

Chapter 41

Social Media as Alternative Public Sphere for Citizen Participation and Protest in National Politics in Zimbabwe: The Case of #thisflag

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines and discusses the role and communicative potential of social media based platforms in citizen political participation and protests in Zimbabwe specifically focusing on the #thisflag movement on Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp. #thisflag is a social media-based platform that rose to challenge the Zimbabwean government over the political and economic decay as well as rampant corruption characterising the country contemporarily. While a new phenomenon to Zimbabwe and Zimbabwean politics, the impact and communicative potential of social media as an alternative public sphere was recently tested in nationwide protest stayaway organised through the Facebook and Twitter movement under the #thisflag handle/brand. This chapter discusses the manners in which such social media platforms impact national politics in Zimbabwe as well as globally, specifically looking at the #thisflag movement as a case study.

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SOCIAL MEDIA BASED PROTESTS IN ZIMBABWE: A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO ITS RISE AND POPULARITY

The role of social media in citizen political participation and protests in Zimbabwe is a new phenomenon. Its impact and communicative potential was recently tested in nationwide protest stayaway organised through the Facebook and Twitter movement under the #thisflag handle/brand. Following this, the chapter discusses the manners in which social media platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp impact national politics in Zimbabwe and on a global scale, specifically looking at the #thisflag movement as a case study. In the period between March and June 2016, there 'exploded' in Zimbabwe social media based protests against the Zimbabwean Zimbabwe National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) led government over the state of the economy. Since the controversial elections of 2013, Zimbabwe has been on an accelerated economic decline, characterised by the closure of the larger part of industry and a general degeneration of the fiscus.

The economic challenges faced by Zimbabwe had adverse effects on other economies as well, especially those of her border neighbours who had to 'accept' hordes of Zimbabwean economic migrants. The situation has become so bad that the government has been struggling, albeit failing to meet its civil service monthly wage bill commitment among other pertinent responsibilities. In this political climate characterised by political squabbling, rampant corruption, a general economic decay and severing of regional and international relations arose a social media movement named #thisflag, led by a Pastor Evan Mawarire. The movement arguably, while not political party driven, has managed to rattle the ZANU PF government into realising the potential of social media mass protests to the point that it eventually flighted threats to the citizenry over the use and 'abuse' of social media. In fact, the Zimbabwean government has since enacted into law a Cyber Security Law, an act seen as responding to fears of social media. The promulgation of the Cybercrime and Cybersecurity Act in Zimbabwe and the subsequent appointment on Patrick Chinamasa as first minister of the newly created Ministry of Cyber Security speaks to the fears of social media by the ZANU PF government. Sadly, because social media utilises the World Wide Web (WWW) which is internet based, it makes it a transnational phenomenon and more difficult a space to monitor and regulate. This was in light of the observation that the #thisflag movement successfully mobilised the nation to a day national boycott of work on the 6th of July through their submovement tagged #shutdownzimbabwe.

The participation of Zimbabweans living outside the country in countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, The United States of America and Europe in general as economic migrants, further solidifies the transnational impact that the movement had in the determination of the direction the country would take politically and economically. The success of this mass stayaway evinces the power of social media in citizen advocacy in Zimbabwe and thus warrants further study and examination.

As Sabao (2016) observes, since the attainment of independence from the British settler rule in 1980 up to the late 1990s, Zimbabwe *had* predominantly been a one-party state. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) led by the incumbent president, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, was at the helm of the national political ladder, with little, if any, meaningful oppositional political resistance. The emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 saw the ZANU PF led government face the greatest opposition ever since independence. This is largely evidenced by the political inroads made by the newly formed MDC in the 2000 plebiscite, in which it won a resounding historic 57 of the possible 120 seats in parliament – a real political threat and shock to the ZANU PF political hegemony. This feat, to date, is still unparalleled in Zimbabwean politics. Since the emergence of the MDC the

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