

Zambia at a crossroads: Will citizens defend democracy?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 157 | Michael Bratton, Boniface Dulani, and Sibusiso Nkomo

Summary

If democracy is “rule by the people,” then “the people” play a decisive part in determining the health of this form of government. Especially when an incumbent president seeks to accumulate excessive powers, the question arises: Will people stand up to defend democracy?

Today, Zambia has arrived at a crossroads. A convergence of troubling trends is evident: The quality of elections has deteriorated, the police and courts are losing independence, the space for political expression has shrunk, the leader of the political opposition languishes in jail, opposition legislators have been banished from Parliament, and an over-reaching president has imposed a state of emergency (Agence France-Presse, 2017).

How do ordinary citizens react as such developments unfold? Do they consider that their country is backsliding from a functioning electoral democracy to a dominant-party autocracy? Are they predisposed to act as everyday guardians of democracy in the face of power plays by the executive?

This report addresses these questions by means of a nationally representative Afrobarometer survey of public opinion conducted in Zambia in April 2017. The survey results show that, while Zambians remain firmly committed to democratic ideals, they worry that, in practice, their own democracy has begun to erode. They recognize that political space is closing with regard to basic rights such as freedom of speech. They assess the performance of the incumbent negatively, especially in terms of economic management, corruption control, and police repression. In response, Zambian citizens – notably those with most education, but less so for those with limited schooling – are sounding an alarm. They are reiterating solid and sustained support for institutional checks and balances and a firm rejection of one-man rule.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were implemented between 1999 and 2015. Round 7 surveys (2017/2018) are currently underway; results are released as fieldwork is completed.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of citizens aged 18 years and older. A sample of 1,200 respondents yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level.

This dispatch draws on a Round 7 Afrobarometer survey conducted in Zambia between 8 and 25 April 2017. The results therefore cover events after Zambia's August 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections but before the National Assembly's ratification of a presidential order to impose a state of emergency in July 2017. The arrest and detention of the country's main opposition leader occurred on April 10, during the time the survey was in the field. In order to track long- and medium-term trends in public opinion, this dispatch refers to data from all seven Afrobarometer surveys conducted in Zambia at two- to three-year intervals between 1999 and 2017.

Key findings

- Although Zambians have long been committed to the ideals of democracy, their satisfaction with the way democracy actually works in their country has sunk from a majority 68% in 2012 to a minority 49% in 2017.
- People sense a decline in freedom of speech. The proportion expressing a need to "be careful what they say about politics" has risen by 10 percentage points, from 62% to 72%, between 2012 and 2017.
- They also perceive a closure of space for political association. As of April 2017, Zambians perceive less rather than more freedom for opposition parties to operate (46% vs. 35%).
- Only about one-third (36%) of Zambians feel comfortable offering criticism of President Edgar Lungu.
- Yet most Zambians favour checks on the president's executive powers. For example, more than six in 10 (64%) think the president should be monitored by Parliament, and seven in 10 (71%) say he should always obey the laws and courts.
- More than eight in 10 Zambians (84%) favour a limit of two five-year terms for the presidency.
- Attitudes toward emergency measures are mixed. Zambians oppose governmental violations of the right to privacy (e.g. monitoring phone communications) and the right to political association (e.g. banning organizations). But, at least before the imposition of emergency measures in July 2017, citizens were less robust in defending freedom of the press and freedom of movement.
- Education is the best predictor of popular commitment to democracy in Zambia. Even small amounts of primary or secondary education strengthen an individual's predisposition to defend democracy. To counteract democratic backsliding in Zambia, however, the key opinion leaders are those with post-secondary education.

Background

Until recently, Zambia enjoyed a well-deserved reputation as one of Africa's leading electoral democracies. In 1991, it was the first anglophone African country to undergo a peaceful transition from one-party rule to a competitive multiparty system, which included the electoral defeat of the country's founding father. In 2001, Zambia set another democratic precedent for

Africa: Backed by a groundswell of public support, members of ruling and opposition parties combined to deny a sitting president an unconstitutional bid for third term in office. In 2011, Zambia passed another milestone in democratic consolidation when, in one of the continent's few examples of post-transition electoral turnover, voters chose to remove a dominant ruling party and elevate a populist challenger to the presidency.

Trends took a turn for the worse, however, in the approach and aftermath to the August 2016 presidential election, which pitted President Lungu (who had succeeded Michael Sata after the latter's death) against Hakainda Hichilema (who had narrowly lost to Lungu in a presidential by-election in January 2015). The pre-election period was marred by electoral violence so "frequent and extreme" that the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) suspended campaigning in Lusaka for 10 days and the president called on the country to pray for a peaceful vote (Resnick, 2016). In a move widely seen as a government effort to stifle dissent, the country's main independent newspaper, *The Post*, was summarily shut down, ostensibly for defaulting on taxes.¹ As for the vote itself, the main coalition of domestic election monitors certified that, despite minor irregularities, Zambians and others "should have confidence in the ECZ's presidential results" (Christian Churches Monitoring Group, 2017).

But an escalating standoff ensued. Hichilema cited voting irregularities and refused to accept the results, instead filing a petition for nullification of the election with the Constitutional Court.

But the court threw out the opposition's petition on a technicality in a process judged by a senior Zambian constitutional specialist as "an illegal subversion of the judicial process" (Ndulo, 2017). Hichilema was arrested, brutally treated, and detained indefinitely on spurious treason charges for which no evidence has been provided. In June 2017, the speaker of the National Assembly unilaterally suspended 48 opposition members of Parliament, purportedly for missing the president's State of the Nation address. In July, the remaining majority-party legislators ratified a 90-day state of emergency decreed by President Lungu, which suspended civil liberties and granted the police increased powers of arrest and detention.

Against this background, concerned commentators judge that Zambia is "edging towards dictatorship" (Allison, 2017) or is already "a dictatorship – or getting there" (Cheeseman, 2017). In a country that is formally designated as a "Christian nation," Zambia's church leaders have publicly warned that their country is, "except in designation, a dictatorship" (Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017).

Direction of the country

To get a sense of the overall public mood, Afrobarometer asks a general question: "Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or the right direction?" As of April 2017, almost two out of three Zambians (65%) say that their country is headed in the wrong direction (Figure 1). This represents a stark reversal from 2012, when fewer than one out of three (29%) felt the same way. While the public mood darkened considerably over the course of President Sata's tenure (61% said "wrong direction" by October 2014), it has dimmed further under President Lungu.²

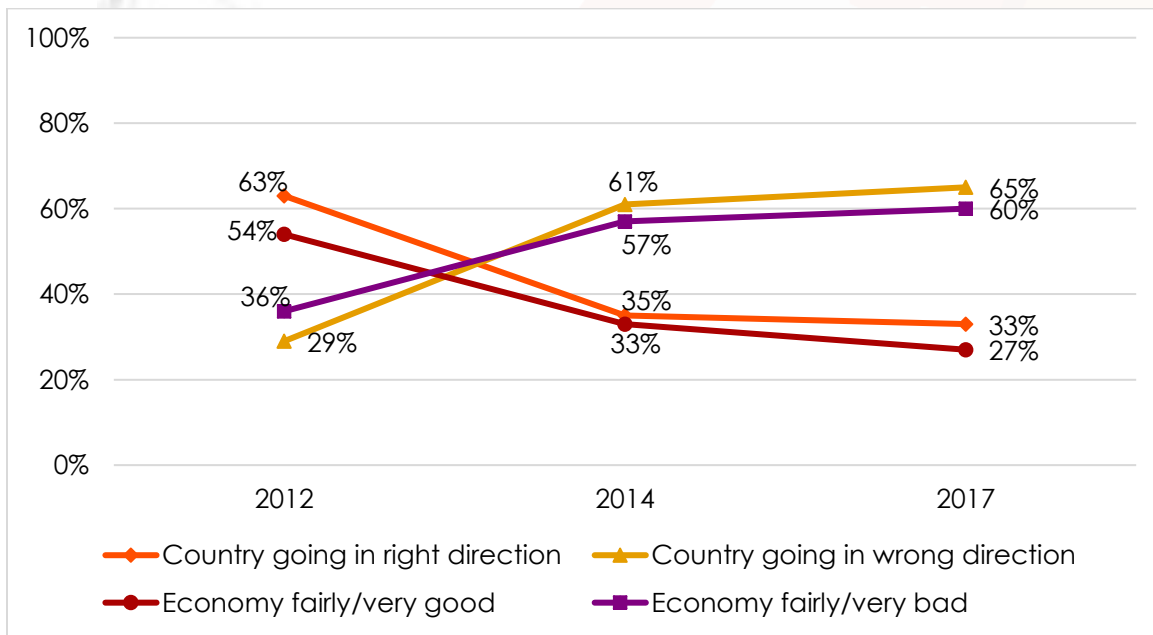
¹ *The Post* now operates as *The Mast*.

² A 4-point change, while small, falls outside the surveys' margin of sampling error.

As in other African countries, the public's general sense of optimism or pessimism is shaped by economic considerations. The perceived trajectory of the country closely follows popular assessments of "present economic conditions." When the economy is seen to be doing well, optimism about the country's future is high. In 2017, however, some 60% of Zambians consider that their national economy is underperforming. For example, large majorities report that the government is doing poorly at creating jobs (77%), narrowing income gaps (80%), and keeping prices stable (81%) (not shown).

Moreover, two out of three Zambians (66%) think that official corruption has increased ("somewhat" or "a lot") over the past year. An even higher proportion (70%) consider that the government is handling the fight against official corruption "fairly badly" or "very badly." In addition, a similar proportion (68%) say they fear retaliation or other negative consequences if they report incidents of corruption, including within the police force.

Figure 1: Direction of the country | Zambia | 2012-2017



Respondents were asked:

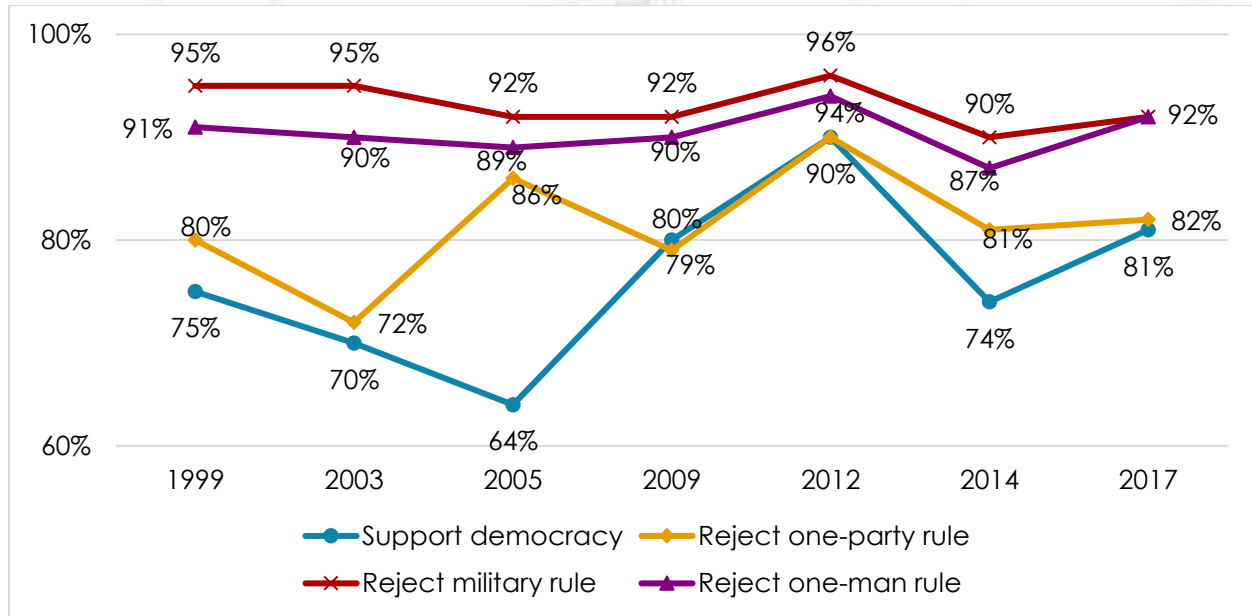
1. Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask YOU about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
2. In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

Trends in democracy

Despite economic challenges, Zambians remain strongly committed to the ideals of democracy (Figure 2). On average, across seven Afrobarometer surveys over 18 years, three out of four Zambians (76%) have expressed a preference for democracy rather than "any other form of government." In 2017 this figure stands at 81%. Solid affection for democracy is reinforced by widespread popular rejection of authoritarian systems such as one-party rule (82%), military rule

(92%), and rule by a big-man dictator (92%). All told, Zambians express among the longest and strongest attachments to the principles of democracy of people anywhere in Africa (Bratton & Houessou, 2014).

Figure 2: Political regime preferences | Zambia | 1999-2017



Respondents were asked:

1. There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?

- A. Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.
- B. The army comes in to govern the country.
- C. Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

(% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove” of each alternative)

2. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

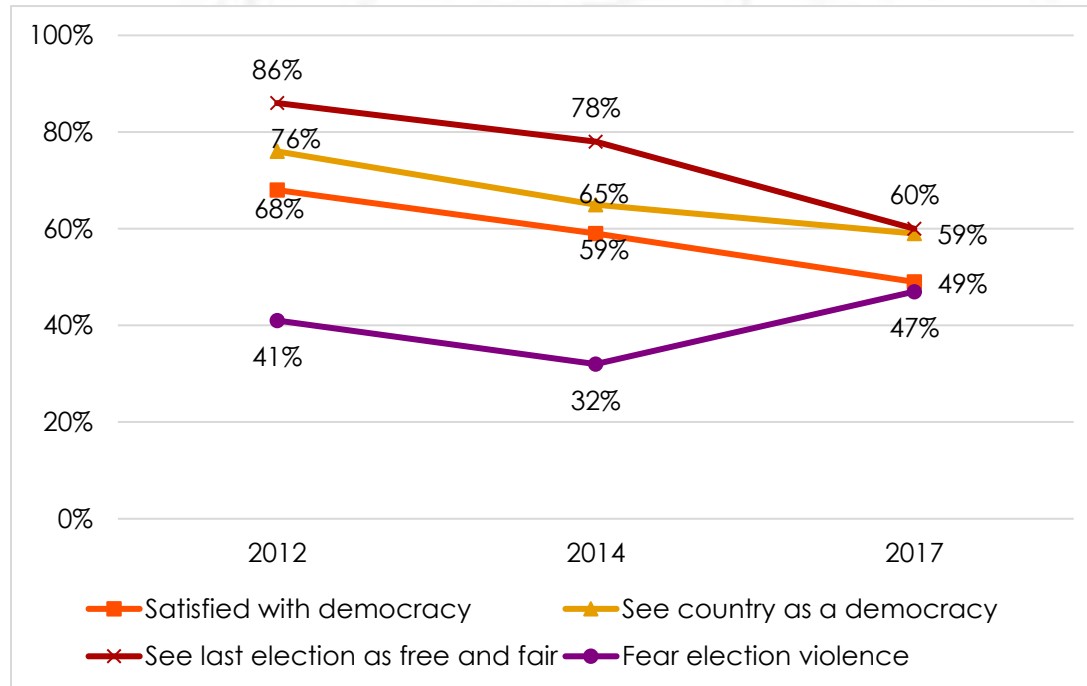
- Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
- Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
- Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

(% who say democracy is preferable)

But principles are rarely realized in practice. In recent years, Zambians have expressed declining confidence in the actual quality of democracy in their country (Figure 3). The proportion of the population who pronounce themselves satisfied (“fairly” or “very”) with “the way democracy works” in Zambia has sunk from a majority 68% in 2012 to a minority 49% in 2017. This sharp downward trend is echoed in the proportion who see their country as a “full” or almost full democracy, which has dropped from 76% to 59% over the past five years.³

³ The reader should bear in mind that these downward trends also represent a return to the norm before the 2011 election. The perceived extent of democracy and popular satisfaction with democracy were both low (below 50%) prior to the alternation of ruling parties.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy | Zambia | 2012-2017



Respondents were asked:

1. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Zambia today? (% "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems")
2. Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Zambia? (% "fairly" or "very" satisfied)
3. On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]? (% "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems")
4. During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")

Citizens apparently judge the extent of democracy in good part according to the quality of elections. If they think elections are clean, citizens tend to believe that democracy is being constructed (Mattes & Bratton, 2017). It is therefore worrisome that the proportion of Zambians who regard the latest election as "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with (only) minor problems" has declined even more sharply than other democratic attitudes. Only 60% see President Lungu's election in 2016 as having been free and fair, down from 86% for the 2011 contest that first elected President Sata, a 26-point drop. The fact that the 2017 figure is higher than the opposition's vote share in 2016, however, suggests that many Zambians saw the election, even if disputed, as acceptable.

Nonetheless, people recognize that the government is failing to protect them from electoral violence. For example, at least as many people say the government is handling the prevention of such violence badly (50%) as say it is performing well (46%). Indeed, consistent with earlier observations about the declining quality of elections, almost half of all citizens (47%) now report

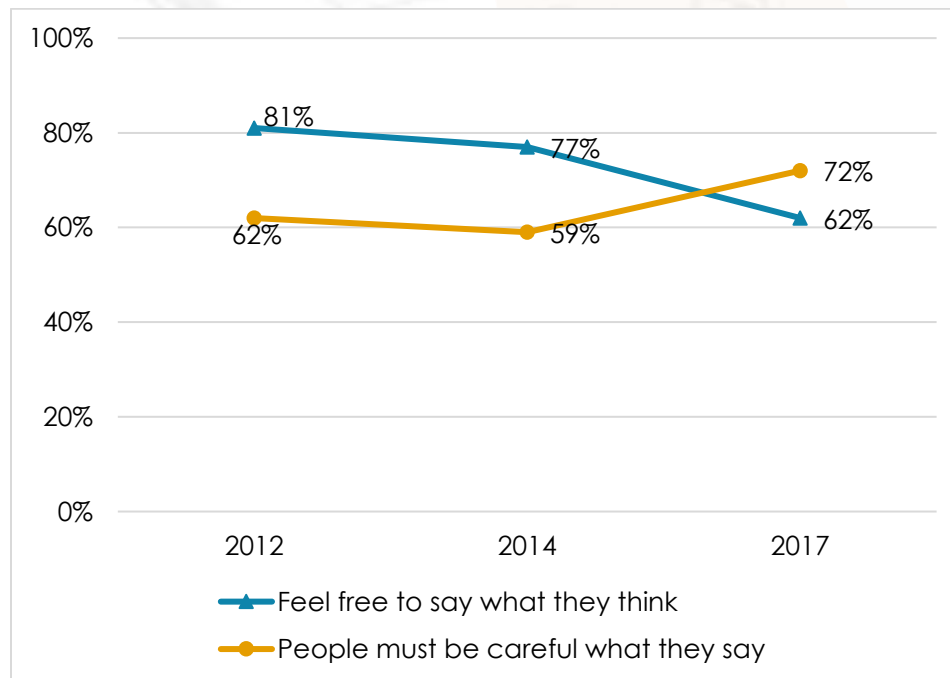
that, during elections in Zambia, they “personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence.”

Afrobarometer has used trends in public opinion to appraise political risk in Africa (Bratton & Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). In cases like Kenya, Mali, and Zimbabwe, rapid drops in popular political satisfaction have been shown to portend risk to a democratic regime. In Kenya and Zimbabwe, such risk was manifest in violent elections; in Mali, the result was the easy overthrow of a feckless civilian government in an ill-prepared military coup. The form that political risk might take in Zambia remains unclear, but early warning signals are present that the country’s hard-won democracy may well be in danger.

Political space

To defend democracy, citizens require an open political environment. At minimum, they must be able to speak their minds about public affairs, including criticizing government if criticism is warranted. Yet Zambians express concern that the political space for free expression is closing. In surveys over the years in Zambia, Afrobarometer has asked, “*In this country, how free are you to say what you think?*” Between 2012 and 2017, the proportion of citizens saying “completely free” or “somewhat free” has declined sharply, from 81% to 62% (Figure 4). On a separate question on the same subject, more than seven out of 10 Zambians (72%) now say that they must “always” or “often” be “careful of what they say about politics,” a proportion that has risen by 10 percentage points over the past five years.

Figure 4: Freedom of speech | Zambia | 2012-2017

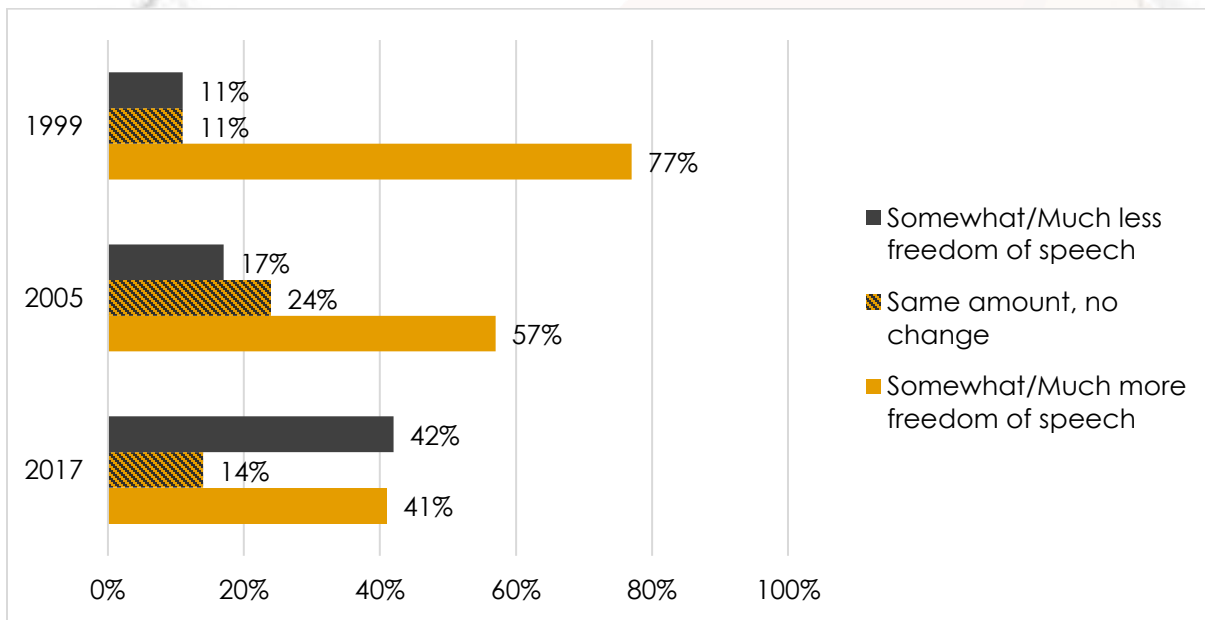


Respondents were asked:

1. *In this country, how free are you to say what you think? (% “completely free” or “somewhat free”)*
2. *In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful of what they say about politics? (% “always” or “often”)*

The closing of political space is even more evident when viewed over a longer time perspective (Figure 5). Afrobarometer has sometimes asked whether people have “more or less freedom now compared to a few years ago.” At the end of the 1990s, when enthusiasm for the country’s democratic transition still ran high, more than three-quarters (77%) perceived a recent expansion in freedom of speech. By 2005, this sentiment had soured substantially (to 57%), but a majority still thought they were freer than before. By 2017, however, an about-turn had occurred: Only a minority (41%) now considers that they enjoy “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom of speech. Instead, the proportion saying “less” freedom has risen by a factor of almost four. In sum, Zambia has gone from a country where most people felt at liberty to engage in open political debate to one where most people have begun to look over their shoulders to see who is listening.

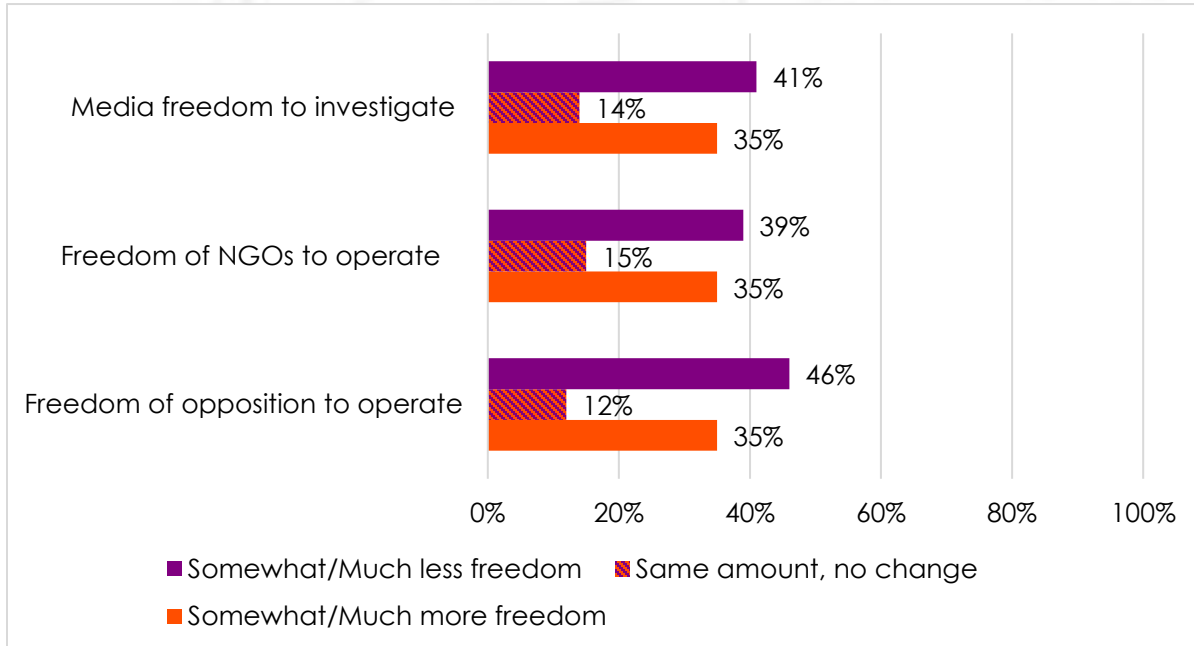
Figure 5: More or less freedom of speech? | Zambia | 1999-2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?

In parallel, the 2017 survey also reveals fall-offs in the perceived freedom of the press. More Zambians think that conditions have recently worsened (41%) than improved (35%) in terms of “the media’s freedom to investigate or report on government mistakes or to criticize government’s actions or performance” (Figure 6). Perceived restrictions on free expression also spill over into an erosion of associational life. Slightly more Zambians think that the country has become worse off (39%) rather than better off (35%) in terms of “the freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views.” Most importantly, the declining quality of elections and the government’s mistreatment of the country’s main opposition leader have seemingly convinced Zambians that the country now has less (46%) rather than more (35%) freedom for the opposition parties to promote alternative views and operate without hindrance.

Figure 6: Freedoms, present vs. past | Zambia | 2017



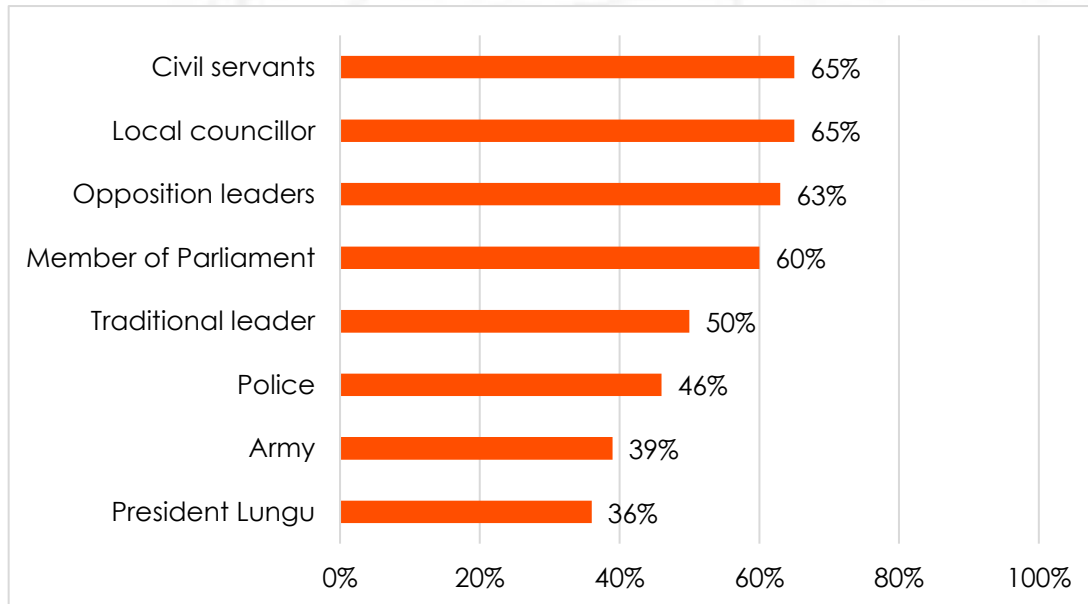
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same:

- Your own freedom to join any political organization you want?
- The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
- The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?
- The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?

A shrinking political arena silences some people more than others. In a sign of democratic health, almost two out of three Zambians (65%) say they feel free to criticize civil servants, many of whom are non-partisan professionals. Majorities even feel free to criticize members of Parliament and local councillors, even if these elected officials are affiliated with the ruling party (Figure 7). But ordinary Zambians hesitate to criticize any institutions associated with the coercive power of the state, such as the police (46%) and the army (39%). Instead, to the extent that police officers do the bidding of the ruling party, they risk being regarded as partisan agents rather than neutral professionals.

The partisan cast of the remaining political space in Zambia is well illustrated by the contrast in popular orientations to incumbent and opposition political leaders. Most Zambians (63%) feel little hesitation in taking issue with the public statements of opposition political leaders like Hichilema. But many fewer – barely one in three (36%) – say they feel comfortable offering criticism of orders issued or claims made by President Lungu. In other words, freedom to criticize is unevenly available in contemporary Zambia, strongly favouring the top leader over his main rival.

Figure 7: Perceived freedom to criticize | Zambia | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following? (% "somewhat free" or "completely free")*

Checks on the presidency

A key purpose of a democracy is to limit executive power. Under a democratic constitution, legislatures and courts have their own independent realms of authority designed to temper and offset excessive presidentialism. In short, the rule of law aims to prohibit the arbitrary rule of individual strongmen.

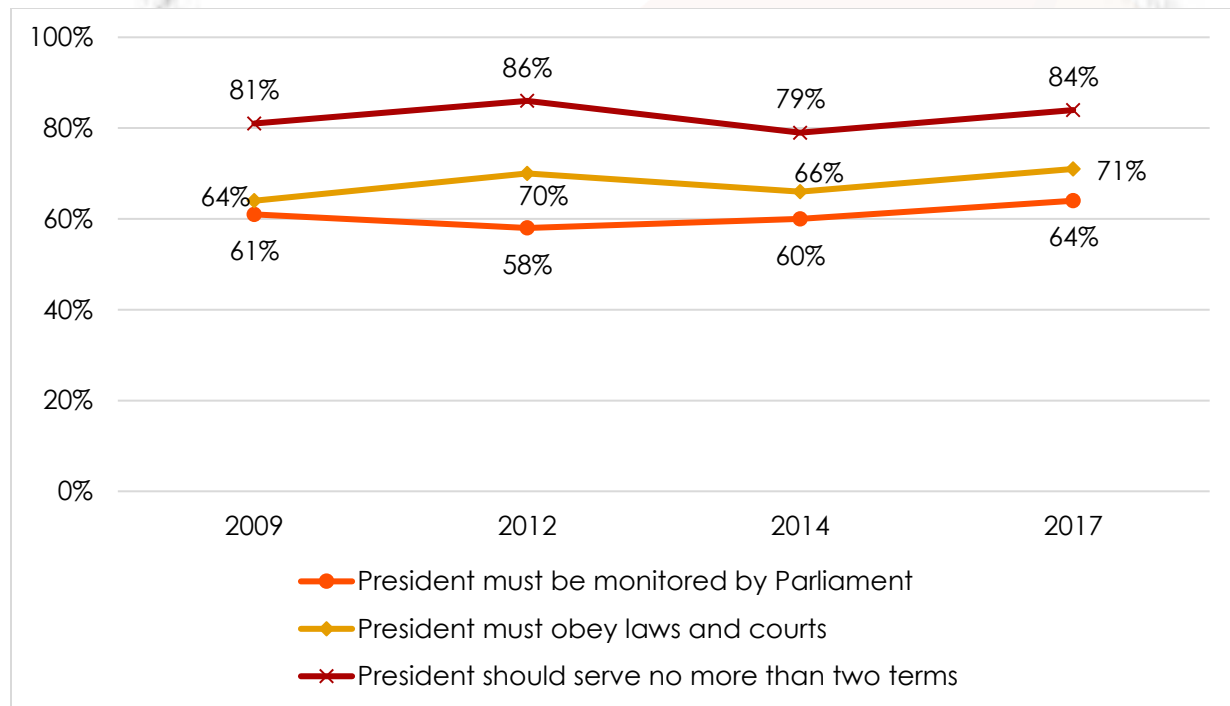
Zambians apparently cherish these institutional checks and balances, which puts them at odds with the recent authoritarian machinations of President Lungu. Take the issue of legislative oversight of the president's actions. Afrobarometer asks survey respondents to choose whether: (a) "Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money" or (b) "The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting his time justifying his actions." Consistently since 2009, about six in 10 Zambians have favoured legislative oversight above presidential discretion. Indeed, since 2012, the proportion supporting a check of this sort on the presidency has risen steadily, to a high of 64% in 2017 (Figure 8). Thus the public mood is hardly favourable toward the suspension of opposition members of Parliament or presidential manipulation of a denuded legislature to ram through emergency powers.

Take another example: the rule of law under an independent judiciary. The choice posed here is: (a) "The president must always obey the laws and the courts" or (b) "Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong." By an even higher margin, Zambians side with the rule of law. Most citizens, rising to a new high of 71% in 2017, want the president to obey decisions by the country's court system. They are therefore predisposed to reject any effort by a sitting president to pack the courts with

political supporters or to short-circuit judicial processes in reaching favourable court decisions. The public's steady position is that no man, a president included, is above the law.

Finally, term limits. The Afrobarometer question on this subject asks again for a choice: (a) "The constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office" or (b) "There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve." By the largest margin so far, Zambians are firmly committed to presidential term limits. Over the past decade, the public has embraced this check against incumbents clinging to office; popular support has averaged more than 80% since 2009 and is especially high (84%) in 2017. This overwhelming public sentiment against politicians who overstay their welcome should be front and center in the mind of President Lungu as he moots the option of running again in the presidential election of 2021.

Figure 8: Checks on the presidency | Zambia | 2009-2017



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.
 Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The president must always obey the laws and the courts.
 Statement 2: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

Resistance to emergency measures

The depth of popular commitment to democracy is only fully tested, however, when presidents actually seize extra-constitutional powers, for example by declaring a state of emergency. Are citizens prepared to stand up to defend democratic rights at this critical juncture? In Zambia, the answer to this question is mixed. While people say they are ready to defend some basic civil rights, they seem to be willing to acquiesce to the violation of others (Figure 9).

On one hand, Zambians are fierce defenders of the right to personal privacy. In April 2017, Afrobarometer posed a choice on this subject; either (a) *“Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence”* or (b) *“People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.”* Some two-thirds (67%) of respondents opt to shield their private exchanges from government intrusion. On a related topic, almost as many (58%) assert a right to freedom of association: They prefer to say that (a) *“We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it”* rather than (b) *“Government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.”* Perhaps they recall, and do not wish to revisit, the bad old days of one-party rule in the 1970s and 1980s when opposition parties were proscribed in Zambia.

On the other hand, Zambians fall short in resisting other real or potential excesses of presidential power. Fewer than half (42%) are willing to assert that (a) *“The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.”* Instead, a slim majority (54%) hold that (b) *“The government should be able to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society,”* a result that will come as a disappointment to the staff and

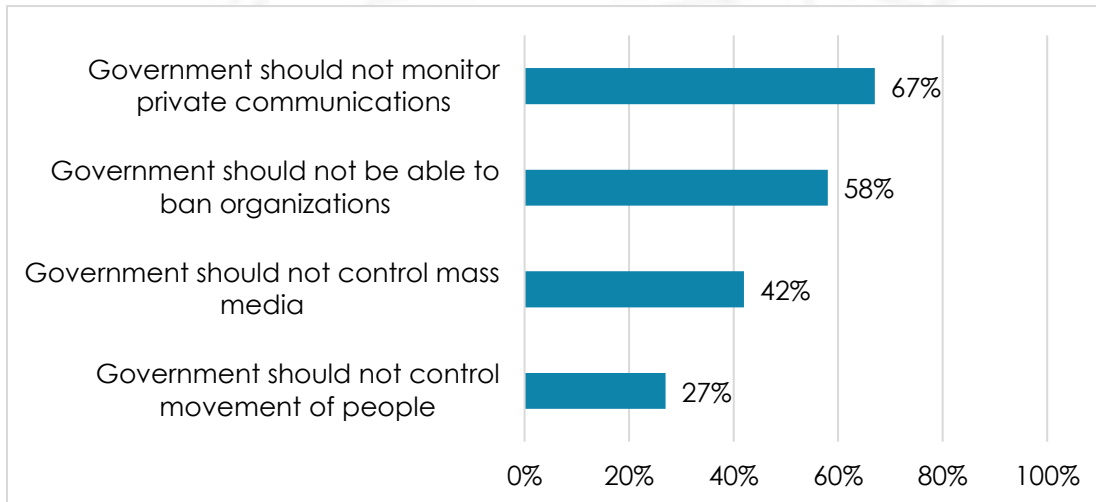
Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

readers of the independent press, which has come under sustained assault during the Lungu administration. Of even greater concern is the public’s attitude toward restrictions on the freedom of movement. Fully 70% say they are willing to accept that, *“When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks.”* Only 27% agree that, *“Even if faced with threats to public security, people*

should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night.” Perhaps Zambians became inured to such restrictions under previous emergency episodes in their country. Whatever the reason, their apparent acquiescence on this matter is worrisome because it opens the door to any autocrat determined to impede the free movement of people.

It must be stressed, however, that the April 2017 survey was conducted before President Lungu seized extraordinary powers. At that time, few Zambians may have believed that security conditions actually existed that warranted infringements of rights. So the above results should not be read as a direct endorsement of the president’s actions. As in Burundi, where Afrobarometer traced a rise in support for term limits as President Nkurunziza moved to undermine them, it may well be that there has been a shift in public opinion since Lungu cracked down.

Figure 9: Popular resistance to emergency measures | Zambia | April 2017*



* Prior to the July 2017 state of emergency

Respondents were asked:

Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Some people say that, in order to enjoy security from violence in our society, we must limit the amount of freedom that citizens are allowed to enjoy. Others say that political liberty is too important to sacrifice and must always be maintained, even if it threatens the security of the country.

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence.
 Statement 2: People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it.
- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Even if faced with threats to public security, people should be free to move about the country at any time of day or night.
 Statement 2: When faced with threats to public security, the government should be able to impose curfews and set up special roadblocks to prevent people from moving around.

Who are Zambia's opinion leaders?

As Zambia's own history demonstrates, a mobilized public can be a powerful force for democratization. But who will lead public opinion in defense of Zambia's democracy in 2017?

One possibility is that urban dwellers might take the lead, a group that has been at the forefront of political change before. For example, Lungu and the Patriotic Front handily won the 2016 vote in both Lusaka and the Copperbelt. However, respondents' residential location – urban or

rural – explains precious little variation in other political attitudes. For example, there is absolutely no difference in the proportions of city folk and country dwellers who think that the country is moving in the wrong direction (both 65%). Rather, perhaps the task of mass political mobilization might be taken up by those who have adopted social media habits, for example by sharing information on Twitter, WhatsApp, or Facebook. Again, few differences between Internet users and non-users is evident; for example, both groups are equally likely to think that the last election was (or was not) free and fair.

Instead, educational achievement is the best marker of difference among Zambians in terms of their willingness to support and defend democracy. Table 1 breaks down all the political attitudes previously discussed in this paper by the respondents' level of education measured in four categories: no formal education, primary school, secondary school, or post-secondary education (meaning a university, technical, or professional qualification).

Table 1: Political attitudes by level of education | Zambia | 2017

	No formal education (n=96)	Primary (n=463)	Secondary (n=486)	Post-secondary (n=155)	Average (n=1,200)
Country going in wrong direction	65%	67%	64%	62%	65%
Bad condition of national economy	56%	59%	60%	64%	60%
Support democracy	59%	82%	85%	86%	81%
Reject one-party rule	62%	78%	86%	94%	82%
Reject military rule	83%	93%	95%	90%	92%
Reject one-man rule	79%	91%	94%	96%	92%
Satisfied with democracy	55%	52%	48%	38%	49%
See country as a democracy	62%	62%	57%	52%	59%
See last election as free and fair	75%	64%	57%	50%	60%
Fear election violence	42%	44%	50%	48%	47%
Feel free to say what they think	65%	63%	64%	54%	62%
Must be careful what they say	60%	70%	74%	75%	72%
See less freedom of speech	41%	41%	41%	49%	42%
See less media freedom	33%	36%	42%	62%	41%
See less NGO freedom	30%	38%	40%	50%	39%
See less opposition freedom	38%	41%	47%	63%	46%
Feel free to criticize civil servants	78%	65%	63%	62%	65%
Feel free to criticize President Lungu	43%	35%	34%	36%	36%
Parliament must monitor president	56%	64%	66%	63%	64%
President must obey courts	60%	70%	73%	75%	71%
President should serve only two terms	69%	82%	87%	93%	84%
Govt. should not be able to ban orgs.	41%	53%	62%	68%	58%
Govt. should not control media	34%	37%	43%	57%	42%
Govt. should not control movement	32%	28%	25%	29%	27%
Govt. should not monitor phones	54%	66%	68%	71%	67%

For some political attitudes, a little education goes a long way. There are observable differences between people who have no formal education and those who have at least some primary-level exposure. For example, primary schooling (even if not later supplemented with higher levels of education) seems to sharply step up the likelihood that Zambians will:

- Support democracy
- Reject military rule and one-man rule
- See a need to be careful about what one says about politics
- Feel constrained about criticizing President Lungu

In other instances, political attitudes change by increments as respondents gradually attain higher and higher levels of education. For example, this roughly linear effect can be seen with respect to the likelihood that Zambians will:

- Reject one-party rule
- See the last election as less than free and fair
- Prefer to limit the president to two terms in office

Finally, a post-secondary education seems to be required before individuals are able to take on the most demanding understandings of, and commitments to, democracy. For example, majorities of this group tend to:

- Recognize recent declines in freedom for the media, NGOs, and opposition parties
- Oppose efforts by the government to control the mass media
- Oppose efforts by the government to ban independent organizations

Overall, Zambians feel empowered to speak out. Even though they think the country is headed in the wrong direction and has less freedom of speech, a majority at every education level continue to “feel free to say what they think.” In this regard, public opinion remains a potentially resilient source of resistance against growing threats to the country's democracy.

Conclusion

The 2017 Afrobarometer survey finds Zambia at a crossroads. The country faces a choice of futures between democratic deepening and authoritarian backsliding. Despite temporary setbacks under Presidents Chiluba (1991-2002) and Sata (2011-2015), Zambia experienced a quarter-century of democratic progress, including six competitive elections and two peaceful alternations of ruling parties (1991 and 2011). Yet the current Lungu administration threatens to undo much of this progress by reverting to a range of repressive political tactics borrowed from the handbook of the one-party era.

Much depends on how Zambians themselves react. Ordinary citizens are clearly disposed to prefer democracy and reject dictatorship. In perhaps the single most striking result from the latest Afrobarometer survey, the proportion of citizens who reject “one-man rule” (defined as

"elections and parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything") rose from an already high 87% in 2012 to an almost unanimous 92% in 2017.

To some extent, however, Zambians recognize that political space is closing down, which poses an existential risk to their country's hard-won democratic regime. Ordinary folk will not easily sacrifice valued rights of free speech. But they are also wary of openly confronting the powers-that-be. Less-educated citizens are prone to underestimate the threats inherent in government takeover of independent agencies of restraint such as the legislature, courts and the mass media. Moreover, many people remain willing to acquiesce to specious arguments by political incumbents that law and order requires the sacrifice of individual liberties.

This state of affairs suggests that the defense of democracy in Zambia depends critically on active political engagement by educated citizens. Individuals with a post-secondary technical or university qualification are especially well placed to serve as opinion leaders for their fellow citizens, though those with primary and secondary schooling matter too. They have essential roles to play in helping other Zambians to understand that the greatest risk to democracy in Zambia today comes not from the imminent threat of a military coup but from the gradual erosion of hard-won political gains at the hands of an elected civilian leader bent on expanding his own power.

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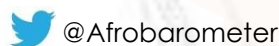
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