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Understanding the Effects of Politicizing Media Operations: A Study of the Patriotic Front Regime (2011–2021)

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Abstract:

There are various forms of Media that have a wider reach of communication, such as newspapers, radio, television, internet-based websites, and magazines. These have a major impact on politics, especially television, radio and newspapers. However, media reporting has received a reaction from political leaders and, in some cases, banned for what is deemed negative reporting against the ruling government. This paper explores the relationship between media and politics in the context of democratic tenets. The study used both secondary and primary sources of data collection. A total of 25 participants took part in this study as key informants. These were selected through purposive sampling and several official and academic documents were reviewed to address this study's aim. The collected data were analysed through a thematic, methodological approach. The findings show that the influence that the Patriotic Front (PF)'s time in government was defined by both successes and a shrinking media space for political debates and information sharing with the public. It was found by this study that television stations, such as Prime TV, with highly politicised content being aired, were bridled by the government to the point of their closure. This study has revealed that various political party structures of the Patriotic Front were used to intimidate the media. Based on the findings, it can be argued here that media houses' critical role in politics was not consolidated but rather constrained during the period under study.

Keywords: Government, patriotic front, politics, Zambia

1. Introduction

In Zambia, the media has evolved by taking several types from print to now the growing dependence on internet-based social sites, including Meta, Twitter, and WhatsApp, among others. Most of these are controlled for profit (Brooke, 2021). There are two divergent views on the role of the media in politics and democratic processes:

- First, it helps improve the quality of policy outcomes and political accountability through the provision of information on what is happening in the government
- Second, media matters by exploiting perceptive mistakes made by citizens while voting for political representatives and propaganda (Mulubale, 2017)

Media plays a critical role in democratic societies to ensure citizens are informed and make responsible choices rather than acting on ignorance. This serves as a checking function to ensure that elected representatives uphold their oaths and carry out their responsibilities. However, growing media has posed a negative impact on political processes as the reporting sometimes lacks verification, presenting misinformation and hate speech. Propaganda has been nothing new since the invention of print media (Hofstetter & Strand, 2009).

The use and migration to digital media have revolutionized and changed how politicians and political groups remain connected with the people. This has enabled small groups with limited resources to also participate in political processes. However, some political regimes have blamed media in democracies for the increased rise of populism, the proliferation of fake news and the spread of radical extremism (Mitchell et al., 2019). This research, therefore, seeks to investigate the effects of politicizing media operations in a democracy. The paper is divided into three main parts:

- The first section has introduced and reviewed some materials on the topic,
 - The second part shows the methodological approaches that were used in this research,
 - In the third section, the findings and the discussion of the results are given.
 - The final and fourth section is the conclusion which gives key issues on the implications of the politicization of the media with lessons from Zambia's former ruling party
- In the following section, we begin with the method utilized.

2. Methodology

This study adopted the empirical review research method to investigate the effects of politicizing media operations. The empirical design enabled critical observation and measurement of the phenomena. Thus, the data gathered was compared against the theory and produced real experiences by examining past empirical studies to answer the research questions (Mulubale, 2019). This research design allowed for evaluating data quality dimensions of completeness through collecting, organizing, and synthesizing available information providing an understanding of the country context and identifying the gaps to address (Gohavacyf, 2020).

The research study used the purposive sampling technique. This is because the purposive sampling technique allowed for qualitative research methods to provide in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation (Statistics Solutions, 2022). As the study focuses on the effects of politicizing media operations with a study on media operations during the Patriotic Front regime 2011-2021, 20 respondents were interviewed to generate appropriate information related to the topic. This sampling method provided for elements carefully chosen based on the purpose of the study.

Data collection involved a review of secondary or written materials and primary sources through semi-structured interviews with key informants. The two selected methods helped the researcher probe participants further on issues that are beyond desk reviews. Data collected from the two methods were valuable for fact-checking and associating responses as given by participants. The research findings were analyzed through a qualitative thematic approach involving some content analysis. The research provided necessary information from carefully selected documents that were relevant as findings on the topical issues covered under this study.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discusses them following a thematic approach. The data given here illustrate media operations in Zambia during the reign of the Patriotic Front-led government from 2011 to 2021. These findings and their analysis draw from what participants said and a desk review of publications and rest upon a descriptive and investigative approach. Emblematic quotes from research participants have been given pseudonyms.

3.1. Participants' Demographic Characteristics

The study sample focused on respondents' service in each sector, professional role, and respondents' experience.

Participants' Roles	Gender		Total (n=25)
	Female	Male	
Journalist from Public Media	1	3	4
Journalist from Private Media	0	2	2
Editor from Public Media	0	2	2
Editor from Private Media	1	1	2
Politicians	2	3	5

Table 1: Features of Research Participants

The table above indicates that 90% of the respondents who participated in the study were males, while 10% were females. This is indicative that there were more male respondents than female respondents in the research. The male respondents were more willing to be part of the study than the female respondents.

4. Media Operations in Zambia: A Historical and Situational Perspective

Media operations in Zambia are guided by several laws to help promote press freedom. Since Zambia's independence in 1964, the country has passed several laws. For instance, the Defamation Act of 1964 restricted freedom of expression and the State Security Act of 1969 limited free speech and media and the possibility of criticizing the government and its officials (Hunt, 2010). Since the 1990s, Zambia has recorded growth in the media from one state-owned broadcaster (Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation), two state-owned daily broadsheets (Times of Zambia and Daily Mail), one major private tabloid (The Post), and one independent private radio station (Radio Phoenix). The country now has over 200 media houses spread across the nation. However, this growth in the media has not fully translated into a free media operating environment (Ndawana, 2021).

In 2002, the ZNBC Amendment Act and the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act were created to establish independent press freedom regulations. Unfortunately, they could not be implemented as the issue was not resolved in the courts as of 2005 (Ndawana, 2021). In 2012, a year after the Patriotic Front party was elected to power under the leadership of the late President Michael Sata, who promised to improve the country's media freedom to enable media operations, the government's agenda on media was said to ensure that the media continue to challenge the government to serve the people of Zambia better. The government embarked on a wide range of policy interventions. To free both public and private media from government control, the self-regulation mechanism for the media and the Freedom of Information Act were passed (Parliament, 2012).

The late President Sata's presidential speech highlighted the decision to free media, indicating, "We have removed government controls on public media so that they carry out their role of informing, educating, and entertaining the public freely and professionally. Even our colleagues in the opposition are now happy beneficiaries of this open policy of my government" (IPI, 2022). On April 30, 2012, a draft constitution was released with provisions for freedom of the press. The

draft constitution, Article 38, guarantees freedom and independence for electronic, print, and other media. Part of it holds that:

- The State shall not exercise control over or interfere with any person engaged in broadcasting, the production or circulation of any publication, or the dissemination of information by any medium, or
- The State shall not penalize any person for any opinion or the content of any broadcast, publication, or dissemination (Draft Constitution, 2012)

In most democratic states, such as Zambia, there has been continued state involvement that limits media independence. Usually, media houses are targets for allegations of non-adherence to regulations, defamation, non-compliance and publishing seditious materials, to mention a few. In most cases, whether the allegations are true or not, authorities tend to use them as tools to compel the media to align with the ruling government for the sole purpose of political power. In July 2012, the Zambia Media Council (ZAMEC), a media voluntary self-regulatory body, was launched to enable the media effectively regulate themselves. This meant that government-controlled media would also be able to operate independently (Ndwana, 2021).

Respondents mentioned issues of media regulation by the government in Zambia. The oppression of the media by the government through inefficiencies with broadcast licensing, intimidation of media houses, and harassment of journalists by political party members infringed on the Freedom of Information Act. For instance, in 2016, government authorities ordered the closure of the Post Newspaper. The closure occurred after a news published by The Post Newspaper accused Zambian authorities of having selectively applied the law to get news publication coverage. Media operations became very partisan (Correspondents Interview, 2022).

Freedman (2012) has shown that there are two critical questions that must be addressed to understand what motivates media regulations.

- Firstly, what are the objectives of media regulation and whose interests it exercises?
- Secondly, what is the relationship between the specific forms of regulations and the wide political environment it emerges?

To respond to these questions, one needs to be observant of the political environment and the type of relationship that exists between the state and the media. In Zambia, this relationship has gradually been confrontational, with various attempts to introduce more formal regulations since the 1990s. Additionally, identifiable state attitudes and actions against press freedom are insightful.

5. Role of Media in Politics

The media is informed by interests, practices, values, and norms. Therefore, the media is an indissoluble part as its messaging creates and gives shape to politics (Craig, 2004). Therefore, media ownership is critical because it raises issues about the diversity of voices in society and the context of political culture. The media serves as the ears and eyes of the public. The traditional print and media reporting has, over time, been viewed as a way to ensure the public gets the real scoop on the functions of the government and various views of political candidates. News media as a societal influence is recognized as it serves four essential purposes:

- Firstly, the free press holds government leaders accountable to the citizens,
- Secondly, the media educates citizens so they can make informed decisions,
- Thirdly, publicizing issues that need public attention and
- Fourthly, the media connects people with one another in a civil society

National public broadcaster carries greater political influence throughout the country through its national television network, radio stations, and newspapers. The Zambian media landscape is rich with the national broadcaster, the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), which has three television channels and three radio stations. The state owns two daily newspapers. The widespread media contributes to the constitution and quality of politics by providing an understanding of issues and events. Hence, enacting a process of critique and questioning that stimulates the democratic health of a society. This function of the media only grows in its importance as the distance between the governors and the governed grows (Mintz, 2016).

Additionally, the media plays a significant role in democratic societies such as Zambia. Media reporting provides information to the public by reporting commentary upon proceedings within parliament, government operations, and the views and alternative policies from the opposition. Zambians, through media, are better informed about the government's decision-making processes, comment on government conduct and demand clarity from decision-makers. When parliament is sitting, the media attend parliament and the main task of parliamentary journalists is to select information about parliamentary debates which are of interest to the public. Therefore, governments have established advanced information units to ensure policies gain maximum coverage (Parliament, 2015). As remarked by P1 in the quote below:

The media's role in politics is to inform electorates about political trends. This is because politics are constantly influenced by the views of those in power. The world of politics is always adapting to various political party forms of governance. How power is achieved and used in a country or society varies from one political regime to the other. Also, media is a tool used by politicians to reach electorates.

Nevertheless, the media not only observes the democratic process but is also an integral part of democracy. The media plays a key role in influencing political elections. When the media is free and balanced, it fosters transparency and determination of important electoral information. The spread of media provides citizens with opportunities for participatory citizenship. The public often turns to media platforms to follow election news and development (Rosen, 2015).

The media in politics create a reasonable standard that the media is expected to use in striking a balance among viewpoints and voices in the news. This resulting balance can allow the government to deliberate and exercise while holding officials accountable to the public's opinion in the process. Editors and reporters might weigh out the extent to which official news regarding an issue through which social opinion is allowed to pass be presented. Therefore, journalists can index legitimate voices in the news based on the range of views expressed by prominent officials and members of various institutional blocs of influence on the outcome of a situation (Bennett, 1990).

Zambia held one of the most highly anticipated and fiercely contested general elections in recent times, in which an analysis of the performance and conduct of the media was expected to be at its highest. The general indication showed that the opposition trends were at their worst in the weeks and days towards and after August 11, 2016 poll, as portrayed in the content carried by various media. This was more so, especially when it came to the coverage and reporting on various political entities in the country. The quarter also saw continued high levels of political prejudice towards media freedom and freedom of expression (MISA, 2016).

However, critics indicate that media reporting threatens democratic values and that, for most developing countries, the media is seen as a threat to national unity, national development, and peace. Often, politicians claim tabloid media are overly discordant in their reports and create content that is destructive and negative news. Government's point to this is the lack of well-investigated information. The situation of The Post newspaper, among other media houses in Zambia, is informative as it shows how situations of direct or indirect state assault intimidate the media, (MISA Zambia, 2016).

It has become difficult to define the precise nature of media power. More recently, media has focused less on the production and forms of media texts and more on contexts and processes of reception. A consequence of mediated public is the breakdown of the distinction between the public and private spheres. Public media increasingly render public issues that are free from public scrutiny (Craig, 2004).

6. Government and Media Operations: A Complex Relationship

The public space provides a dynamic platform for vigorously examining competing ideas. This relationship between two perpetually opposing sides makes it a fascinating area of investigation to understand how it functions and is in a continual transformative mode as factors change. The government's role in media operations is to enhance media regulations. Media in all its forms is under governmental jurisdiction and regulatory efforts by the government help to transform new forms of media that emerge and expand its market to larger audiences. Although there are various institutions that hold different roles and duties, the overall purpose of governmental control remains to establish and bring order to media operations while ensuring the declaration of the public good (Minnesota, 2010). As stated by P2, who said the following:

The government's role in media operations is to create an enabling environment for all stakeholders by creating good policies and laws, issuing licenses and equipping the media with all available information and training whenever there is a national event, for example, during elections. The government should create a non-hostile environment allowing the media to report openly on issues that inform the citizens to make well-informed decisions.

However, the increased shifts in government regulatory control have had powerful effects on the media landscape in Zambia. Laws have prohibited media houses from reports that seem against the government hence, creating a large mass media that is increasingly dominated by the government. Efforts to enhance self-regulation had been crippled by the government, which prevented the public media from participating. Since public media employs almost two-thirds of all Zambian journalists, its non-participation threatened the body's legitimacy and financial independence. P1 reflected on the Zambian government's role in media between 2011 and 2021 by commenting:

Government's role in media operations should provide the media's free space to conduct investigations and provide credible information without fear or favor. However, this has not been the case because the government interferes in media operations. Public media tends to be vulnerable and biased towards the government because the government is a senior stakeholder. On the other hand, private media tend not to be factual in their reporting, which may not sit well with the government. Hence, the government has closed some media houses, which have made it look like a bully.

Media's freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed in Zambia. However, the government often restricts these rights in their practice. The Patriotic Front government pledged in 2012 to free all state-owned media from government editorial control, which was the opposite as they continued reporting along pro-government lines. Most journalists supposedly practiced self-censorship as the media houses conducted prepublication reviews (Press Freedoms, 2017).

As of 2014, media houses and journalists faced physical attacks and harassment in their work and several retaliations for their reporting; the general media environment faced increased intimidation. Most private and community radio stations encountered increased harassment and threats by alleged PF cadres and local government officials, usually after programs that hosted opposition parties or phone-in shows that criticized an official on air. For instance, in April 2014, PF cadres raided Sun FM in Copperbelt Province during an interview with the then-opposition presidential candidate for United Party for National Development in 2011, 2015 and 2016 which forced the candidate to flee (Amnesty, 2016).

As of 2016, the Rights Freedom House ranked Zambia's press as 'Not Free' during the annual country reports on press freedom status. The government during the Patriotic Front took punitive measures against critical news outlets (Press Freedoms, 2017). P3 illustrates this point clearly by indicating the following:

The government's role in media operations is to regulate and form policies to have a bias-free industry. Unfortunately, one of the major problems is that journalists get little money, and in turn, it gives politicians an opportunity or advantage to bribe them, thus preventing media from investigating and sharing fact-based information rather than opinions.

In 2020, the PF government launched the first-ever Media Development policy in the history of Zambia. The policy set out the government's vision and mission to promote media's freedom of expression which created a critical step towards attaining vibrant media in Zambia. The launch of the policy was evidence of the government's commitment to creating an enabling environment for the media to thrive, as the media is the fourth state and plays a critical role in informing, educating, and entertaining the public. For this reason, it is practically impossible for any government to have expressive engagement with citizens in the absence of the media. Further, citizens can only contribute to the development of the country if they are well-informed. The policy was anchored on four key pillars: media freedom, media independence, media pluralism and the safety of journalists to achieve media development indicators (Zambia Daily Mail, 2020).

The government in Zambia works to guarantee freedom of the press to Zambians through the constitution. However, there were efforts to establish a new constitution with the help of the Zambian National Constitutional Conference (NCC). The task was to review, analyze and implement old provisions that had previously been listed in an earlier constitutional draft (9IPI, 2016). As noted by former Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services Dora Siliya, the media development policy would set a good platform for the media in Zambia to grow and positively contribute not only to informing the citizenry but also to creating employment (Zambia Daily Mail, 2020).

Information is powerful and insight impacts the public discourse. Therefore, perceptions of the citizen can be changed by access to the media. Freedom of expression is not the only core of healthy media but also a central human right and dynamic for a democratic structure. In any culture of prevention, effective and democratic media is an essential part and crucial for societies trying to make a transition towards peace and democracy. It is the government's responsibility to ensure state peace and stability and regulate media to avoid media being misused for propaganda, inciting hatred and spreading rumors, and, therefore, artificially creating tensions (Kuusik, 2010).

Misinformation can cause conflicts making media a pervasive part of the public's daily life, especially in unstable societies and thus, able to shine a light on conflicts. Since most armed conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa have governmental and not necessarily territorial reasons, the media bears a lot of potential for misrepresenting facts and trying to seize control over the distribution of information. For this very reason, the intervention of unbiased and free global media is important not only for the worldwide public but also for the people directly affected. The number of conflicts, however, that get international attention is small. Therefore, local media is vital in this context. In case the local media fail to regulate misinformation, the government may step in to prevent conflict (UNOWA, 2005).

For instance, the news media in Rwanda played a crucial role in the 1994 genocide as local media fueled the killings and prolonged the violence. In 1993, the ruling National Revolution Movement for Development engaged in negotiations to end the civil war through its official radio station known as Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), which broadcasted hate and prepared its listeners for violence. The radio station supported an extremist newspaper, the Kangura. In the lead-in to genocide, the RTLM used insensitive language against the Tutsi community. The massacre that started on April 7, 1994, killed one million people belonging mainly to the Tutsi ethnic community and moderate Hutus in 100 days (Tasamba, 2021).

7. To Interfere or Not to Interfere: How Government Can Affect Media Functions

To understand media, one needs to better understand the political environment in which the media operates. This is so obvious considering the differences between media in democracies and those in authoritarian states. A state's control over the media is an element of authoritarian systems. In such contexts, the state dominates the potential of the media and in extreme cases, state-owned media act as state arms of propaganda to narrowly promote government-sanctioned messaging. In such cases, the public must be able to read between the lines to decode such propaganda efforts. Democratic societies, on the other hand, protect freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Such societies are characterized by a mix of public and privately owned media outlets offering a variety of arts, news, information, and entertainment. The media in such societies are still subject to government regulation, but they are usually given much greater latitude to operate independently (Corwin, 2016).

However, in several democracies, the media is still controlled by a small group of powerful interests. The national government serves as an organizing structure that can, to changeable degrees, promote or constrain the free activity of the media. This is the strain between structure and agency as it applies to media and the political world. This relationship between political forces and the media raises important questions about the limits of 'free speech,' the impact of economic interests, and the appropriate role of government. Political management of the media is exercised through a range of forms of political communication. Political advertising is one of the most powerful forms of political communication that allows political actors to impart their messages directly to the public.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) suspended the broadcasting licenses of Muvi TV, Komboni and Itezhi-tezhi radio stations a few days after what was said to have been an 'unclear' re-election of Lungu in the August general election. The media houses were accused of allegedly broadcasting statements that were a danger to national security. The three media outlets were neither charged nor given a chance to be heard but were just served with suspension notices and switched off. Their buildings were taken over by heavily armed police who denied workers any entry to the buildings. The stations were then reinstated in an apparent 'diluted' form weeks after the election petition hearing had commenced and Lungu was sworn into office (Civicus, 2017).

Government interference in media operations creates a serious clamp-down in the media's freedom of expression and reporting of activities that the government is doing. During the PF regime, in the run-up to elections, radio stations that hosted opposition party members were highly victimized by the ruling party cadres and the police. The scenario continued, as evidenced by the detention of and threats to journalists hosting opposition by media houses such as Prime TV, Chipata TV, Mkushi radio and Radio Mano, to mention a few who had been victims. Also, the harassment of The Mast newspaper, owned by Fred's wife, Mutinta Mazoka M'membe, is yet another example of a clamp-down on freedom of expression (Civicus, 2017). This finding has important implications for how government and media operate, as highlighted in P4's remarks below:

The government's say on what to run and what not to in the media usually reflects more on its self-promotion and agenda to reach out to the people. Usually, it is masked up as mere publicity. This affects information flow to the public to make informed decisions on national affairs that equally affect them.

From the above quote, we can see that government's interference in media operations is often based on national security and counterterrorism, often blind journalism in the public interest. Such interventions prevent the dissemination of information that is in the public's interest. During the period under study, 2011 and 2021, this study found that several journalists were targeted for publishing or having leaked information that the government or state officials had asserted was not meant for the public. For instance, in 2016, Former Minister of Information and Broadcasting Mr. Kambwili reported the Post newspaper to police for alleged 'phone tapping' over a story that quoted a phone conversation between himself and Kitwe District Commissioner Chanda Kabwe, stating the act by the publication by the newspaper is a violation of his privacy (MISA, 2016).

The consequences of political interference in the media are crucial as it leads to the division of societies, as witnessed during the media coverage of the 2021 electoral process and the widespread misinformation or the so-called fake news. Additionally, civic spaces are increasingly narrowed by political manipulation (EFJ, 2021). Although Zambia is constitutionally a democratic state, battles for a free press and freedom of expression are far from being over. It is true that the press is one of the most important freedoms in the process of democratization, but then Zambia is far from truly being democratic (MISA, 2021).

In Zambia, like in many other countries in Africa, the return to multiparty politics or from military regimes to democratic governments has signalled a new and challenging role for the media. From one end, the media tries to play its role to the full, but the declared democratic governments on the other end burden the media with restrictive legislation. These legislations prevent easy access to required government information and make investigative reporting precarious. Constitutional guarantees and provisions for freedom of the Press are not expressed as a fundamental right. Such restrictive and non-progressive media legislation has haunted the media industry in Zambia from 1964 to date, making accountability and transparency elusive and hard to come by (Chanda, 2012).

8. Conclusion and Closing Proposition

This paper has identified and discussed the effects of politicizing media operations in Zambia during the Patriotic Front-led government from 2011 to 2021. Using both primary and secondary sources, it has been established in this paper that there is a strong interplay between the day-to-day functions of the media and the government. One of the main findings of this study presented above is that media operations have an impact on the public which in turn may affect opinions on the effectiveness of a political party in power. Since the media informs the public on the functions of a government and help provide information necessary for checks and balance, it is on this premise that under the PF regime, the relationship between the government and mass media in Zambia was not only apprehensive but unfavorable for democratic consolidation. This is because the media was highly politicized by political party mechanisms and government structures that censored and controlled aired or published content. The presence or lack thereof of media freedoms and the constant threats on journalists can hinder how governments operate and determine how long political parties stay in power, as seen in this research's findings. It can be contended here that limited media freedom in many ways seems to be a product, not a consequence, of tyrannical elements in government that do not have a full separation of party politics from state functions. Based on these study's findings, we can argue that the politicization of the media as a third estate was made unwholesome during the PF's reign partly due to the lack of access to information bills or legislations that guarantee independent media operations by also insulating journalists from interferences and control by political elites.

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