if you commented on random pages where the members did not have a relationship with you." TL-6 says he only commented on some pages and opted to be silent on others even though he followed them. He explains that, "Some pages were not as accommodating of different views as others, so I tended to avoid commenting and instead just read the posts and views that

followed." This example reflects a recognition of one's place in relation to other users, and specifically how understanding within one's neo-tribe may be misunderstanding in another group. There was a relationship of trust between *TL-6* and some pages; a relationship of trust is a necessary characteristic of neo-tribes (Chodak, 2016). Some participants gave examples of the specific experiences they had on Facebook that made them limit the scope of their comments. Some of the experiences shared included harassment both on public comments threads and privately via Messenger. These responses suggest that participants may have self-censored and limited the expression of divergent views due to their fear of harassment by other Facebook users. Online bullying, intimidation and harassment targeted at certain users may create a hostile environment that hinders participation and freedom of expression (Roberts & Lincoln, 2018). Facebook could also have placed people in echo chambers where they either only accessed views that were deemed acceptable or only engaged with fellow Facebook users who expressed similar ideas and views. Participants identifying their own networks where they felt connected and, therefore, comfortable enough to express views that they could not share publicly suggests their recognition of their neo-tribes. There is an element of homophily where participants gravitate towards those members they feel they have the most in common with (Gillani et al., 2018). Homophily is the organising principle behind many digital social networks, neo-tribes in the case of this study, and can amplify tribal mindsets and create echo chambers (ibid). Furthermore, the users' experiences show that social media not only enable quick access to content but also build relationships between and among users, allow for interactivity and extend the reach of content (O'Lynn, 2023).

The other participants did not limit their comments to the Facebook pages they followed. *BN-1* and *BN-6* say they commented on any post that was topical at the time, regardless of the page, as long as it was verified information. As *BN-1* observes, "The internet is a global village and when people shared topical posts from pages I did not follow, I still commented. My main criteria was whether the information was verified or not because I was avoiding potentially participating in propaganda." Similarly, *BN-6* reiterates how important it was to ensure the source of information was credible before commenting on posts on pages he did not follow. As he recalls, "There was a lot of propaganda and fake news so I was careful when commenting on pages I did not follow. I did not want to inadvertently contribute to the spread of fake news by commenting on it." *BN-1* and *BN-6*'s observations fall within the neo-tribal experience of organising around shared beliefs and customs, and being able to trust the motivations of other members (Chodak, 2016; Clark et al., 2019). *TL-2* and *BN-7* say they did not follow PF pages

but regularly commented on their posts. According to *BN-7*, PF pages were the best platforms to challenge propaganda against UPND and win new supporters. She asserts, "Sometimes I commented more on PF pages than our own UPND pages because one of the best ways to grow numbers was by winning over supporters of other parties." *TL-2* and *BN-7*'s experiences point to a neo-tribal instinct to defend in-group interests against perceived out-group threats, in this case propaganda (Hibbing, 2021). The experiences also point to inter-group competition, in this case wanting to win voters from the opponent's camp (Abbink & Harris, 2019). Like *BN-1*, *TL-5* shares how some posts from pages he did not follow were brought to his attention by Facebook friends: "Friends would tag me in a post of interest and we would have a discussion on that same thread even though we did not follow the page. The content – as long as it was verified – mattered more than the source." A typical neo-tribe experience would prioritise source, i.e. in-group, over content; nevertheless, *TL-5*'s experience resonates with the unstable and fluid nature of neo-tribes (Clay, 2018; Hardy, 2020). *TL-5* further shares how some posts appeared on his timeline in the following ways: whenever a Facebook friend commented on a post, when a post was suggested by Facebook, or when a post was sponsored by the publishing page. This response is an example of how algorithms can contribute to creating filter bubbles and echo chambers. Users affected by algorithms may become disconnected from content outside their bubble, and end up reinforcing their existing beliefs (TechTarget, 2018). Ndlela (2020) argues that the impact of algorithms on election campaigns is felt not only in the West but also by emerging African democracies. He argues that, in Africa, social media amplifies echo chambers and filter bubbles that may be organised according to ethnicity, political affiliations and ideological inclinations (ibid). *TL-5*'s response is also an example of how online platforms can influence the circulation of political communication and, in turn, play an increasingly important role in shaping democracy (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2022).

Overall, the responses show the frequently discussed interconnectedness that social media platforms enable. In this case, Facebook made it possible for some participants not only to access information that was outside their pre-selected network (outside the pages that they *chose* to follow) but also to share their views and join in discussions. It provided users an opportunity to both receive information and produce it (Biancalina, 2022:30).

The final question in this section asked how the participants in the two focus groups related with other Facebook users who also engaged regularly. I have placed the responses in three main themes, namely: positive, neutral and negative. Some participants' experiences are

captured in more than one theme. The responses that fell under the positive theme had sub-themes of tribe, humour, community and public deliberation. *BN-4* shares how she enjoyed commenting on the Facebook live broadcasts by the two main presidential candidates, Lungu and Hichilema. She recalls, "I would ask rhetorical questions that would get many people responding and debating. It was always insightful but also interesting to see how varied people's views on the same issue tended to be." *BN-3* shares how she and other users got to know each other and created an online community that constantly interacted, and raised and debated issues. "We also dissected political developments as they were being reported. Twitter was the same," she adds. *TL-2* notes that the relationship was so cordial on some pages that sometimes users joked with each other more than they debated. He adds that it was an insightful relationship where people of diverse backgrounds with their different knowledge, ideas and views gathered in that one place. The experiences cited reflect the neo-tribal characteristics of bonding over shared interests, the need for connection, and a shared sense of identity, beliefs and customs (Musvosvi, 2010; Clark et al., 2019).

The responses under the neutral theme were neither outright positive nor negative. *TL-1* feels the difference in the level of knowledge and understanding was too significant to allow for meaningful interaction between certain users. As he recalls, "I commented often but only interacted with a few people because many tended to exhibit ignorance even of basic issues. You would find a person arguing the whole day on a non-existent premise. I decided it was not worth engaging." This point of view reflects an interesting debate in the theorisation of social media as an extension of the digital public sphere, and particularly what qualifies as rational and democratically legitimate communication (see Dahlberg, 2007). *TL-1*'s observation begs reflection on the importance of situating conceptions of the public sphere within the broader context of the developmental nature of society (Susen, 2012). In Zambia's case, differences in levels of education, general literacy and political consciousness are bound to show in Facebook interactions. *BN-7* shares that she typically enjoyed a good relationship with her fellow UPND supporters but that it was not the same with PF supporters. This is consistent with typical in-group congeniality and out-group conflict (Clark et al., 2019). As *TL-3* explains, the relationship between users was not always about discussions. She states, "I would say we, sometimes, had silent relationships where even though we did not interact with each other often, you always looked out for their comments. We even knew the people most likely to comment depending on the topic." This experience points to an enactment of the neo-tribal concepts of belonging and proxemics, where users experience proximity to each other in either

physical or virtual ways, as in *TL-3*'s case (Riley et al., 2010). *TL-3* and *BN-2* say they were known for calling out fellow users who posted tribalist content, regardless of their tribe or political affiliation. *BN-2* shares how, long before elections, she joined a Tonga group on Facebook to learn more about her husband's tribe and culture. She says,

> During the election period, what was a cultural and social group turned political and, sometimes, tribal. Whenever I saw this, I would confront the members and condemn the tribal comments. I would also speak against tribalism whenever it came up in the Bemba groups I was in.

BN-2's experience suggests a shift from a neo-tribal group that had come together over shared cultural and social interests to a tribal one organising over politics and ethnicity. Groups that form around identity, ethnicity and homogeneity can evoke ferocious tribalism (Hibbing, 2021). *BN-2*'s reaction to what she perceived as ethnic tribalism is consistent with the prevalent thinking in the data across all five pages of the study that tribalism is wrong. It might be necessary to interrogate the extent to which fear of moral opprobrium might inhibit the expression of people's real views on tribe, and the implications for free speech and rational discourse as elements of democracy (Fukuyama, 2018). *TL-3* shares a similar experience of calling out both UPND and PF supporters who expressed tribal views on the pages she followed. The responses under this theme had sub-themes of propaganda, tribalism, hate speech and hostility. *BN-5* says he was sceptical of pages that had similar messaging and he made it a point to only believe their posts if they were supported by official confirmation such as an officially issued press statement or police statement, or if they were attributed to a traceable authority. "I could easily tell [the similar messaging] was scripted and the pages were just parroting. Some were obviously part of party machinery and I took all content with a pinch of salt and rubbished everything unless it was supported," he says. This observation suggests some content was placed as part of a deliberate strategy by powerful actors, such as political parties, to influence public discourse, disseminate preferred political narratives and potentially manipulate public opinion through false or misleading information (Morozov, 2011). *BN-4* says she avoided reacting to certain comments because there was a lot of hate speech on social media. She observes: "Social media really exposed our tribal side as Zambians. I was always surprised by how many likes tribal posts and comments would get. I did not interact with any posts that either pushed out or defended tribal commentary." This observation points to the

active existence of groups that mobilised on the basis of ethnic tribes. It also references "likes", and how the commenter understands them as a show of agreement, reflecting this social media practice as a form of political acclamation (Dean, 2017).

TL-6 says he had strained relations with PF supporters, and he believes he was picked on as often as he was because of his Tonga name. He asserts, "The PF pages were quite hostile and no matter how respectful your comment, as long as you did not agree with them, you would get insulted. My name [Tonga name] also got me a lot of abuse." He is of the view that tribalism on Facebook did not just manifest in the way people spoke but also how they targeted and treated tribes like his (Tonga). While the two focus groups were both pro-UPND and held similar views on several issues, some experiences, such as tribalism, were different. *TL-6*'s experience suggests a combination of online bullying and tribalism. Some users target others with bullying and intimidation, creating a hostile environment for the targeted people to the point of failing to participate freely in online deliberations (Roberts & Lincoln, 2018). The reason for *TL-6* being targeted by bullying suggests the tribal mindset of only seeing members of the same tribe as people and disparaging members of other tribes as inferior (Musvosvi, 2010).

TL-8 is of the view that some people were just on Facebook to deliberately antagonise and keep others from discussing "sensible things". She particularly finds it suspicious that the same people always seemed to be at the centre of arguments on almost every major page. During this part of the discussion, some participants mentioned names of some regular commenters who were antagonistic and others joined in reminiscing on the different interactions that stood out for them, including specific disagreements they either witnessed or participated in. Others recalled how some regular commenters had assumed the role of peacemaker, encouraging respectful debate regardless of the parties involved in a heated argument.

6.2 Misinformation and Disinformation

This section presents discussions on participants' experience with fake news during the election period, their reactions to fake news, and who they think participated in the dissemination of fake news.

Some participants say they did not encounter fake news online during the election period. *BN-2* says she did not encounter fake news but encountered a lot of fake images. She gave an example of how some political parties would post pictures of rallies with large crowds while

their actual rally would have been poorly attended and much smaller. This response highlights what may be different understandings and definitions of what fake news is. *TL-5* says he does not believe he encountered any fake news. He argues, "I observed a pattern where any time news that was inconvenient to any political party was published, they would claim it was fake. In essence, the news was not fake, just inconvenient." *TL-8* agrees that news that negatively exposed the party in government or expressed a divergent view was typically dismissed as fake. These submissions are interesting because they contradict a common claim by the UPND that the party and its presidential candidate were unfairly targeted with fake news. They do, however, align with Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) assertion that the term fake news is misappropriated by politicians and others to describe news they find disagreeable. *BN-5* says she encountered fake news in different circumstances. She recounts how she once witnessed a politician go live on Facebook and claim there was a riot and heavy police presence in the Central Business District (CBD). The claims, she recounts, caused people who had tuned in to his live broadcast to start running to safety and consequently creating commotion in the CBD and surrounding areas. "We too got caught up in the commotion and had to close down operations at my workplace and leave, only to later learn the entire situation was caused by the politician's false live update", *BN-5* narrates. This is an example of how the ubiquity of social media can be applied in a negative way (Popham, 2018). *TL-4* says she encountered fake news on almost a daily basis. "HH was a big target with distorted accounts of his role in the country's privatisation process, how he got his wealth, how he treated his family and many other things that have been proved false over the years", she shares. *BN-3* narrates her encounter with false news in the immediate post-election/results announcement period. She recalls how several Facebook pages ran a story that a media personality had won the parliamentary seat he contested, and many people proceeded to congratulate him. The official results later revealed that he had, in fact, lost. *TL-1* says he encountered many instances of fake news, especially closer to election date when many new Facebook pages came on the scene. As he recalls, "You would find a page only publishes stories about one candidate and all the stories would be very damaging. It was easy to tell that the stories were fake but the engagements showed that many people believed them". *BN-6* shares a similar account of new Facebook pages coming up just before the elections and targeting specific candidates. The discussions under this theme show how the participants in the focus groups, with the same political affiliation and following the same pages, experienced the same platform differently. Fake news was flagged by many as a concern before, during and after the elections. Some participants, however, reported never encountering it during the election period while others reported the opposite. Some made a

distinction between fake news and fake images. Others went on to interrogate the probable purpose of spreading fake news, with a few categorising it as a propaganda tool. The difference in experiences while using the same social media platform raises such questions as whether some people were in echo chambers where they had their own unique experience, or whether they were using different subjectivities and knowledge in the identification and categorisation of news as either fake or genuine. If the latter, then it was possible to encounter the same news and categorise it differently.

This follow-up theme discussed participants' reaction to the presence of fake news and how they thought it would affect the elections. Some participants expressed worry over the presence of fake news on Facebook and its possible impact on the elections. *BN-1* shares how, in previous elections, it was not uncommon for a political party to rally supporters and win votes based on how catchy or danceable their campaign songs were. He explains, "I was worried that fake news might influence vote choice even more than campaign songs previously had. I was particularly worried that fake news would make some traditional HH supporters change their minds and how they voted." *BN-4* says she was worried because many pages on Facebook were not credible and did not hold back when it came to publishing fake news. She observes, "There was a lot of irresponsible posting with neither regulation nor consequences for the perpetrators. Many such pages deliberately put pictures with no caption and left people to speculate or form opinions on fake news/pictures." She adds that the published fake news spread fast and became the focus of attention, driving discussions both online and offline for several days at a time. *BN-7* says, considering how electoral choices impact lives in a real way, she found it worrying that some people would potentially base their choice of candidates on fake news and other dishonest representations. She asserts that the ruling PF based a large part of their campaign on creating and spreading fake news about Hichilema, the UPND candidate. This, she says, was a source of more worry as she feared Hichilema would end up losing supporters, and ultimately votes, due to such strategies. *BN-4* and *BN-7* share how they felt the prevalence of fake news had the potential to undermine the credibility of the entire election because some people were using it as a basis for either backing or shunning candidates. *TL-2* says one of his main concerns was how difficult it was to identify certain news as fake. He says he encountered several manipulated pictures, videos and audio files that he could easily tell were fake but his concern lay in the ones that were not easy to identify. As he admits, "to this day, there are certain posts I still cannot tell with certainty whether they were fake or genuine. My guess would be that some fake news was professionally produced and, therefore, harder to recognise

as such".TL-6 also shares the view that fake news was professionally produced and spread. He suspects that fake news was a tool the PF government used to divert people's attention from real issues such as political violence, rampant corruption and poverty. He asserts,

> For example, at a time when we had such issues as the government supplying expired drugs, defective condoms, waging violence against its own citizens, etc., you find the majority of people just talking about how HH allegedly got rich from privatisation or how he grabbed someone's cattle.

BN-8 says he was frustrated by what seemed like a lack of deliberate effort by UPND to counter fake news targeted at the party and its candidate. He says he would have appreciated a more active and deliberate approach to setting the record right. "In such a tight election, every vote counted and needed to be protected against those compelling lies. It may not show since we won but I believe we lost many votes due to the absence of official counter-narratives." A common sub-theme in the responses was how political violence was a consequence of fake news. TL-3,for example, says fake news on Facebook transcended into hostility both online and offline. She says, "Some people were killed and many others attacked because of the fake news that was being spread. Innocent lives were lost and there should have been consequences for that kind of behaviour."

The responses under this theme show that some participants were not only aware of the prevalence of fake news on Facebook during the election period, but were also worried about the possible implications. The theme resonates with one of my research questions on the presence of disruptive voices and the implications for nascent democracies.

Some of the participants say they were not concerned about fake news affecting the elections in any way. *TL-5* says he was aware of several concerns about the presence of fake news on social media and in public discourse, but he did not share any of the concerns. He says it is typical of Zambians online to follow and "obsess over a story for a few days and then forget all about it." He adds, "Electoral decisions, on the other hand, came from long-term experiences that people had had enough of. If you are voting against poverty, corruption, violence, you cannot change your vote just because of some fake stories." *BN-6* shared the view that people were voting on bigger issues that affected day-to-day life such as high unemployment, high cost of living, lack of proper healthcare, corruption and political violence. He did not, therefore,

believe fake news was important enough to affect the election process. *TL-8* feels the number of people exposed to fake news on Facebook was a very small percentage of the total number of voters in the country. She asserts, "My view was, for fake news to affect the vote, it would have required unrealistic circumstances like convincing every voter online and they, in turn, convincing their networks who were not on social media". The respondents whose views fell under this sub-theme did not believe fake news on Facebook to be capable of affecting the process and outcome of the 2021 elections.

The last theme in this section was a follow-up discussion in only the TL group. Earlier in the discussion, UPND was mentioned several times as a target and victim of fake news. The follow-up discussion sought to get TL participants' views on whether they thought UPND also participated in the dissemination of fake news or not. Politics, as a prominent form of inter-group conflict, can elicit significant cognitive biases in its political party members (Clark et al., 2019). It was, therefore, necessary to establish whether political affiliation played a role in the participants' identification of fake news. The responses fell into two sub-themes, with some respondents stating that UPND participated and others stating that it did not. Participants gave different reasons for their view that UPND participated in the dissemination of fake news. According to *TL-1*, UPND's participation was a case of demand and supply. He states,

> I think the general public created such a demand for sensational and, at times, outright false information. I did not support it, and still do not, but the reality is that such news drew some of the highest numbers to Facebook pages.

TL-6 shares a similar view that the party's participation was in response to public demand. "The Zambian Watchdog [pro-UPND page] posted sensationalist and outright fake news from time to time. I think it was a case of 'if you can't beat them, join them'", he says. *TL-3* believes it was a matter of the party unknowingly receiving wrong information and then sharing it. She says she saw some posts on Hichilema's page which later turned out to be false but is convinced that they could not have been intentionally shared.

The other participants gave their reasons for believing UPND did not participate in the dissemination of fake news during the election period. *TL-5* says the PF government was looking for any reason to kill the opposition and, had UPND participated in spreading fake news, the government would have had the perfect excuse to arrest everyone involved and weaken the party. "As you may recall, attempts were made over the years to charge and lock

people up, including President HH himself and some of his close associates. No known UPND members would have gotten away with spreading fake news," he concludes. *TL-4* says she cannot recall seeing fake news on official UPND pages or any other publicly visible platforms. She says her few encounters with fake news was in private WhatsApp groups created by UPND supporters. *BN-8* is also of the view that fake news was never part of UPND's strategy and, if any was shared, it was most likely that some supporters were misled into sharing fake news produced by others. This theme divided the opinions of the TL participants, with some convinced that UPND participated in the dissemination of fake news and others convinced that it did not participate. This contradiction could be a result of people accessing the same social media platform but with different understanding (Hall, 1980) or it could simply be a case of in-group bias influencing the positions people take on political matters (Clark et al., 2019; Hibbing, 2021). Fake news can potentially distort public discourse and electoral choices of the voting public. It is considered a big part of social media and is noted for its impact on public trust in the quality and credibility of information (Olan et al., 2020).

6.3 Online Deliberations

This section has three themes which participants in both focus groups discuss, namely the role of social media in the 2021 Zambian elections; the role of social media, if any, in vote choice; and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the participants' use of social media. The responses to the role participants considered social media to have played in the 2021 elections are consolidated under the sub-themes of censorship, political violence, mobilisation and solidarity. *BN-3* says that social media played a critical role in facilitating the expression of divergent views because the physical space in the country was very hostile. She shares how, in the pre-election period, she witnessed a woman being beaten up by "illiterate PF cadres" who saw her dressed in red and assumed it was UPND party regalia. *BN-3* shares, "The words on the t-shirt were just something else but the cadres could not read and just assumed it was a UPND t-shirt. Watching her get beaten up was very scary." *BN-3* shares another experience where she was getting ready to leave home in a green t-shirt [PF party colour] and her friend reminded her that it might not be safe as she could be mistaken for a PF cadre. She explains,

> I had to change my t-shirt before going outdoors because that is how hostile and unsafe physical spaces were. Social media, on the other hand, allowed us to publicly

> share our views on politics, views that we would not dare share in physical public spaces such as on public transport.

BN-1 says the government at the time did not anticipate the impact social media would have in the 2021 elections and how the youth would be at the forefront pushing the change agenda. He says the impact was so significant that the government panicked and shut down the internet. He asserts that, without social media, the youth mobilisation witnessed in the country would not have happened. He further asserts that, despite UPND not being covered in mainstream media due to government control, social media made it possible for people to know about Hichilema and follow everything he said and did online. *BN-1* believes social media helped some people make electoral decisions "because it kept us all informed and connected. All the popular commentary and slogans on social media such as 'bally' or 'bally will fix it' quickly spread off social media and even reached rural areas and villages." *TL-2* adds to the discussion on the role the youth played in mobilising and advocating for a change of government. He states that youths were convincing other people to vote for Hichilema because they felt they knew him personally through their constant interaction with him on social media. *TL-2* notes, "Through social media, the youths were able to directly tell HH what their challenges and expectations were and he, in turn, was telling them how he would improve their situation if elected." There was a general discussion in both groups of how Hichilema used social media to frequently interact with social media users and create what seemed like a personal relationship with them. *BN-3* weighs in again and shares how social media allowed Zambians in the diaspora and non-Zambians to contribute their views, some which were enlightening to voters based in Zambia. She shares, "When the internet was shut down in Zambia, someone from an organisation in west Africa that works to open the internet, reached out to me. That international solidarity was made possible because of social media." *TL-7* says social media brought voters together and provided "a much-needed platform" for the exchange of information and ideas. She says that, apart from enabling constant interaction between candidates and voters, social media made democratic processes more accessible and more appealing to younger people. She attributes the high number of young and first-time voters partly to social media making the elections fashionable. *TL-5* says that social media was the only place UPND could campaign freely and reach the voting public. "The PF government was attempting some form of 'one-party' state by wanting to be the only ones able to hold public

rallies, appear on TV and radio, travel anywhere in the country for campaigns, and so on," he asserts.

Some respondents viewed the role of social media in the 2021 Zambian elections as both positive and negative. The responses had sub-themes of fake news, lack of universal social media access, and political tensions. *TL-4* says social media had some positive elements to it, but it was largely a missed opportunity for enhancing democracy because of the presence of fake news. She says Zambia's democracy will only genuinely benefit from social media if everyone is required to have verifiable information and sources before sharing online. She is also of the view that the percentage of the voting population that had access to social media was too low to affect democracy in a tangible way. "We would need to get more people online for social media to serve us in a meaningful way," she says. *BN-2* says that, although social media had problematic elements such as Facebook pages not always giving accurate information, it played an important role in helping opposition parties, especially the UPND, campaign. She says the ruling PF wrongly assumed that they were placing the opposition at a disadvantage by disallowing public rallies, denying them space on public radio and TV, and shutting down private media that covered them. She notes, "What the PF did not know is that everyone was now gathering online, including people who normally would not. I used to see even my relatives who live in the village posting and commenting on political posts on Facebook." *BN-6* says social media was the ultimate test in political tolerance because of the freedom that all views, including divergent and "wrong ones" had. He says it was also a test in political tolerance because of the way some people would completely misunderstand a post or comment and take on the author in a hostile way. He says the political temperature was too high on Facebook and could have easily erupted both online and offline had election results gone differently. The peaceful aftermath, he asserts, was only due to the fact that many people seemed to like the UPND victory because they were tired of the PF government. "I wonder what would have happened had PF won? I believe the tension that had built up on Facebook would have easily turned into a disaster had PF won. This is how dangerous social media had become in 2021," he says. Related to this theme, some of the ways Zambians could use social media better in the 2026 elections was discussed. Some respondents feel that it is necessary to strengthen the positive aspects of social media use, such as quicker and cheaper dissemination of information and direct interaction between candidates and the electorate, in order to benefit from it in 2026.

The final theme in this section had responses that considered the role of social media as negative. *BN-4* says social media did more harm than good in the 2021 elections. She says, "I think we have been given social media at a time that we do not yet understand it. It was no wonder many of our problems during elections came from social media." She adds that social media had considerable problematic and false commentary that was adopted and shared widely, including off social media. She hopes for social media regulation during the next election period in 2026. She argues,

> I think we underestimated how far-reaching social media content was and how that made the problem of tribalism, fake news and other problematic content bigger. My parents, for example, are older and were not even active on Facebook but were always kept up-to-date with social media commentary by younger family members around them.

BN-4's reference to social media content being spread via word of mouth is a well-known phenomenon which Nyamnjoh (2005) calls radio trottoir (see also Wasserman, 2018). *BN-7* says the 2021 elections demonstrated that Zambia is not ready for unregulated social media and something needs to be done before the 2026 elections. She says there was an overwhelming amount of irresponsible content, such as tribal hate speech, that almost set the country ablaze. *TL-1* says people were spending too much time on social media at the expense of being productive. He says that, as a result, many people ended up being out of touch with reality on the ground and that, over time, this potentially deprived the country of participation in activities that could have had tangible impacts. *TL-1*'s observation aligns with Morozov's (2011) argument on what he calls 'clicktivism', where people engage in online activity such as sharing posts as a substitute for physical engagement. The foregoing discussion perpetuates the known debate of cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism. It also provides a middle ground in what can be considered cyber-realism.

This next follow-up discussion sought to establish how social media impacted the participants' voting choices, if at all. Some respondents say they were influenced by social media. The consolidated responses under this sub-theme are grouped as political intolerance, hooliganism and governance. *BN-4* says social media influenced her decision to vote UPND because of how much it exposed PF caderism. She says she was so tired of, every time she went online, seeing PF cadres breaking the law with no consequences, and decided she wanted them gone. She says, "My vote was always public; I was so tired of that government and its lawlessness. On election day, I was on the queue when the PF government shut down the internet and that

cemented my resolve to vote them out." She says she had initially questioned her own decision to vote for a Tonga person after all the backlash her choice was getting, but PF content on social media made her maintain her resolve to vote the PF out. This point of view reflects a typical in-group characteristic of coming together to improve chances of survival in an inter-group competition (Clark et al., 2019). *BN-3* shares the same sentiment and says she was influenced by social media because it exposed PF. She says she saw the lawlessness of cadres over and over and just knew the PF needed to be voted out of government. *BN-2* says she was influenced by both social media and her personal experience of PF. She says she felt the previous government was reducing educated people to mere cadres. She cites an example of a former minister of finance who, she says, "had been reduced to just mudslinging HH. There were more high-profile figures doing the same. This made me want to study who this HH was and in the process, I found he was a better candidate." She says her other influence was an encounter she had with PF cadres that tried to run her off the road. She says they insulted her very badly and went as far insulting her mother as well. "I vowed at that point to never vote for PF," she concludes. *TL-2* says he was influenced by social media because it enabled him to see a side of Hichilema that PF propaganda had made him believe did not exist. He says he found him relatable, in touch with citizen challenges on the ground and intelligent enough to drive the country to greater heights. *BN-1* says social media exposed a lot of irregularities in the PF administration such as corruption, violence, citizens being gassed in their homes and schools, and a student and others dying due to police brutality. He adds, "I knew continuing on that trajectory would not have allowed the peace we have now. I was also convinced by the UPND manifesto because it aligned with my ideals, like free education, NAPSA partial payment and other pro-poor policies." Responses under this sub-theme show that some participants were influenced by social media through its watchdog role. By revealing what may otherwise have gone unreported in mainstream media, some participants were able to decide against voting for the PF. This point advances my understanding of some of the possible motivations that brought users together in neo-tribes. *TL-2* and *TL-7* say they were influenced by the discrimination they faced as Tongas. *TL-2* says the PF government normalised discrimination against Tonga people, including in public service. She says, "We saw many family members and colleagues lose their jobs in government institutions because the PF believed all Tongas were pro-HH and therefore needing punishment. We lived in fear wondering who would be targeted next." She says her decision to vote for UPND was, therefore, influenced by her desire for a government that would treat all citizens as equal. *TL-2*'s submission, like other tribe-motivated experiences, marks an important difference between

BN and TL participants. *BN-6* says he was influenced by his experience as an activist working to hold power to account. He says any time his team expressed a divergent view, people would warn them not to get 'on the government's bad side'. He says the experience made him realise Zambia was no longer a democracy and people were living in fear. He says he decided to read the manifestoes of the different political parties and concluded that the UPND manifesto was the most relatable. *BN-5* says he was not influenced by social media but by his desire to see the PF government go. He says that for him it was a question of identifying and rallying behind the candidate who had the highest chance of dislodging the PF. "After making that decision, even my social media activities were all tuned to helping that candidate gain more traction," he says. Overall, the views expressed suggest that social media and personal experience influenced some participants to vote against the PF. This is a form of negative democracy where you vote for a candidate as a way of voting against their opponent. The responses also showed participants who voted for the UPND's Hichilema because they believed him to be the best candidate.

The final discussion in this section sought to establish how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the participants' social media use, if at all. It was raised as a follow-up to the discussion in the Bemba/Nyanja focus group on what drove people to social media during the 2021 election period. *BN-3* shares that she was largely isolated and not in employment during the Covid-19 lockdown and that resulted in her being online more than usual. She says, "I was affected positively because I made so many connections online and, by the time the elections came, I had a much bigger network that I interacted with more than I had ever had before." *BN-2* recounts how she had Covid-19 twice and, consequently, spent a considerable amount of time in isolation. She says social media was welcome company during that time, resulting in her spending more time online than she normally did before. *BN-1* says he was an essential worker and Covid-19 worked to his advantage with regard to online interactions. He says his usual physical interactions were now limited by public health guidelines leading him to spend more time online and, in the process, meet many like-minded people whom he still interacts with. *BN-5* asserts that the government at the time used Covid-19 to physically separate citizens from each other and from the opposition candidates. "They [the PF government] bought all the media space and dominated all public spaces to silence the opposition, and what this ended up doing was push me to social media to find alternative information as well as to seek out like-minds," he says. *BN-8* shares a similar experience and states that Covid-19 pushed many people to find unregulated and uncensored media, share ideas and mobilise away from mainstream media and

spaces that the government had dominated in its attempt to stifle opposition. He says the pandemic made him spend more time on social media and connect with a bigger network than before. *BN-7* says the Covid-19 pandemic made her spend less time on social media. "There was an extended period of time during Covid-19 when social media was full of death notices and that was very unsettling for me. I made a decision to limit my time online so I could see less death," she says. Some participants did not experience any change in their social media use on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. *BN-4* says she was an essential worker during the lockdown and did not experience isolation or any downtime. She says her online presence and interactions remained the same. *BN-6* says his use of social media was the same as before Covid-19. He says he used the free time from the lockdown to read hardcopy novels, which was a hobby he had missed.

6.4 Tribalism

The discussion summarised in this section sought to establish what participants' reactions were to the campaign messages based on tribe that were shared online during the 2021 election period. This part had some of the most engaged and lengthiest discussions in both the BN and TL focus groups. Although all the participants expressed opposition to campaign messages based on tribe, two distinct themes emerged in the responses, namely: opposed and affected. The main difference between the themes is that the participants whose responses fall under 'affected' belong to the tribes targeted in the messages and, therefore, their reaction is on two levels, as audience (opposed to the messaging) and as subject (affected or targeted by the messaging).

The following are responses from participants who were opposed to campaign messages based on tribe but were not directly affected by them, for example, by way of their tribe being targeted with hate speech. *NB-4* says she comes from a long line of Bembas but has never believed her tribe to be superior or more Zambian than others. She says she was totally opposed to the tribal narrative against Hichilema being championed in the name of her tribe. She says:

> The tribal narrative led by Kambwili, a prominent fellow Bemba, did not sit well with me. It was demeaning and did not represent us as Bembas. In the end, it was that same tribal narrative that influenced me to vote for Hichilema.

She says PF's openly tribalist campaign made things difficult and uncomfortable within her family. "For example, my parents-in-law are from the same tribes that were being demonised alongside the Tonga [Tonga/Lozi bloc] and it was people from my tribe [Bemba] perpetuating that narrative," she recounts. The family situation that *NB-4* references is not unusual, as Zambia had more than 40% inter-ethnic marriages as at 2020 (Crespin-Boucaud, 2020). *NB-4* says the campaign messages were unreasonable because it will never be right to deny someone a position they may be qualified for just because of their tribe, something no one chooses for themselves. She adds, "Campaigning on the basis of tribe was an attack on our unity as Zambians. Some people took it so seriously that up to now [2024] there are some extended family members who do not talk to me for voting UPND." *BN-2* says the tribal campaign messages were an affront to the reality of many Zambians. "The tribal talk by the PF in the run-up to the elections was childish and dangerous. I hope it dies because it does not reflect our reality of unity as people from different tribes," she says. She recounts how, when she was only six months old, her mother travelled out of town for work and left her in the care of their Tonga neighbour who looked after her well until her mother returned. She says her family went on to live with different Tonga neighbours and friends and she, eventually, married a Tonga man. "Would it then make sense for me to one day wake up and demean the very people I have lived well with since birth just because we are from different tribes?", she wonders. *BN-4* agrees that the campaign messages ignored people's reality even at family level. She says, like *BN-2*, her own children are not even fully Bemba because her husband is a mixture of other tribes. She says it would be ridiculous for her children to be discriminated against on that account. Fake news, a recurrent thread in the discussions, is again cited but this time as a tool for tribalist messaging. For example, *BN-6* says the campaign messages largely relied on false information and unfounded stereotypes about Tongas. He says the tribalism was evident in the campaign messages and that became one of his reasons to vote PF out of office. Like some other participants, he states an intention to vote Lungu out of office by voting for Hichilema, rather than just voting Hichilema into office. This characteristic of negative democracy has been one of the common resolutions holding the neo-tribe together. The pro-opposition solidarity that was expressed, regardless of motivation, reflects the affective nature of neo-tribes (Papacharissi, 2015). *BN-5* says he could not relate to any messages that were trying to either campaign for or against a candidate based on tribe. He observes,

> The narrative was, and even more so now, that tribalism was peddled by one group but the fact is both PF and UPND were tribal. UPND may have been more subtle about it than PF but it was also tribal. For me, it was a matter of picking the lesser evil, not that either party was innocent.

This is another example of negative democracy, with the difference being acknowledgement of both parties' possible participation in tribal campaigns. *BN-5* adds that he had never voted on the basis of tribe before and he was not going to start in 2021. He says he found it interesting that he was unable to really see President Lungu of the PF as "a fellow Easterner" (Nyanja-speaking side of the Bemba/Nyanja bloc) because he came out more "as a Northerner" (Bemba-speaking side of the Bemba/Nyanja bloc). He says , during the election period, his trips to the village would often bring up conversations about voting "for our own". He says he always challenged such discussions: "I would always ask, 'Who is our own? We don't even know where he [Lungu] comes from; he speaks more Bemba than Nsenga and we don't know his village.'" This particular account was an interesting point of reflection on what seemed like 'tribal qualifiers', determining who qualified to evoke their tribe as a campaign tool and who did not. *BN-1* asserts that he could not accept such messaging because tribe was not a consideration for him when deciding who to vote for. He said what he wanted most was for citizens to show PF who really had the power and to show that citizens could make anyone they chose into president. *BN-3* says it was the first time young people like herself [under 35 years old] were seeing tribalism preached so openly and confidently by politicians. She says that growing up in cosmopolitan cities meant growing up with people from all tribes without even realising who comes from where. "The tribal narrative was simply being forced on us. I once posted that tribalism was being forced on my generation and we could not relate, and that post received almost 1 000 likes and general agreement from young people", she recounts. This point suggests that tribalism is perceived differently according to generation. Specifically, it suggests that older people were perpetuating tribalism and unsuccessfully trying to recruit younger people into the belief and practice. *BN-3*'s account also reflects the concept of acclamation and democracy, where *BN-3* feels confident that her point of view was representative of, and approved by, her generation because of the number of likes the post received (Dean, 2017). *BN-8* says the tribal campaigning was a divide-and-rule strategy by politicians and, as the election results showed, citizens resoundingly rejected the narrative. He says the problem of tribalism, however, has not been resolved and will still be an issue in the 2026 election.

Part of the general discussion included views on what appeared to be a normalisation of tribe-based campaigning, which was a deviation from previous elections in Zambia.

Some participants, particularly from the TL group, not only expressed opposition to campaign messages based on tribe but also shared how they felt they were victims of the same. *TL-6* says it still feels unreal that the Tonga were presented as "outcasts, less human and less Zambian" in different campaign messages. He says the Tonga were demonised so much that, for many people, it became normal to speak ill of them and even act poorly against them. "I had a number of experiences where even close colleagues would start saying tribal things about the Tonga to me, forgetting I am also one. That is how normalised tribalism had become", he recalls. He says he was alarmed by the audacity of the messages and disappointed by what he calls the silent agreement of the PF leadership, including President Lungu. He is of the view that the messages cost PF many Tonga votes. He shares his personal experience of having parents and grandparents who are Tonga and voted UPND while he and his siblings voted PF. "I campaigned publicly for PF in the 2016 elections when I was in university and convinced my brothers to join me. Tribe was not a consideration for us. That is why the 2021 anti-Tonga campaign strategy felt like personal betrayal," he says. The disclosure of being third generation and breaking away from the family voting pattern resonates with other references, within the study. *TL-1* also laments what he deemed PF-government-sanctioned tribalism. "A senior politician and close associate of the president was free to go on radio, TV, and hold physical rallies to denounce Tongas just because HH decided to exercise his democratic right to run for public office," he says. He asserts that the political violence witnessed in 2021 was a natural consequence of normalising hate speech as campaign messages. "This is how genocides start; first you strip people of their dignity and humanity and present them as less and then you proceed to get rid of them. You can research how it started in Rwanda," he argues. *TL-3* says she would not compare the hate campaign to the start of a genocide, but she was disappointed to see so many people she considered principled happily participate in the hate campaign. She adds that the tribal campaign was also fuelled by deliberately false information. "It was frustrating to see so many people entertain and spread obviously false information just because it suited their narrative. The best response was 2.8 million people rejecting tribalism and voting HH," she concludes. The discussion on genocide revealed some participants' fear of possible consequences in the real world. Some believed it might just be a matter of time before the hate they were experiencing in the media, including social media, translated into real-world activity. Similarly, *TL-3*'s reference to the 2021 election results, which saw Hichilema beat Lungu, as a

rejection of tribalist messaging against the Tonga people suggests a belief in social media sentiment translating into real-world action. *TL-2* recalls the fear that caused him, for the first time in his life, to be afraid of disclosing his name online and in some physical spaces, whenever he joined political discussions. He says,

> I used a pseudonym on Facebook so that I could participate without being attacked and dismissed just because of my tribe. Physical spaces were trickier because, unlike Facebook, there was no obvious way of knowing who hated Tongas speaking up and what they could potentially do to me.

One of the main points everyone agreed on in the Tonga/Lozi group was that the tribalist campaign did not end with the elections but rather created deep-seated suspicion among tribes, which will take a long time and deliberate effort to remove. *TL-8* says she has been voting since the 1990s when she was in high school and, until Hichilema's candidacy, she had never witnessed a tribe hated and demeaned on account of one of its members contesting elections. "It [anti-Tonga sentiment] makes me believe that the campaign was a deliberate creation of politicians, aided by social media, because why did we not see it when Mazoka, another Tonga, was favourite to win the 2001 election? It was a PF creation", she states. Mobilising on ethnic grounds has been part of politics since pre-independence, and has manifested in different ways over time (Posner, 2005; Habasonda, 2018; Sishuwa, 2019; Kapesa et al., 2020). What is new is the use of social media to mobilise on ethnic grounds. *TL-4* raises the issue of generations of inter-marriage and how, she argues, not many Zambians can say they do not have Tongas and Bembas in their extended families. She says:

> These two tribes are even among the common inter-marriages we have, so how can we allow politicians to try and set us against each other? I found those campaign messages lacking in logic and honesty. Even Kambwili, the chief tribalist, cannot claim to have a purely Bemba extended family.

Drawing on Stuart Halls' (1980) seminal work on encoding/decoding, it is evident that the participants in both focus group discussions received the campaign messages based on tribe, and applied an oppositional reading. They rejected anti-Hichilema messages and proceeded to vote for him instead.

A discussion was held in the Tonga/Lozi group on whether or not UPND participated in tribe-based campaigns. The discussion was a follow-up to the discussion on tribe-based campaigns and the long-standing accusation that UPND is a party "for Tongas by Tongas". One of the often-cited examples in the accusations are the landslide victories the party achieved in Tonga/Lozi provinces in previous elections. For example, Dundumwezi is a constituency in Southern Province that had some of the highest UPND and lowest PF votes in what appeared to be a pronounced regional/tribal voting pattern; Dundumwezi eventually featured in local lingua and pop culture as a reference to being vanquished. Some participants assert that, contrary to common belief, UPND is not a tribal party. *TL-3* argues that Southern Province (the native region for the Tonga people) has lagged behind other provinces in the country in terms of development and it was, therefore, inevitable that people in that province wanted a change of government. She argues that Hichilema was the most promising alternative to the incumbent, and the support Hichilema received had nothing to do with his tribe and everything to do with what he could deliver. "Has a commission of inquiry ever been set up because Bembas voted for their own? Why does such preference become a problem only when the Tonga do it? This position already confirms who the real victim of tribalism is," she concludes. *TL-7* agrees that the choice of Hichilema had nothing to do with his tribe but had to do with expected deliverables. She says she finds the accusation insulting because it assumes that the only reason a Tonga can pick a candidate is because of tribe. She says it assumes that the Tonga do not have the reasoning and agency to set criteria and objectively compare candidates. She adds that, like other citizens, the people of Southern Province have expectations of political leaders as well as the knowledge and experience to decide who they think is most likely to meet those expectations. "If it was about tribe, the other Tonga and Lozi candidates in the 2021 elections should have followed closely behind HH but they were nowhere near his numbers. The premise of the whole tribal party argument has always been false," she concludes. *TL-2* states that wanting to be represented by a person who shares your background and understands your unique needs is not tribalism. "Black people seek representation in decision-making positions, women do it too, and so do many others. It would have been a problem if this representation was sought to disadvantage non-Tongas but we all know that was never the plan," he says. *TL-6* says there was an unfair conflation of the Tonga people as a tribe and the UPND, which led to many private individuals becoming political casualties. He states,

> People lost their jobs in the public service because they were assumed to be pro-opposition just because they are Tonga. So for many, jobs, economic opportunities,

> dignity and peace depended on a UPND victory. It was not about HH's tribe but the hope for change that he represented.

TL-3 agrees that there was widespread conflation of Tonga-the-tribe and UPND-the-party. She states that one of the problems with the narrative of UPND as a tribal party is that it generalises what could be isolated behaviour. She cites the example of how Bemba politicians were driving the anti-Tonga narrative but people were mentioning the perpetrators by name, and thus it was never said that Bembas are tribalists. She says such distinction is not extended to situations involving the Tonga, and when one of them is tribal, the entire tribe is painted as such. *TL-3*'s observation is of ethnocentric thinking that generalises the weaknesses of a few individuals to characterise the entire out-group they belong to (Musvosvi, 2010). Ethnocentrism also makes people exaggerate the perceived evil of members of out-groups (ibid).

Some participants were of the view that UPND benefited from tribal politics during the 2021 elections. *TL-1* says UPND benefited from the elevated tribal narrative in the country because they positioned themselves as victims and, in the process, won sympathy votes as well as anti-PF protest votes. The fact though, he says, is that UPND's campaign strategy also had an element where tribe was used to rally supporters. He narrates how different the party and public dynamics were between UPND under Mazoka and UPND under Hichilema. He recounts, "Mazoka's UPND was viewed as inclusive, and voters reciprocated this inclusivity by giving him votes nationally. HH became UPND leader under the very harsh pronouncement by party heavyweights that only a fellow Tonga could succeed Mazoka after his death." He says tribe as the main criterion for a successor was the beginning of a tribally divided UPND and the loss of its appeal outside its traditional strongholds. *TL-5* admits that UPND takes tribe into consideration when making political decisions, such as which candidate to field in local government and parliamentary elections. He says any suggestion that only UPND does it is, however, not true. He asserts that Zambian politics were driven by tribe even during and immediately after independence, and the only difference is that the tribe factor may have been better concealed in the early days than it is now. "Today, you cannot apply to contest on any party ticket without first proving your tribal connection to the area. That is why you have Tonga MPs in their provinces and Bemba MPs in their provinces as well," he says. He adds that, when this strategy is employed by other political parties, it is understood and accepted as a way of ensuring the electorate are represented by candidates who can fully relate to their lived reality. "It makes sense to have candidates who understand your needs through their own experience.

Candidates who can speak your language and respect your culture. But when the same strategy is employed by UPND, it is called tribalism," he concludes. *TL-1* disagrees with the opinion that UPND uses tribe the same way other parties do. He argues,

> Do you think a Bemba would be allowed to succeed HH as UPND president and candidate? Definitely not. The answer to your question is no one on this side of the fence may openly say it but we know the unwritten rules.

He further argues for a distinction between UPND members and UPND voters. He says 2021 saw many non-UPND members from all over the country vote for the party, hence its national victory. That, he argues, is not representative of the party membership which he insists remains predominantly Tonga. This assertion highlights the temporary nature of neo-tribes and the issues that bring them together. It is a possibility that some Hichilema and UPND voters came from temporarily situated neo-tribes that did not transition into long-term party membership. TL-8 says Hichilema's choice of running mates in 2016 and 2021 was informed by the understanding that tribe is critical to electoral success because, fundamentally, "Zambians vote for their own." She says Hichilema knew he had little to no chance in native Bemba regions and had to field "their own" in order to improve his chances. "The hypocrisy we have as a nation is that using Bembas to draw votes is called political strategy but doing the same for Tongas is called tribalism," she says.

There are several accounts in the literature (see Posner, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; Nasong'o, 2015; Baloyi, 2018; Shilao, 2018; Munemo, 2019; Adeyanju, 2020) of how commonplace political mobilisation on ethnic grounds is in African politics, including from its roots in colonialism. Some responses to the question of whether UPND is a tribal party align with the literature in arguing that the use of tribe to rally political support is an enduring strategy, present from as early as pre-independence and immediate post-independence Zambia. The participants argue that UPND is simply following not only tradition but also current practice because the strategy is used by all the other political parties. These participants argue for the acceptance of mobilisation on ethnic grounds as a political strategy. Other participants, however, problematise the practice as tribalist and detrimental to democracy.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented a description and discussion of the data collected through the two focus groups that I conducted. One group represents the election's swing voters as they voted for Hichilema, against their ethnic tribes. The second group voted *with* their tribe. The next chapter presents data collected through semi-structured individual interviews.

Chapter Seven: Data Presentation and Analysis – Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

In the previous chapter, I presented a description and discussion of the data collected through the two focus group discussions. This chapter presents a summary of eight semi-structured individual interviews conducted between 9th April and 7th May, 2024. The respondents were originally requested to be part of a focus group comprising members of the Bemba/Nyanja language bloc who voted for the PF candidate, Edgar Lungu. The format was later changed to individual interviews when a number of the participants expressed concern about their safety and opted for a more private form of engagement. I compiled the different individual responses according to collective themes. The participants are coded ECL (Edgar Chagwa Lungu) or SE (Smart Eagles), according to the Facebook page on which I identified them, and numbered 1 to 8, in the order the interviews took place. The discussions are grouped into themes, namely: Facebook, Elections, Tribe, and Social Media.

7.1 Facebook

This section presents discussions on why respondents followed the Facebook pages they did and the relationship they had with fellow frequent Facebook commenters. *SE-1* says she followed the pages because that was the easiest way of staying up to date with what was going on in the country and how people were reacting to it. Her motivation aligns with the evolution of political communication after the advent of social media (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). In her case, Facebook played the role of her primary source of election-related information, something that would previously have been the preserve of mainstream media (ibid). *SE-2* followed pages that were posting what he wanted to hear because, as he says, other pages were unjustifiably negative about Lungu and the PF. This reflects the concept of information cocoons where people may seek one-sided information sources that frame and reinforce their pre-existing ideas and beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021). Such selective exposure to media content may lead to the creation or reinforcement of polarised groups and echo chambers (Guess et al., 2018). *ECL-3* says he followed the pages to promote the PF party agenda there. As he recounts, "I praised President Lungu on as many posts as possible – both on PF and opposition pages – and I criticised President Hichilema and discouraged people from voting for him. I made sure that, with each comment, I influenced a couple of people or more. In a follow-up discussion on

whether he achieved this objective of influencing other users, *ECL-3* says the answer is both yes and no. He explains, "Yes, because our message was well delivered; it reached the voters and many voted PF. No, because not all voters bought into our message and some ended up voting UPND." *ECL-3*'s account reveals the ability of social media to serve as a political mobilisation tool that even private individuals can use (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). The act of praising his preferred candidate while criticising the opponent, for the purposes of influencing voter choice, reflect typical in-group/out-group competition and bias (Musvosvi, 2010). *ECL-4* says she followed the pages in order to add her voice to national debates and bring matters of interest to the attention of the candidates. She explains that President Lungu's page was also followed by almost all the other PF parliamentary and local government candidates, and they took note of what members of the public were discussing in the comments. She says, "The page gave us direct access to many leaders, so it was a good place to bring our issues as a community to the attention of the president and other candidates for them to tackle once elected or re-elected." This submission reflects the concept of disintermediation, where candidates and the electorate can directly interact with each other. On the one hand, disintermediation has been praised for enhancing democracy and is believed to have a positive effect on political engagements and civic outcomes (Pierskalla, 2013; Bode & Dalrymple, 2017). On the other hand, disintermediation has been criticised for potentially exposing the electorate to unfettered populism by candidates, with Donald Trump's first election as president of the US often cited as an example (Gerbaudo, 2018). *SE-5* says she found the comment sections on the pages interesting and insightful. *ECL-6* reflects a neo-tribal characteristic of the need for connection when he says that he enjoyed the many debates he participated in on the pages and that he created still-existing relationships with some of the people he met there. It is worth noting that a meeting that took place through a temporarily situated online neo-tribe (Cova & Cova, 2002) has transitioned into a longer-term relationship. *ECL-7* says she followed the pages to be part of the campaign and election mood in the country. She recalls that it was both an exciting and stressful time: "It was exciting to see such high-profile politicians being so attentive and interactive. It was like they knew us too. But it was also stressful because HH was gaining so much momentum and that worried me." This combines the neo-tribal need for connection over shared interests, and the affectual dimension expressed through worrying about an opponent's growing popularity (Clark et al., 2019). It also touches on disintermediation. *ECL-8* says he followed the two main presidential candidates to see what they had to offer. He says he already knew he was going to vote for Lungu/PF but he was curious about Hichilema and followed to see "what the fuss was about". The responses under this theme fall within the sub-themes of

information-seeking, community/belonging, engagement/influencing, and resonance, revealing similarities with the discussions in the two pro-opposition/UPND focus groups.

Under this theme, respondents described the relationship they had with other regular Facebook users. *SE-1* and *SE-2* report cordial relationships that speak to an in-group dynamic. *SE-1* says the relationship was great and felt like having a family or group of close friends who were always up for a discussion, a debate, or just sharing jokes. She says she never experienced a quarrel because they all mostly agreed and disagreed on principle. *SE-2* says, "Some became comrades, people that I still interact with from time to time. Others became inactive or closed their accounts after elections, so we have not interacted again since then." Both descriptions reflect a sense of community and connecting over shared interests, which is typical of neo-tribes (Clark et al., 2019). *ECL-3* shares two different types of relationships. Initially, he says some people were very emotional and intolerant. He says being a staunch and vocal PF member made him a target for attacks, insults and threats on his life. He says, "Some UPND people took it so personally that up to today, they are still looking for ways to harm PF members like me." He adds that PF supporters are "still being hunted" and victimised on account of their social media activity in 2021. "Some of our members have been arrested under no clear circumstances. Sometimes they pretend to befriend you just to create an opportunity to get you arrested and beaten up by police."

ECL-3's experience reflects inter-tribe conflict (Clark et al., 2019), particularly exhibiting ferocious tribalism which is typical in tribes formed around such issues as in-groups and out-groups, homogeneity and identity (Hibbing, 2021).

Later in the interview, *ECL-3* says not all UPND supporters were problematic. He says,

> I was very vocal in my support for PF but I still have a cordial relationship with some of those who were vocal for UPND. Some are my neighbours and we still talk to each other when we meet and freely ask each other for help if needed.

A similar experience is shared by *ECL-4*, suggesting a natural easing of inter-group hostility that is typical of election periods, and a return to regular real-world interactions. The experience further suggests a difference between how online and real-world inter-group hostilities were expressed and, in *ECL-3*'s case, how long they persisted after elections.

ECL-4 says she enjoyed the camaraderie that came out of Facebook interactions. She says sometimes people she only knew from Facebook tagged her in posts that they thought would be of interest to her and directly sought her comment. She says she attended some offline activities, such as discussion forums, at the invitation of people she met on Facebook. *SE-5* says she did not always enjoy the relationship with others because not everyone had the maturity to debate facts and accept uncomfortable truths without attacking those who had different views. She says,

> I never enjoyed debating with UPND people because they were overly sensitive and carried around a victim mentality. Anytime we had a confrontation and they saw that they were losing, they would divert from facts and start claiming tribalism and other discrimination.

She says she typically stopped responding to such conversations, opting instead to just read comments. *SE-5*'s experience mirrors that of some pro-UPND focus group participants who reported hostility between themselves and pro-PF commenters, as well as the need to self-censor sometimes in order to avoid confrontation. Although expressed through different scenarios, this experience suggests members of both camps were accusing each other of the same things, such as intolerance of divergent views. *SE-5*'s interpretation of pro-UPND complaints about tribalism and other forms of discrimination as merely being overly sensitive and possessing a victim mentality suggests cognitive bias typical of inter-group conflicts (Clark et al., 2019).

ECL-6 says that for some users, it was a matter of disagreeing but still respecting that each side was entitled to their own views and choices. He adds that for others, however, it was about trying to intimidate opponents into silence. "You would find that everywhere you comment, several profiles would attack you both on the post and in your inbox and this would happen over and over," he says. This experience aligns with the assertion by Clark et al. (2019) about modern politics being one of the most prominent forms of modern coalitional conflict. *ECL-6*'s account also reflects political intolerance as was experienced in real-world interactions (Siachiwena, 2021) and how the intolerance was mirrored online in what can be seen as an example of social media reflecting what exists (Wasserman, 2018).

ECL-7 says she got along with many users despite their differences. She says she did not appreciate those who would just call other commenters names and not add any substance to the discussions. She says she hated the practice whether done by UPND or fellow PF supporters. "I tried my best not to start unnecessary fights with UPND guys even though they seemed to want that a lot. Unfortunately, some PF guys were also doing the same thing of forcing unnecessary fights," she says. *ECL-8* says the election period was very heated and rough, causing several relationships to be strained. Like *ECL-3*, he says many people like him who were actively supporting PF online live in fear because UPND insiders have warned them about being on wanted lists. He says UPND functionaries are still trying to get them locked up and beaten up. "It is unreasonable to seek revenge against people who were just exercising their democratic right but that is the situation on the ground. It has already happened to some of the people we campaigned for PF with," he says. The frequent allegation of post-election victimisation of PF supporters who were vocal on Facebook by UPND government functionaries suggests the repressive strategy of using the internet to spy, in order to monitor political dissidence (Soriano, 2013).

Generally, the respondents had either positive or negative relationships with regular fellow Facebook users. The responses that stood out under the negative relationships were the ones speaking of continuing victimisation post-elections. The alleged victimisation is said to be taking place in the real world, i.e., outside the platform where the views being objected to were expressed. In addition, the alleged victimisation is said to still be happening three years after the elections. During my thematic content analysis on Facebook, I observed the notification "the comment xy is responding to has been deleted" on several comment threads. As already discussed, some profiles and pages were deactivated (including the recently restored Edgar Lungu page) after the elections, begging the question whether the deletion of pre-election social media activity was partly motivated by the alleged victimisation.

7.2 Elections

This section presents discussions on how individual respondents selected a presidential candidate to vote for and what the respondents think PF should have done differently in the 2021 elections. *SE-1* says she had always voted PF and, consequently, Lungu was her obvious choice. "My friends and I once met the King Cobra (President Sata) when we just enrolled at UNZA (University of Zambia) and I do not think Zambia has ever produced a more charismatic

politician," she recalls. She says the meeting inspired her to follow all of Sata's media appearances and later vote for him. She says his death was a great loss to Zambia and her personal pledge was to continue supporting his vision by voting for his party. *SE-2* says he was happy with the development projects PF had delivered countrywide and, therefore, decided to vote for Lungu in the interest of continuity. *ECL-3* says he had been voting PF since he became eligible because Sata's pro-poor ideology appealed deeply to him: "I bought into the ideology because his [Sata's] message and delivery were very relatable to the common man. His death was a big blow but I remained PF and when Lungu came, I took him as the candidate Sata left us." He recounts how he got his "political consciousness" from a Facebook group. "In 2009, I joined a Facebook group called Zambian People's Pact and that shaped my political participation. That time, citizens interested in political updates and commentary used to be in groups and not pages as is the case now." He says the group had leaders like Mr. Peter Sinkamba (he was later to contest the national presidency twice as the Green Party candidate), Lt. Col. Panji Kaunda (politician, diplomat and President Kaunda's son) and Ms. Tina Banda (social media personality and blogger). The common factor among the cited three respondents and their choice of candidate is political-party affiliation. *ECL-4* says she listened to all the manifestos and decided that PF had the most realistic plans. "PF also had a record of delivering. We all saw the infrastructure development in the country and how other countries started respecting us. Of course, things were not perfect, but Rome was not built in one day," she says. The basis for *SE-2*'s and *ECL-4*'s choice of candidate is the development they believe the party had delivered, and their desire to see that continue. This focus resonates with the governance theme in the four main factors that generally shape elections in Zambia (Siachiwena, 2021). *SE-1* and *ECL-3*, on the other hand, use their affinity for the candidate as the basis for their vote choice. Interestingly, they both reference the PF's founding president, who went on to be Zambia's fifth president, the late Michael Sata. Sata is unanimously cited in the literature as the architect of the latest wave of populism witnessed in Zambian politics in the 2000s, and an example of how critical the strategies of opposition leaders are to elections in Zambia (Siachiwena, 2021; Sishuwa, 2024). *ECL-3* adds an element of early use of social media in Zambian politics, with a reminder of how groups were driven by citizens rather than by candidates or parties, as is the case with the Facebook pages used in the 2021 elections. *SE-5* says she does not maintain any political party membership and only chooses a candidate to back during elections based on who she thinks has the best chance of winning and fulfilling their campaign promises. She says that, in 2021, there were only two possible candidates – Lungu and Hichilema – and she believed Lungu to be "the lesser evil". *ECL-6* says there were

only two serious contenders and Hichilema was not an option for him. He says he could not vote for Hichilema because of his lack of experience and what *ECL-6* considered Hichilema's shady business practices, such as his role in the country's privatisation exercise. "Someone who had never served as member of Parliament or even just ward councillor wanting to start straight from the top [the presidency] never sat well with me," he says. The motivation of *SE-5* and *ECL-6* also aligns with the candidate as a determining factor (Siachiwena, 2021). *ECL-7* says she did not trust Hichilema's intentions. She says, "It was strange seeing a person lose that many times but keep re-contesting. If his desire was to serve, he would have found a different way to do it but it seemed like being president was just a personal obsession." Her response to a follow-up question on whether or not she had similar reservations when Sata kept re-contesting elections and losing, is that the circumstances were different. She says it was justifiable for Sata to persist in his bid for presidency because he had already served from the lowest level and risen through the ranks. "Sata had already proved himself and the only place left for him was State House. With his experience, he knew how much more he could deliver in that position. HH, on the other hand, had nothing to build on," she says. There seems to be an element of political tribalism in her assessment of the candidates, which positions Hichilema as inferior to Lungu (Musvosvi, 2010). *ECL-8* says he chose Lungu because he had more public service and political experience than Hichilema. He says through Lungu's earlier work as a lawyer and later member of Parliament, minister and president, voters had had an opportunity to assess his leadership abilities. Some of the most pronounced sub-themes in the criteria used for choice of candidate is Mr. Sata's legacy as founder of the PF party, President Lungu's political experience and what is perceived as Mr. Hichilema's lack of experience in public service. Each respondent shared an element of the aforementioned sub-themes in their motivation for either voting for Lungu or against Hichilema.

The second part of this section presents what respondents think PF should have done differently in the 2021 elections. *SE-1* feels the PF should have managed the social media agenda set against it in a better way. She asserts,

> It was clear that we were being unfairly targeted because almost every post by HH would be accusing ECL of incompetence, corruption, theft, you name it. I think the party largely ignored because of the old belief that what social media believed did not matter because votes would be won at the grassroots as usual.

In a follow-up question as to whether she believed social media to have won the election for UPND, *SE-1* says that would be an exaggeration. She says social media had an impact because the previously "harmless online numbers" now became votes for the opposition. She does not, however, believe that was all it took. "There were many factors that had nothing to do with social media, like cost of living, unemployment and just general fatigue. It is typical of citizens to want new leadership at some point," she says. Like SE-*1, ECL-3*'s response is also about the party's relationship with social media. He says one of the things PF should have done differently was take the "online constituency" more seriously. He asserts, "For years, the belief was that HH was a 'Facebook or social media President' because he was always popular online but that never translated into votes. We used to laugh at him and his supporters over the issue." He says by the time "some of us" realised that 2021 was different, it was too late to run an online campaign compelling enough to shift significant numbers from UPND to PF. He emphasises that 2021 was different from previous elections and "social media was the new kingmaker". The responses suggest a recognition of the way social media has reshaped elections in Africa (Mano & Ndlela, 2020), and specifically the 2021 elections in Zambia. The responses also show a recognition of a shift from political support expressed only on social media, to the support actually translating into votes. This presents an interesting counter to Morozov's (2011) concepts of slacktivism and clicktivism. *SE-2* says the party ignored the feedback people gave, especially online, on issues like gassing, defective medical supplies and cadre violence. "Our leadership sabotaged us with unpopular decisions like choice of presidential running-mate, soft reaction to scandals like gassing, Honeybee… As supporters, we also sabotaged the party by accepting the decisions. We should have been the ones to protest before elections," he says. *ECL-4* says , in hindsight, the party largely misread the mood in the country and was likely to be perceived as tone-deaf in some of its activities and pronouncements. "I suspected the election would be tight but I did not think UPND capable of winning. The margin was too big for a ruling party, it was unexpected. It felt more like a resounding rejection than an electoral loss," she says. She jokes that she believed PF would win because that is how much she believed UPND would lose. *SE-5* says UPND's time had just come and even if PF had done everything differently, the results would have been the same. She cites the change in governments from UNIP to MMD to PF and most recently to UPND as testament to a voting pattern in Zambia. "After a certain period in office, loss for the incumbent is almost certain because that is how Zambian voters are. I hope I don't get misunderstood but Zambians are a fickle lot and UPND will be no exception," she says. *ECL-8* is also of the view that there was nothing to change because the party did almost everything right. He says the

party had the widest reach because they engaged on social media, in person, on radio and TV, through popular songs, and extensive distribution of posters and party regalia, and included the diaspora. He says no party campaigned as much or as well as the PF did. “Our entire campaign was based on a proven track record unlike UPND’s based on promises. We lost because Zambian voters are more emotional than logical. They can remove a government that is performing just for the sake of change,” he says. He adds that UPND was a craze mostly driven by the youth. “Not much thought went into the decision. Typical of this TikTok generation, they simply saw it as the latest trend and went along with it. It is not a surprise that many people already regret voting for HH,” he says. *SE-5* and *ECL-8* assign the element of affect in the electoral process. The affective dimension alerts us to a recognition of neo-tribal influence in the 2021 election results (Papacharissi, 2015). *ECL-6* says tribal campaigns did PF more harm than good and should not have been adopted as part of the strategy. He says it was a miscalculation by the party’s strategists and added, “Unfortunately, the effects did not end with the election. Our country is still deeply divided up to now. That is definitely something that should have been handled better.” *ECL-7* says the party should have targeted more relatable messaging at the educated and middle-class youth. She says such a demographic does not consider tribe when picking their candidates and, therefore, needed to be targeted with issue-based campaign messages.

Overall, the responses bring out certain views such as what was perceived as PF’s under-utilisation of social media, a recognition in itself of social media’s game-changing ability in political communications. There was also a view that, after some time, it becomes inevitable for the incumbent to lose and for power to shift, regardless of how well office-holders may have performed. Finally, there was a reflection on the PF’s governance and association with tribe-based campaigning.

7.3 Tribe

This section presents discussions on whether a candidate’s tribe was a consideration when voting, and how each respondent reacted to tribe-based campaign messages that were shared online. The discussion on candidates’ tribes as a voting criterion was as a follow-up to the theme of how respondents selected their preferred candidate, presented in section 7.3. *SE-1* says tribe was not a consideration because she did not believe it affects anyone’s ability to rule a country well or not. She says, “I think UPND supporters are the ones who were obsessed with

tribe because they refused to give votes even to clearly better candidates, as long as they are not Tonga." *SE-2* says it was not a consideration because he does not even know Lungu's tribe. He says Lungu's name suggests that his native language could be Nyanja, Nsenga, Chewa, Tumbuka or similar (i.e., the Nyanja language group), "but he speaks Bemba all the time. I see him [Lungu] as a 'city man' from the Copperbelt [Province] with no real tribal affiliation. If I were to claim association, it would be that we both lived on the Copperbelt," he says. *ECL-3* says he grew up knowing Sata as an action-oriented man who left a strong and still visible legacy of development as the governor of Lusaka, minister of health, and other portfolios he served in. "I thought if he achieved that much at lower ranks, how much more as president? That legacy is what made PF my automatic choice. If ECL and HH had swapped tribes, I would have still voted PF," he says. *ECL-4* says she was sceptical about Hichilema's candidacy and how much it seemed to depend on tribe. She says Hichilema and his supporters seemed obsessed with the idea of "a Tonga president" rather than a Zambian president who could deliver development to all regions. "They felt entitled because according to them, we had never had a Tonga President before so it was now their turn. That is not how democracy works and that is why I rejected that agenda by voting Lungu," she says.

SE-5 says she is Bemba on her father's side and mixed Bemba/Tonga on her mother's side. "Voting on tribal lines was created by UPND. Many of us have mixed heritage and not able to pick one tribe over the other. We voted PF for other reasons but UPND would rather claim we voted on tribe," she says. *ECL-6* says the only evidence of Zambians voting on the basis of tribe is presented in Tonga locations and those of their allies. He says the 2021 election results showed that Hichilema received votes from all tribes and regions but the same could not be said about other candidates and what they received in Tonga and affiliated regions. *ECL-7* says she has been discriminated against by her Tonga boss who routinely favours her Tonga colleagues and that her experience is shared by many non-Tonga people in her position. She says she has also had other experiences where the Tongas refuse to co-exist with other tribes. This, she says, made her afraid to imagine how Tongas would treat everyone in the country if Hichilema won. *ECL-8* says tribe was not a consideration for him because his main interest was proof of the candidate's experience in public service and ability to deliver. The foregoing discussions revealed themes similar to the themes from the Facebook posts and comments, as well as from the two pro-UPND focus groups, namely themes of mutual accusations of tribalism; of party leaders (in this case, Sata) and candidates as main voting factors; and the

perceived ambiguity of President Lungu's ethnic tribe on account of his use of Bemba, which is not from his language group, as his default vernacular language.

The second part of this section presents respondents' reactions to tribe-based campaign messages shared on Facebook during the election period. *SE-1* says the PF party was a culprit through its association with Chishimba Kambwili. She says she did not agree with that line of campaign and believes it contributed to their loss because the majority of voters are youths and not likely to relate to such ideas. *SE-2* says the message was necessary but not well packaged. He says the UPND had always used tribe to garner votes as well as campaign against (campaign negatively) opponents but the difference was that they did it in closed groups and face-to-face. He says PF messaging, such as interviews and rallies by Kambwili, was being shared on social media without its full context, and was hence being mistaken for hate speech. *ECL-3* says he was and still is a staunch PF supporter, but he condemned tribal messages regardless of which party was promoting them. "If you check my many comments on different pages or even on my [Facebook] wall, you will see that I neither accepted the messages nor participated in their dissemination," he says. He says he refrained from commenting on tribal posts on Facebook not only because he did not believe in the message but also because he has family and friends from different tribes. "I have lived with these people very well for many years, so how would they even look at me if I contributed to such a narrative?" he wonders. He says he has a problem with how tribalism has been so normalised on social media to the point where even young children in high school openly disparage people on the basis of tribe. *ECL-4* says there was a lot of fake outrage that ignored the fact that tribal politics has always been a part of elections in Zambia. She says the only difference now was that tribalism was being perpetrated against the Tonga, the traditional perpetrators. *SE-5* says the narrative of tribe was driven by politicians for the sake of gaining numbers. She says citizens themselves are united and have no problem co-existing with other tribes, but politicians came in and started trying to separate them. *ECL-6* says tribe has always been a political tool in Zambia which is why, in his time, Kaunda actively advocated for "One Zambia, One Nation". He says the current crop of politicians was different because they cared more about winning elections even at the cost of unity. "Tribalism is a known strategy. HH once joined forces with prominent Bemba politicians like GBM [Geoffrey Bwalya Mwamba, former member of Parliament and defence minister], Kambwili and others in an attempt to be accepted by Bembas and get their votes," he says. He says tribalism was more visible in 2021 because of social media and how everyone

was connected in one place. *ECL-7* says Hichilema campaigned on tribe throughout his time in opposition. She says,

> HH was recorded campaigning on tribal lines and voice notes shared but people always chose to ignore that. There was this fear that if you criticise HH, you would be accused of discriminating against him. He loves appearing like a victim and you can see this even in his presidency.

ECL-8 says that tribalism used against the Tonga on social media was, in fact, sponsored by UPND in order to win a sympathy vote. He says he witnessed a number of UPND agents who were planted in PF, pretending to be members but instead spying and taking information out. He says a UPND member of Parliament and minister later confessed that the anti-Tonga campaign by Kambwili was a UPND project. "They sponsored his [Kambwili] hate speech in order for them to look like victims and make the people hate ECL and PF," he says.

7.4 Social Media

This section has two themes namely the role respondents think social media played in the 2021 elections, and whether respondents encountered any fake news online during the election period. If they encountered fake news, I probed whether they were concerned in any way. *SE-1* says social media was a good tool in the wrong hands. She says many Zambians are not enlightened enough to the pros and cons of social media and, as such, their usage poses more of a threat than a benefit. She concludes that social media was abused rather than used during the 2021 election period. *SE-2* says social media played an important role as it enabled the elections to proceed, despite challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. He says had it not been for social media and its ability to facilitate virtual campaigns, elections would have probably needed to be postponed. "Social media made it possible for us to hold big virtual rallies and reach people even during the Covid-19 lockdown. It brought us together even when we were physically isolated," he says. *ECL-3* says social media had both negative and positive aspects and its use in 2021 could be best taken as a learning curve. He says, "It was used for voter education, campaigning, and interaction between citizens and candidates. It was also used to spread all sorts of malice, alarmist and outright fake news. We should take these as lessons and do better in 2026." *ECL-4* says Zambian politics will never be the same again because social media has permanently changed the way things are done. She says people can now easily

get information, demand accountability and give feedback to the politicians. She concludes that social media contributed to enhancing democracy in 2021. *SE-5* says social media played a negative role because it created idle citizens who talked more than they thought and acted. "People were sitting online and complaining about the economy, the leadership and so on, not realising that the time they were wasting on social media could instead be used to do something about what they were complaining about," he says. *ECL-6* says social media played an important role in exposing what political parties would have preferred to remain hidden. He cites as an example the interrogations that Hichilema faced online with regard his role in privatisation and other business dealings. "Ironically, the same transparency social media was forcing on the opposition hurt PF in the end because citizens were seeing everything, including things like disorderly members of the party flaunting bags of cash while the majority were starving," he says. *ECL-7* says social media played a bridging role where Covid-19 had created disruptions in the election campaigns. She says the downside was that it also facilitated the dissemination of problematic messages, some of which resulted in violence. *ECL-8* says social media played a negative role because it polarised the country more than any election in the past. He said social media was the "headquarters" of fake grievances, intolerance, tribalism and hatred. He recommends limiting the use of social media in the 2026 elections.

The question "Did you encounter any fake news online during the election period? If yes, were you concerned in any way?" elicited different responses. *SE-1* says she encountered a lot of fake news. She says she was worried by how freely fake news was spreading and how easily members of the public were buying into it. The whole situation, she concludes, was bad for a young democracy like Zambia's. *SE-2* says he saw fake news shared by both UPND and PF camps. He says some of the fake news was not easy to spot as such and his worry was that many people were voting on the basis of false information. *ECL-3* says he saw UPND officials, including their presidential candidate Hichilema, spread a lot of fake news. He says,

> HH would claim that PF had sold public enterprises and assets like ZESCO, ZNBC, ZAFFICO, etc. He would carry on for weeks and months and generate so much public outrage against PF. Now he is in power and using the very companies that he claimed were sold.

ECL-3 goes on to say that Hichilema always knew better but chose to deliberately spread fake news and mislead the public. He wonders how many people based their vote on such fake news.

He cites another example of how Hichilema often accused PF of theft and corruption and repeatedly assured people that "PF criminals" would all be sent to prison once UPND came into power. "UPND is now in power and no one has gone to jail for theft. All they do now is investigate 'possession of goods reasonably believed to be proceeds of crime'. Ok, but where is the prison you promised?" he argues. *ECL-3* concludes that the absence of any successful prosecution and imprisonment is proof that UPND and Hichilema were lying about so-called PF crimes.

ECL-4 says Hichilema was a "mass spreader" of fake news because he had large followings on his social media accounts. She says the beauty of social media is that everything remains on record and publicly accessible. She says the same youths that helped Hichilema win through social media are now using the same platform to confront him on his campaign promises and anti-PF lies. "The same youth that delivered his victory are now the ones leading the demand for accountability. In this regard, social media can be a double-edged sword," he says.

SE-5 says she often experienced fake news in WhatsApp groups but rarely on Facebook. Her worry, she says, was that people would become indifferent to important news because they would consider it fake. *ECL-6* says fake news was present in online discourse and it posed a danger to the country's peace and stability as a still-developing democracy. *ECL-6* says he was more worried about the reaction than the fake news itself. He says some of the laws passed in the name of combatting fake news were, in fact, aimed at stifling opposition. He says the PF government had UPND in mind when they introduced the Cyberlaw and UPND has PF in mind when applying it. *ECL-7* says she was worried about the prevalence of fake news in 2021 but knew that nothing could be done about it then because the damage had already been done. She says Zambia needs to do better in managing fake news in the 2026 elections. *ECL-8* says social media was used to mislead voters. He says people were duped into voting out the better candidate because of the groupthink that was typical of social media in 2021. "Personally, this way of voting should worry any person who wishes our democracy well. We must encourage people to think logically and not go with trends – just because the next person says 'vote bally', I will do the same," he says. I ask a follow-up question on whether PF has also been a beneficiary of trends where, as alleged by several commentators, the party got and maintained power not by appealing to voters' logic but through such strategies as hit campaign songs by popular musicians, slogans such as "more money in your pockets" and saturation of neighbourhoods with party regalia. *ECL-8* says the commentary is false and everyone ought to

be aware that the party's founding president was a man of unmatched legacy in individual political contributions to the country. He says PF came into power because President Sata represented the best alternative and President Lungu won elections twice because people were happy with the direction in which the PF was taking the country. He challenges that if music and regalia was all it took to win an election, then Hichilema should have adopted the same and not allowed himself to lose so many elections.

7. 5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the data collected through semi-structured interviews held with Patriotic Front supporters who belong to the Bemba/Nyanja language bloc. The next chapter presents a discussion and summary of findings.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion and Summary of Findings

In the foregoing three chapters, I presented and discussed findings from my thematic content analysis of Facebook posts and comments, focus group discussions, and semi-structured individual interviews. In this chapter, I present the conclusion and summary of findings of the study, reflections, and suggestions for future research.

I set out to explore the role that social media played in the 2021 Zambian general elections with regard to the emergence of neo-tribes as new forms of political affiliation, weaponisation of tribe, and the prevalence and implications of misinformation and disinformation on nascent democracies such as Zambia's. I sought to answer the following set of questions:

i. What role does social media play in the transition from ethnic to neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation?
ii. How do voters who use social media make sense of campaign messages based on tribe?
iii. How do members of online neo-tribes make sense of their online participation?
iv. How do anti-democratic voices on social media affect nascent democracies?

I answered these questions through a mixed-methods qualitative approach as detailed in Chapter Four. I employed a case study approach using qualitative thematic content analysis, focus group discussions, and semi-structured individual interviews.

8.1 Key Findings

Several studies have been conducted on ethnic tribalism in Zambian politics (Posner, 2005; Habasonda, 2018; Sishuwa, 2019; Kapesa et al, 2020; Beardsworth, 2020), social media and Zambian elections (Willems, 2016; Mfula, 2020), as well as electioneering and voting preferences (Cheeseman, 2016; Hern, 2020). My study extends the scope of the literature by introducing a neo-tribal lens to the understanding of social media, elections and associational patterns in Zambia. I also contribute nuanced deliberations on social media's anti-democratic potential and possible implications for a still growing democracy like Zambia's. By answering the research questions, I also advance understanding of Zambia's position in relation to the Koffi Annan Commission's (2020:15) assertion that "for the foreseeable future, elections in

the democracies of the Global South will be focal points for networked hate speech, disinformation, external interference, and domestic manipulation".

In this section, I present a summary of my key findings under each of the four research questions.

My understanding of the role of social media in relation to democracy, and specifically elections, has been informed by the literature review in Chapter Two and the theoretical framework in Chapter Three. Through these two chapters, I aptly situated my study within the changing landscape of mediation of politics in Africa and the resulting relationship between social media and elections. I adopted three main theoretical postulations of the relationship between social media and elections, namely: social media as an extension of the digital public sphere, social media as a tool for political mobilisation, and social media as alternative media. Chapters Five, Six and Seven, inform my understanding of the role social media played in the specific context of the 2021 Zambian elections.

I have revealed that online neo-tribes emerged as salient forms of political affiliation in the 2021 Zambian elections. Some distinctive differences with ethnic tribes include the fact that neo-tribes organise within and across ethnic lines, are temporarily situated, affectual, and not geographically bound (Cova & Cova, 2002; Clay, 2018; Clark et al, 2019; Hibbing, 2021). I have observed some contradictions to the traditional expectation of neo-tribes such as how some members established long-term political relationships. I have also observed a similarity in mechanisms of connection and establishing in-groups and out-groups. Particularly, neo-tribes were observed rallying around a political leader as a mechanism for building community, and using accusations against out-groups as ways of building tribes, all of which are associated with ethnic tribes. I have concluded that the rise of neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation in Zambia represents a tension between democratic progress on the one hand, and political fragmentation on the other.

8.1.1 What role does social media play in the transition from ethnic to neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation?

I apply the theoretical and analytical lens set out in Chapter Three to the data collected and presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven to establish the role social media plays in the

transition from ethnic to neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation in Zambian elections. I have established that the role social media, Facebook in particular, plays in the emergence of neo-tribes is the provision of a platform that enables the meeting of like-minded people and connection over shared interests, beliefs or identities. In this way, Facebook enabled both the emergence and visibility of new political actors and practices during the 2021 Zambian election cycle. The nature of political engagement exhibited by the neo-tribes did not take a traditional form, but, like traditional forms, it also had its own rituals as discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. In this case, Facebook enabled the emergence of new political actors and practices in the form of neo-tribe participants and their public formation and interaction. I established the new actors as ephemeral groups that formed on Facebook around the broader subject of elections, and specific focus areas at group level, outside the known traditional political tribes, with ethnicity being foremost among them. In essence, neo-tribes emerged because participants' political beliefs and activities did not align with existing traditional coalitions that typically organise on the lines of ethnicity/tribe affiliation and political party affiliation, with some groups inherently combining the two. Facebook enables the visibility of new political actors and practices, the assembly of like-minded people, expression of divergent ideas and views, ultimately enabling identification of matters of interest and like-minded people. The identification, in turn, enables connection with like-minded people over shared interests, beliefs or identities. Elections as a rallying point resonate with the ephemeral nature of neo-tribes because they are also a temporary event, albeit recurrent.

I established that some of the interactions within neo-tribes included non-members, essentially making the neo-tribes themselves sites of contestation between in-group and out-group members. I interpreted this as an example of the fluid and unstable nature of neo-tribes (Cova & Cova, 2012; Clay, 2018). I posit that the diversity of views introduced by this fluidity potentially reduced the extent to which neo-tribe members could be locked in echo chambers. I identified disintermediation, as practiced on the Facebook pages of candidates and parties, as one of the new political practices enabled by the platform.

I further established that Facebook played a number of other roles, which fed into its ability to support the formation and expression of different neo-tribes. For example, the thematic content analysis of Facebook posts and selected relative comments undertaken, and presented in Chapter Five, reveal the use of Facebook as an extension of the digital public sphere. They also reveal Facebook as a tool for political mobilisation and as alternative media. Through

Facebook, members of the public from diverse backgrounds and with diverse political inclinations were able to participate in public deliberations before, during and after the 2021 elections. The platform, therefore, enabled the inclusion and expression of voices of some of the typically marginalised categories of the population, as expected of a digital public sphere (Mano & Ndlela, 2020). The inclusion was not universal because over 60% of Zambians live in rural and typically poor areas while access to Facebook is mainly concentrated among relatively affluent and educated people in urban areas (see Wyche & Baumer, 2015). The definition of access to Facebook, in this case and as discussed in Chapter Two, encompasses technological-knowhow, suitable devices, internet connectivity, and the ability to read and write in English, which is the primary language used on the platform in Zambia. It is necessary to state that access to Facebook content was not limited only to those who could access the platform itself. The reach of the content was extended by mainstream media such as newspapers, television and radio stations that reused it on their platforms. The reach of Facebook content was also extended through peer-to-peer platforms such as WhatsApp and other forms of word of mouth, reflecting the phenomenon of "radio trottoir" (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Wasserman, 2018). It was common, for example, for local radio stations to pick topics from Facebook and invite their listeners to react, significantly increasing the reach of the content and number of participants in a particular discussion and further growing and diversifying the audience. I observed that Facebook was also appropriating content from mainstream media by way of broadcasting such content as the campaign programmes on community radio stations that I cited in Chapter Five. By doing so, Facebook was applying its amplifier effect to mainstream media content and extending its reach beyond the media's geographic scope. Like other African countries, radio has the widest reach in Zambia, with over 100 stations, some of which are dedicated local language channels, operating in the country (Ndlela & Mano, 2020; Independent Broadcasting Authority, n.d). I established, through the data, that the access that Facebook created, regardless of extent, enabled the emergence of new political actors and practices (Zaghlami, 2020). For example, both ruling party and opposition political leaders and parties were able to interact directly with citizens of different political affiliations. For the pro-incumbent/PF voices that were typically already covered in mainstream media, Facebook facilitated their extended reach as well as created opportunities for more ways of engaging. For opposition political leaders and their parties as well as everyday citizens who were unlikely to be featured in any mainstream media, Facebook provided opportunities for overcoming restrictions imposed by the stifled mainstream media environment in the country (Willems, 2016; Zaghlami, 2020). An example of emergence of new political actors and practices is the

way citizens were able to apply the concept of acclamation to elections by following the pages of preferred candidates and parties, approving or disapproving the page's messages by liking, sharing, commenting in favour of or against the message (Dean, 2017). Facebook further enabled acclamation through its inbuilt emojis that provide a range of emotions (e.g. like, love, sad, laugh, care) that people could select and communicate without needing to add a comment. Facebook also enabled the practice of disintermediation, where candidates directly interact with the electorate without traditional gatekeepers such as media. The pages were managed by administrators on behalf of the candidates and occasionally, according to the respective pages, by the candidates themselves. In practice, direct interaction was achieved through actually interacting with the candidates themselves or with proxies, posting in the name of the candidates. I did not set out to establish the impact of intermediation but I did, however, take note of the data in Chapter Five which shows that more engagement took place between the candidates and the electorate than would have been possible outside a social media platform. Direct interaction between candidates and the electorate is hailed as a positive impact on both political engagements and civic outcomes (Bode & Dalrymple, 2017). It was neither necessary nor possible for my study to state with certainty the impact of these interactions on civic outcomes. What I, however, observed about the interactions from the data is an absence of authoritative counters for purposes of either clarification or verification, as would be expected of a traditional gatekeeper. For example, both Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Hakainde Hichilema pages shared, as fact, information that either contradicted the electorate's lived reality or failed to provide supporting facts and context. Users then debated in the comments, sometimes for extended periods of time, with no way of knowing what the correct position was. An example of a contentious and polarising debate was Lungu and Hichilema's allegations of corruption in the mining sector and counter-allegations of poor leadership, hatred, and inciting voters against the opponent, as cited in Chapter Five. The two contradictory statements turned one of the most critical election issues into an exchange of allegations and counter-allegations between rival candidates and supporters. I observed that disintermediation, in this and related instances, exposed the electorate to potential populist and other propaganda directly from the candidates, with no gatekeeper to establish what was true or not. The risk was exacerbated by the general political temperature on Facebook and the different ways the platform had been weaponised. Interactions similar to the mining statements were also seen on the two politically affiliated pages in the sample, and with more range (topics) and frequency than on the candidates' pages. I took these examples, and others observed in the data, as confirmation of positions put forward in the literature on the connection between social media and populism (Gerbaudo, 2018). The

election of Donald Trump as US President is often cited as an example of this relationship (ibid).

The practice of following preferred candidates on Facebook, and in the process finding fellow supporters and other like-minded people, created new networked publics (Papacharissi, 2015). This particular affordance places Facebook at the heart of formations of neo-tribes as witnessed in the 2021 Zambian elections.

8.1.2 How do voters who use social media make sense of campaign messages based on tribe?

Chapters Five, Six and Seven reveal the different ways voters who use social media received, interpreted and reacted to campaign messages based on tribe in the 2021 election cycle. I established three main sub-themes under this theme, namely: justification, accusations of tribalism, and condemnation. Some pro-PF Facebook commenters in Chapter Five and individual interview respondents in Chapter Seven were of the view that campaign messages based on tribe were necessary. They contended that messages warning voters about how bad a certain tribe is did not amount to tribalism or tribal hate speech but that they, instead, served as a necessary warning and deterrent. This category of social media users also justified the messages as statements of fact. I observed this particular view to have only been put forward by pro-PF supporters from the Bemba/Nyanja language group in chapter Seven. Some of the campaign messages they were justifying were shared by Chishimba Kambwili who, at some point during the electoral cycle, was suspended from participating in campaign activities by the Electoral Commission due to tribal hate speech (ECZ, 2021). The pronouncement and action by the Electoral Commission confirmed some of Kambwili's messages as tribalist hate speech, and going against the country's electoral standards. The people justifying Kambwili's and other similar messages, therefore, exhibited a strong tribal mindset that allowed them to only view members of their own tribe as people, regardless of what they said or did, and to disparage members of all other groups (Musvosvi, 2010). Some pro-UPND focus group participants in Chapter Six justified alleged tribal practices by the party such as only nominating Tonga candidates as well as recording landslide victories in their traditional strongholds. Some argued that there was nothing wrong with electing a leader who was relatable and could appreciate, through experience, the constituents' lived reality. Others

argued that the two cited practices were not unique to UPND and Tonga/Lozi region strongholds. They argued that the same political strategies were employed by Bemba/Nyanja politicians without anyone accusing them of tribalism. The second sub-theme had both pro-PF and pro-UPND members from Chapters Five, Six and Seven, accusing each other of tribalism. This sub-theme was, to an extent, similar to the third sub-theme where some users condemned tribalism, while perpetuating it. I established that both camps recognised tribalism as a bad thing and many condemned it, but did not seem able to spot it when perpetuated by themselves. For example, Kambwili appeared on many radio and television programmes as well as virtual and physical campaign rallies condemning Hichilema's and UPND's alleged tribalism. The messages were deliberately couched as anti-tribalist in order to appeal to more people because of the general shared understanding in the country that tribalism is a bad thing. I established that the content of a number of such messages were, in fact, tribalist in nature. Some reactions, particularly by pro-PF members of the Bemba/Nyanja language group, also justified directing tribalist sentiment at Hichilema, UPND and the Tongas in general, because they were allegedly tribalists themselves. I understood such views and attitudes by some of the voters who use social media as displaying an element of cognitive bias, typical of coalitional conflict as expressed in modern politics (Clark et al, 2019). There was also an evident display of the neo-tribal characteristic of in-group bias and out-group discrimination in the way that some people under the second sub-theme processed the messages based on tribe (Fu et al, 2012; Abbink & Harris, 2019). Some people's family situations place them in both language groups either by birth - where the parents were an inter-ethnic union - or by marriage, where the voters are in inter-ethnic unions themselves and some even have children from the same unions. This category of people received the tribalist messages with discomfort because they belonged to both the group that was perpetuating and the one on the receiving end. With inter-ethnic marriages in Zambia standing at over 40% as at 2020 (Crespin-Boucaud, 2020), it was inevitable that some participants found themselves straddling the two language groups.

Some responses in Chapter Six, particularly from participants who are under 35 years old, reflected a disconnect from tribal sentiment and discourse as it has been experienced in the country, from as far back as the colonial era. I observed that some accounts of the perceived generational shift also had spatial elements to them, such as growing up in a cosmopolitan area with no ethnic majority tied to it. An interesting reaction was the sense by some Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi pro-UPND participants in Chapter Six that the UPND benefited from the heightened tribal temperature in the country because they positioned themselves as victim.

Similarly, I observed a distinctive position by a pro-PF Bemba/Nyanja respondent in Chapter Seven who alleged that the tribalist propaganda against UPND was self-sponsored for purposes of the party gaining a sympathy vote from the public. This position admits the existence of tribalist propaganda, something that some pro-PF respondents denied, and only seeks to deny and reassign responsibility. I did establish, through the Facebook analysis in Chapter Five and focus group discussions in Chapter Six, that some voters who used social media opted to vote for UPND in protest against the tribalist agenda that they believed the PF was pushing. I also established the PF's overt expression of tribalism that could easily be seen on social media, and what may be considered the UPND's implicit expression through actions such as the historic landslide victories in their strongholds and only fielding Tonga/Lozi candidates in their strongholds. I am cognisant of the fact that implicit tribalism by the UPND cannot be proved just by these indicators as they can also be logically attributed to other factors. An explicit expression of UPND tribal bias was when part of the party leadership declared, in 2006, that only a Tonga could replace the deceased Mazoka, and how Hichilema, a Tonga, was subsequently unveiled as the successor. I noted, with interest, the candour with which the Tonga/Lozi focus group in Chapter Six interrogated the issue of tribalist messages and the possibility of UPND being a beneficiary of the sentiment. Some members pointed out how Hichilema's party presidency originated in tribal bias, and how there is a silent understanding that to this day, a non-Tonga cannot assume party presidency. I observed that this level of candour and reflexivity was not present in the Facebook comments of individuals who, like the focus group participants, also identified as pro-UPND and Tonga/Lozi or whose identity could be inferred that way from their names and comments. I understood this as some participants potentially perceiving the focus group as a more private space compared to comment sections of Facebook pages. This was consistent with views shared in the focus groups in Chapter Six where participants limited some of their political deliberations and expression of views to smaller, private networks. I also observed the different ways TL participants made sense of tribe-based messages, with some expressly challenging each other in the discussion. Another notable difference in discussions of tribe was between the pro-UPND Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi focus groups in Chapter Six and how TL participants seemed more comfortable critiquing UPND on tribe than their BN counterparts. This suggests shared implicit awareness of the sensitivity of tribe, as a subject, and the navigation one has to do when discussing a tribe they do not belong to, in order not to offend. It further suggests that even as there has been a shift from ethnic tribes to neo-tribes as salient forms of political affiliation, there is still recognition of ethnic tribe as the primary in-group hence sensitivity around the subject. I also

observed candour in the discussion of tribe in the individual interviews with pro-PF Bemba/Nyanja in Chapter Seven. Some respondents perpetuated the conflation of Hichilema, UPND and Tonga, as witnessed in some campaign messages and Facebook posts in Chapter Five, when alleging tribalism. An interpretation of the tribalist propaganda that was not shared across the two language groups was the sense of being targeted by the tribalist messaging and fear of tribal messaging and sentiment on social media translating into real-world harm. I also observed that some pro-UPND and pro-PF Bemba/Nyanja participants, in Chapters Six and Seven, aligned in distancing themselves from tribal propaganda perpetuated in the name of the Bemba ethnic tribe.

Voters who use social media received and interpreted campaign messages shared online in different ways. I observed that both pro-PF and pro-UPND voters brought their own subjectivities to the interpretation, some aligning within party affiliation, others within and across party and language group affiliation. I observed, from the interpretations, that while the manner of online participation reflected neo-tribe membership, some participants exhibited attitudes that were consistent with ethnic tribe in-groups. I observed that the basis of political affiliation had indeed shifted from ethnic tribe to neo-tribe but some of the mechanisms of organising had remained the same. For example, some participants advanced the same tribe-based arguments that proponents of ethnic-tribalism advanced in Facebook posts and comments.

8.1.3 How do members of online neo-tribes make sense of their online participation?

The meanings that both pro-UPND and pro-PF focus group participants and interview respondents, respectively, made of their participation in online neo-tribes were generally aligned under four main interrelated sub-themes namely: information seeking, community/belonging, resonance, and engagement/influencing.

In the first sub-theme, I established that some participants were online to access election-related news and information, in real-time. I observed that social media, Facebook in particular, provided several options for users seeking information. This was, in part, necessitated by the constrained state of mainstream media in the country (Goldring &Wahman, 2016; Willems, 2016), continuing from the previous election cycle of 2016. I observed that the Covid-19

pandemic and the restrictions on physical gatherings it brought, coupled by a political environment that severely restricted the campaign activities of the opposition, both forced an increase in the reliance on social media for information (Sishuwa, 2022; Chenoweth, 2022). The sub-theme also confirmed existing theories on the evolving relationship between social media and political communication (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). I observed that disintermediation was a significant part of this sub-theme, as participants were able to get information directly from their preferred candidates. I observed that the quality of election-related information differed from source to source.

In the second sub-theme, both pro-PF and pro-UPND voters, in Chapters Six and Seven, saw their participation as a way of establishing communities of interest, connecting over shared beliefs, and developing a shared sense of belonging. I established that several participants identified like-minded individuals within and across ethnic tribe affiliation as well as within but not across political party affiliation. This observation revealed a distinct direction or pattern of neo-tribe formation and the connections formed therein. I observed that political party affiliation was not as affected by emerging neo-tribes as ethnic tribe affiliations were. Participants who identified as falling under this sub-theme, reported some of the benefits of establishing community as being able to debate with each other, learn from each other as well as rally behind their preferred candidates. Although not defined that way by the participants, this was the sub-theme most deliberate about seeking out, forming and growing neo-tribes. Closely related to the foregoing is the sub-theme on resonance. Some participants sought connections with communities and sources of information that resonated with their existing beliefs. I observed that some of the participants that were seeking out Facebook pages and content that aligned with what they wanted to hear, also reported that they did not encounter fake news online in the election cycle. This suggests either selective exposure to information (Sunstein et al., 2016) – through personal choice or algorithms –which results in echo chambers and tribal mindsets (Triandafyllidou, 2020; Gillani et al., 2018), or failure to identify fake news when encountered. The final sub-theme in this section has participants who were online to campaign for their parties as well as influence other users. These participants understood the elections as a competition for power, and by extension resources (Oc et al., 2018) and sought to outnumber the out-groups. I observed that this was part of the reason some participants were actively commenting on issues in neo-tribes they did not belong to.

I observed that some participants were deliberate about seeking out, joining, and assuming specific roles in neo-tribes.

8.1.4 How do anti-democratic voices on social media affect nascent democracies?

Fake news emerged as a significant point of discussion in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. In these three chapters, I observed similarities and differences within and across neo-tribes regarding participants' sense of whether or not they encountered fake news in the electoral cycle, and how they felt about it. Some participants, such as the pro-UPND Bemba/Nyanja reported the least interaction with fake news among the three groups, while others had several encounters. I could not establish whether this difference reflected the actual extent of exposure to fake news or merely difference in ability to recognise or assign it as such.

Some participants believed there was a connection between fake news online and political violence in the real world. Some believed fake news could affect electoral outcomes while others did not believe so. I took particular interest in the views of participants who believed that fake news could not affect voting choices because those were built over a long period of time and could not be affected by something as transient as fake news. This was interesting in the context of neo-tribes as temporarily situated forms of political affiliation and the expectation that they may and do affect electoral outcomes on the basis of their fluid nature. I observed from the Facebook posts and comments in Chapter Five that some of the fake news was deliberately published online to mislead/ serve particular agendas (Morozov, 2011). Some of the news was either completely fabricated, misleading or manipulated (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

I established that there is a connection between the spread of fake news – imagined or real – and the possible ways that different governments react (Eichhorn & Linhart, 2023), and how that, in turn, impacts democracy. In Zambia, legislation has been passed in what the government announced as an attempt to combat fake news. A number of people, including social media content creators, have been arrested and/or jailed on cyber offences covered in the new legislation. Some opposition politicians and civil society actors have condemned the new legislation as anti-democratic. This is one of the ways fake news can affect a nascent democracy, by creating legally backed justification for stifling divergent views. Another way is by damaging society and democratic institutions (Shu et al., 2017, as well as distorting public discourse and potentially undermining decision-making (Olan et al., 2020). I observed that

during the election cycle, the prevalence of fake news undermined public trust (Vosoughi, 2018) and left some people suspicious of everything. One example is how some commenters from the Facebook posts and comments in Chapter Five were debating whether or not the Covid-19 pandemic was real or a mere political strategy to keep opponents confined and unable to run public campaigns. Such an approach could potentially undermine the governance of a young democracy.

8.2 Reflections

1. I believe the main contribution of my study is the description of an emerging phenomenon – tribe – in a relatively under-researched context – Zambia – at a particularly interesting point in time.
2. In retrospect, I should have considered a smaller sample both in terms of the Facebook posts and comments as well as the focus group participants and individual interview respondents. A smaller sample would have allowed me more time to focus on in-depth analysis.
3. I should have included a pro-PF Tonga/Lozi group in my sample. Small as the voting history shows the number to be, it would have been interesting to hear the views of this group and their experience of supporting the party that targets their language group with tribalist propaganda.
4. I could have had joint focus groups with all the three groups – pro-PF Bemba/Nyanja, pro-UPND Bemba/Nyanja and pro-UPND Tonga/Lozi – to enrich the discussion. I could have found a way of responding to the privacy and security concerns by perhaps utilising software that could distort people's voices and prevent recognition. This approach would have required me to be more robust in my moderation, and the discussion could have potentially degenerated, but it could also potentially have produced richer insights with all the participants able to directly engage each other.
5. I started collecting data for the study after the electoral cycle had ended. This was because my research proposal had not yet been submitted for approval at the time of elections. That being the case, I was not able to know if the posts and comments I found still published were the only ones originally there or if some people had deleted their comments or deactivated their accounts. This could be a potential limitation although I believe my multiple layers of data collection and the data saturation I achieved remedy any potentially missing information.

6. Out of the interest spurred by the difference in experiences with fake news exhibited by participants, collecting the data during the electoral cycle itself would have made it possible for me to appreciate what the main stories were at particular periods, and how the different Facebook pages were engaging, if at all.

8.4 Future Research

The study brought up some interesting angles that were outside the current scope but could add value to existing theory. Below are my proposals:

1. Some of the people I interacted with in the focus group discussions and individual interviews, as well as authors of some of the comments analysed, reported family situations that place them in both Bemba/Nyanja and Tonga/Lozi language groups. The specific circumstances that place them in this liminal space vary from children born to inter-ethnic couples, people who are part of inter-ethnic couples, people who have children through inter-ethnic relations, and so on. It would be interesting and insightful to research this category of people in the 2026 elections, and particularly their views and attitudes during periods of polarisation along ethnic lines.
2. It would be interesting to do research that compares how Zambians in the diaspora and Zambians at home experience elections. Specifically, to see if being physically removed from a polarised and tribalised context makes any difference.
3. WhatsApp groups are interesting spaces for citizen deliberation on public issues. They are considered more private than Facebook pages and therefore people express themselves more there. It would be insightful to study this as a potential extension of the public sphere.
4. It would be interesting to research digitally disconnected or semi-connected people, such as those in rural areas with no direct access to social media but who encounter its content through other means like radio or word of mouth from family members with access.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Rhodes University Human Research and Ethics Committee Approval Letter

RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727
f: +27 (0) 46 603 8822
e: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za

https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/

26 May 2023

Iwanga mwilu

Email: g08M4493@campus.ru.ac.za g08m4493@campus.ru.ac.za

Review Reference: 2023-7170-7655

Dear Iwanga mwilu

Title: From tribe to neo-tribe: Exploring the role of social media in the 2021 Zambian elections

Researcher: Iwanga mwilu

Supervisor: Prof Lorenzo Dalvit

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). Your Approval number is: 2023-7170-7655

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please ensure that the ethical standards committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,

Janet Hayward

Dr Janet Hayward

Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee, RU-HREC

cc: Ethics Coordinator

Appendix 2: Participant Informed Consent Declaration

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(To be signed by research participant/s)

Project Title: From tribe to neo-tribe: Exploring the role of social media in the 2021 Zambian Elections.

Lwanga Mwilu, from the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to investigate the role of social media in the transition from ethnic to neo-tribes as salient forms of affiliation during the Zambian 2021 elections.

2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project ***(2023-7170-7655)*** and I may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)

3. By participating in this research project, I will be contributing towards a nuanced understanding of the nexus between social media, changing relational patterns vis-à-vis elections, and democracy, in the Zambian context.

4. I will participate in the project by participating in a focus group/semi-structured individual interview.

5. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.

6. I will not be compensated for participating in the research, but I will receive 10 GB data bundle or cash equivalent for participating in a focus group/ 5GB or cash equivalent for

participating in a semi-structured interview. If attending a physical interview, I will receive a transport refund of K120.00.

7. I will not discuss this research, my participation and my fellow participants with third parties.

8. The following risks are associated with my participation: I may face stigma or hostility due to the way I voted but this will be alleviated by keeping my identity anonymous and paraphrasing my direct quotes and Facebook posts so that they cannot be traced back to me.

9. The Researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of a PhD thesis. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained and my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in the conducting of the research, ***unless I indicate to the contrary/recognise that as a public figure my identity will inevitably be/become known, in which case I agree to accept the loss of anonymity.***

10. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013) it remains my right to request the Researcher to provide me with a detailed explanation of exactly how confidentiality and anonymity of the data I provide will be achieved. I may also request to know exactly how my personal information will be stored securely, and for how long it will be stored.

11. If any data collected from me for this research project is to be used by the Researcher for any further study, I am to be informed in writing and my written consent requested again. I need not give consent for the new research if it is incompatible with the initial purpose of the present study (POPIA, s15(3)). Equally, I can simply reject the request. In such cases, a formal request needs to be made to me by the researcher via the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za).

12. In terms of the POPI Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of an extract of the findings from the thesis unless ***I elect not to receive this feedback.***

13. Any further questions that I might have regarding the nature of the research and/or my participation in it will be answered by Lwanga Mwilu on g08m4493@campus.ru.ac.za under the supervision of Prof. Lorenzo Dalvit on l.dalvit@ru.ac.za

14. By signing this informed consent declaration, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record by the Researcher.

15. I ***agree/disagree*** (delete inapplicable) to the Researcher's request to take photographs, or videoing me as part of this research project, recognizing that agreement here is likely to raise the risk of compromising my anonymity and that steps will be taken to ensure this will not happen it my consent is given.

16. I ***agree/disagree*** (delete inapplicable) to the Researcher's use of voice recording of my comments and opinions during interviews, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views/responses. Furthermore, I have the right to request a copy of the interview transcriptions to confirm that my opinions are accurately recorded

I, ……., have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask, and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

……. ……. …….

Participant's signature **Witness** **Date**

Appendix 3: Pre-Interview Participant Questionnaire

Pre-Interview (Focus Group/Individual Interview) Questionnaire to be completed by each participant:

1. Which of the following is your primary language group? Kindly note that these groups are also representing associated languages e.g. if your primary language is Chewa, you may select the Nyanja group.

- Bemba
- Kaonde
- Lozi
- Lunda
- Luvale
- Nyanja
- Tonga

2. Which party did you support in your 2021 online commentary?

3. Which presidential candidate did you vote for in the 2021 general election?

4. How do you wish to be identified during the interview?

- First name
- Pseudonym e.g. Interviewee 1

Please note that no actual names will be used in the final write-up.

5. For individual interview respondents: How do you want the interview to be conducted?

- Zoom (Researcher to set up Zoom meeting and invite you)
- Phone call (Researcher to call you on your phone)
- Other (Please state)

Appendix 4: Focus Group and Individual Interview Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Self (researcher) introduction and summary of study objectives. Respond to questions if any.

2. Why did you follow Mwebantu/Edgar Chagwa Lungu/Hakainde Hichilema/Zambian Watchdog/Smart Eagles on Facebook?

3. How did you decide which Facebook pages to comment on during the election cycle?

4. How would you describe your relationship with other Facebook users that also regularly engaged?

5. Why did you vote for Hakainde Hichilema?

6. Was tribe an important qualification for a presidential candidate? Why?

7. What did you think of campaign messages asking you to either vote or not vote for a candidate because of their tribe?

8. What role do you think social media played in the 2021 elections?

9. Did you encounter any fake news on Facebook during the election period? Was fake news of any concern to you?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1.Self (researcher) introduction and summary of study objectives. Respond to questions if any.

1. Why did you follow Mwebantu/Edgar Chagwa Lungu/Hakainde Hichilema/Zambian Watchdog/Smart Eagles on Facebook?

2. How would you describe your relationship with other Facebook users that also regularly engaged?

3. Why did you vote for Edgar Lungu?

4. Is there anything you think PF should have done differently in the election cycle?

5. Was tribe an important qualification for a presidential candidate? Why?

6. What did you think of campaign messages asking you to either vote or not vote for a candidate because of their tribe?

7. What role do you think social media played in the 2021 elections?

8. Did you encounter any fake news on Facebook during the election period? Was fake news of any concern to you?