

# Zambia Electoral Analysis Project (ZEAP) Briefing paper series

## Briefing Paper 6: Party Cadres, the Politicisation of Local Government and Zambia's 2021 Elections

### Findings

- Effective local government remains an aspiration for many in Zambia, but decentralisation reforms have failed to deliver, due to the centralising tendencies of the national government, an unsupportive economic environment, and inconsistent donor policies.
- The growing role of party cadres in local politics is a hidden driver of growing electoral violence that is independent of, and just as significant as, the close electoral battle between President Lungu and Hichilema Hakainde.
- Party cadres are intimately connected to complex local politics and undermine the capacity of governments at this level to raise revenue, deliver services, and exert their authority.
- Cadres are supposed to mobilise support for political parties - and do generate a predatory income for them - but are widely disliked, which can also fuel popular anger and frustration.
- There is a significant risk that popular fear of cadre violence will depress voter turnout, especially in "hot spot" areas, and will also have a negative impact on the political participation of women.
- There is a need to invest in long-term post-election programmes with civil society to monitor and address issues of violence and cadre-ism.
- The long-term success of devolution in Zambia depends on at least four factors: more consistent and long-term donor programming that takes into account the key incentives for those in positions of power; a stronger legal and institutional foundation for the devolution of authority and resources; greater resources to finance the system and service delivery; and, a reduction in the reach and impact of party cadre activities.

---

## 1. Introduction

Zambia's August 2021 elections will not only result in the election of the President and 156 Members of Parliament (MPs), but also councillors representing 1,858 wards across 117 district councils, and council chairpersons and mayors representing 117 town and city councils. Although local elections rarely receive as much attention as national ones, they have substantial implications for the delivery of key services and for the grassroots political participation of Zambian citizens.

Moreover, local politics have also been increasingly fiercely contested over the last fifteen years, and are now a vital theatre of national intra- and inter-party competition, fuelling Zambia's ever more contentious political culture.

This brief discusses the history of Zambian local politics and the structure of local government, analyses relations amongst both formal actors (politicians, bureaucrats, ward development committees) and informal intermediaries (party cadres), and highlights key issues for local governance. In addition, the brief offers some potential scenarios arising from the elections and provides reflections on policy choices facing agencies that fund, advise, or otherwise influence Zambian political institutions.

---

## 1. A brief history of Zambia's local governance

Zambia's history with one-party governance resulted in a highly centralised state when the country transitioned to multi-party democracy in 1991. Due to the combination of both domestic interest and donor advocacy that tied decentralisation to "good governance", successive administrations embarked on a series of reforms under the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). These included the 1991 Local Government Act, which stipulated that mayors in municipal and city councils, as well as chairs in district councils, would be elected by ward councillors, and the Act transferred 63 functions to the councils. Disappointment with the delivery of local services led to the adoption of the 2002 Decentralization Policy, which aimed to help councils receive sufficient resources to carry out their functions, and the establishment of a Decentralization Secretariat. In 2010, a Local Government (Amendment) Act led to the creation of the Local Government Services Commission (LGSC), with members appointed by the president, and which focuses on centralised control and management of human resources in local government through hiring, firing, transferring, and promoting local government staff.

After the Patriotic Front (PF) ascended to the presidency, the Revised National Decentralization Policy (R-NDP) was launched in 2013 in order to shift Zambia to a more devolved form of local governance, where elected authorities had autonomy over certain functional areas, particularly health, education, and agricultural extension. As part of the implementation of the R-NDP, the government announced the strengthening of Ward Development Committees (WDC) to facilitate citizen participation and a Local Government Equalization Fund (LGEF) to finance the delivery of services within councils (GRZ 2014).

Simultaneously, the PF relied on the powers vested in the Provincial and District Boundaries Act to create new provinces (for example, Muchinga) and districts. Between 2011 to mid-2018, these grew from 72 to 117. The councils include both a political wing, inclusive of ward councillors, mayors, and council chairs, as well as an administrative wing staffed by civil servants hired by the LGSC. The administrative wing is led by a town clerk in city and municipal councils, and a council secretary in the district ones. With the passing of Zambia's Constitutional Amendment in 2016, mayors and council chairs are now directly elected by citizens in the tripartite elections, rather than indirectly via the ward councillors.

Despite these reforms, substantive decentralisation remains stymied by several factors. First, the councils still have quite restricted capacity for autonomy over revenue mobilisation. Since most of the new districts are in rural areas with fewer economic activities, they have little potential to raise their own sources of revenue. This dynamic will likely be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has undermined local government revenue across most countries (UCLG 2021). Second, the level of intergovernmental transfers through the LGEF is likely to be negatively affected by the country's November 2020 debt default. Third, much of the legislation reviewed above has not been fully implemented, and council functions remain quite centralised under the Ministry of Local Government. This has resulted in an "institutional sedimentation" with the half-abandoned structures of multiple fashions and eras persisting alongside half-built, newly reformed institutions. Fourth, the range of local political actors seeking election has ballooned even as very limited resources are available to implement programmes and invest in services.

In addition, there are many other actors that are active within local government, including MPs who are *ex officio* members of the councils, nationally appointed district commissioners, and committee members for Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) and Ward Development Funds (WDFs). A variety of other networks intersect between the councils and local communities, such as traditional authorities, party cadres, and occupation-based committees (market associations, charcoal sellers' unions, and so on); all of these can be affected by partisan dynamics. Consequently, in combining and overlapping structures of authority, multiple actors collaborate and compete with each other to influence the allocation of development funds and services, licenses to trade, local taxation and regulatory systems, and to claim credit for "delivery" and avoid opprobrium for "failure".

## **2. Formal actors in local government: Constituency and Ward Development Committees - enhancing local democracy?**

The resources that are allocated by various governance processes for development at local levels in Zambia come from multiple sources, some of which are formally tied into the district council systems, others of which come directly from line ministries (rural electrification for example), or international aid donors and NGOs.

Each of the 156 constituencies in Zambia receives 1.6 million Zambia kwacha in annual funding for constituency development. This is called the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) and its disbursement is heavily influenced by the incumbent member of parliament. The fund is supposed to support implementation of development projects at community level, often influenced by the Ward Development Committee. The management and utilisation of

the fund usually carries political undertones as the executive arm of the national government seeks to use it for political gain.

Ministers of Local Government<sup>1</sup> often have a stronger say and "oversight" on how the fund is used. In areas with MPs from opposition political parties, tensions exist about how to allocate and use these CDF funds. One of the implications of the tensions surrounding CDF is that funds have tended to be used for local development projects that seem to be "approved" by and in the sectoral interests of the ruling party elites at various levels of society.

Ward Development Committees (WDCs) are, at least in theory, supposed to operate as non-partisan community leadership structures with a mandate to drive the development agenda at community level. The WDCs are supposed to be chosen from eligible residents based on competitive local and community elections. WDCs are supposed to provide a leadership link between communities and higher-level governance structures such as MPs, ministers and other organs of national government. However, there has been a trend to politicise WDCs to serve the partisan interests of the party in government. The increased politicisation of WDCs saw the suspension of the formation of WDCs after the highly contested 2016 elections. This suspension deprived people of their right to choose their local leaders through a popular vote and created a vacuum in local leadership and service delivery.

---

1. Minister announces release of CDF for 2020, <https://diggers.news/local/2020/08/13/govt-releases-k249-6m-cdf/>

### 3. Overview of the political dimensions of WDCs

There has been a discussion in Zambia between on the one hand those who would like to see these actors operate in a non-partisan manner and who have attempted to impose this norm through codes of conduct, and on the other hand those who recognise that links to party structures can increase democratic legitimacy and access to central state resources. Any democratic benefits of allowing open partisan competition clearly come with a risk of polarisation and favouritism in the allocation of resources - there is a very long history of this kind of political mobilisation in Zambia.

There is an increasingly dense network of elected structures of local parties, mayors, councillors, CDF-committee members, WDF committee members, market committees, charcoal-sellers' committees and so on, all of which have elections for members, chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers, and for many of which there are internal party selection processes ahead of the elections.

One of the implications of the multiplication of roles in the local economic and political sectors is that local politics serves as a machine for the engagement, mobilisation and then disappointment of as many or more people than it draws into office. This provides a large pool of politically engaged actors potentially nursing grudges towards incumbents and with powerful incentives to defect. Of course, this is a typical cost of a "democratically decentralised" structure, but where the formal economy is very weak and economic opportunities are particularly connected to political networks, this contributes to a culture of floor-crossing and intra-party competition that has the potential to generate local sources of conflict.

Two significant drivers of the politicisation of what are sometimes discussed as "non-partisan" structures are: a) that MPs have a central role in local development activity; they act as legislators nationally shaping the policy environment for local government, as *ex officio* members of district councils, and as members of CDF committees, and b) that the electoral principle for the selection of committee members is deeply embedded in Zambian political culture. The nomination of local notables to posts, supported by external donors as part of the "participatory development planning" fashion of the late 1990s, did not create sustained, durable and legitimate structures of representation.

### 4. Informal actors in local government: the role of party cadres

As noted by Fraser (2017) politics in Zambia is dominated by "a set of celebrity politicians sat atop networks of cadres loyal personally to them and who travel between parties seeking opportunities for collective political advancement".<sup>2</sup> Cadres are in many ways the social and economic linkage between political parties and the grassroots, but their behaviour - rent seeking, illegal land allocation and violence - often generates significant resentment from the very citizens whose votes they are intended to mobilise.

The idea of political party "cadres" has been common in Zambian political parlance since the one-party era. These actors have no formal definition; the term could speak simply of supporters of any particular party, including elected representatives, but is increasingly used to denote groups of organised young men operating in the public sphere to deploy control and violence, and to collect fees at markets and bus stations. Equally, cadres often serve as

---

2. Fraser, "Post-Populism in Zambia", 468.

groups of “security details” for politicians and are engaged in day-to-day campaigning and rent collection on behalf of political parties – predominantly the ruling party. These young men have become increasingly visible since the 2006 elections and are popularly discussed as “cadres”.

While the late United National Independence Party (UNIP) era was characterised by party “vigilantes”, whose existence and structure were outlined in and regulated by legislation, the current system has been far more informal; it has changed under different MMD and PF administrations, and has become exacerbated as party competition has increased.

While it was prevalent under Chiluba (1991-2001) – who referred to the streets as the “Office of the President” – it has become more pronounced since 2011, and particularly since 2015. Under President Mwanawasa (2001-2008) and Local Government Minister Sylvia Masebo, the presence of cadres in markets and bus stations was almost completely wiped out, with the council reclaiming ground. With the coming to power of President Rupiah Banda (2008-2011), a permissiveness (and the party’s privatisation of council rents through the cadres system) once more crept in and the system re-emerged.

This continued when the administration changed to the PF in 2011, with many of the same party cadres from the MMD exerting control over levying rents and collecting rates from marketeers and bus station operators. However, by all accounts the current system has outstripped even those antecedents; the lack of accountability and inability of the city council, police or justice system to act against these structures is unprecedented. The cadre

system is currently seen to be more violent, coercive and extractive than in previous eras, with some cadres amassing significant wealth and power due to proximity to political elites.

In urban areas, these groups cross over with (pre-existing) labour organising structures, circulating credit schemes and protection rackets operating in key economic sectors. Networks of cadres effectively compete with council officials, co-operative markets and the police (who historically levied fines), to be the on-the-ground actors collecting “fees” relating to solid waste management, the allocation of market places, slots in bus stops, rights to pick up commuters and residential land allocation.

The collection of these rents is redistributed through party structures, from ward to provincial level and amounts to many millions of kwacha per annum.<sup>3</sup> Some of this finance appears to fund party campaigns at various levels, but also leads to accumulation by elites and intermediaries. Cadres are also protected (from police or council regulation) when usurping these roles through collaborative relations with local (and national) politicians who benefit from the resources cadres collect and the votes they claim to be able to mobilise. By most accounts, cadres are said to be “untouchable” due to their direct links to national-level politicians.

That cadres are able to take on these functions is conditioned by the weaknesses of local government and police structures (partly effects of donor-imposed austerity packages of the 1990s), as well as by the politicised starvation of local government structures by national administrations when (particularly urban) councils have fallen into the hands of opposition parties.

---

3. Sinkala, ‘The Sweet Life of a Cadre’.

This has obvious negative implications for council revenue. With the support of MPs and ward councillors, cadres often interfere in procurement, land allocations, and hiring practices in councils, creating tensions with the bureaucratic wing of the councils. Relations between council officials, elected officials and cadres are complex. Councils are in some cases incapable of surveilling and taxing residents, and thus knowingly pass responsibility for these functions onto party-linked structures, with an understanding that rents are more likely to be collected this way, and that councils may receive some share.

Particularly at election time, bus stations and markets are sites of violence, extraction, and control. These public spaces are important sites of coercion, places where thousands of citizens gather to do business, to buy their necessities, access services and socialise. For political parties, they can often be used as a bell weather, a gauge of the popularity or unpopularity of the ruling party and its opposition counterparts. For this reason, parties seek to mobilise support in markets, and to earn the support of bus drivers who hold the

potential to influence voter choices through the display of overtly partisan materials, and to ferry supporters to rallies during campaigns.

### 5. Implications of the elections

These processes of collaboration and competition powerfully affect the opportunities available to local citizens. Much is at stake. Competition over posts and the flow of finance and political resources are thus highly contentious and have often contributed to pre- and post-election intra-party and inter-party violence.

This violence is generally perpetrated more in urban than rural areas. However, the Lisimba Commission's report particularly pointed to the problem of urban cadres being transported to rural locations with the purpose of reinforcing political campaigns. Such cadres were often regarded as particularly violent and disruptive when interacting with populations from other regions and ethnicities (Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Voting Patterns and Electoral Violence: 2018).

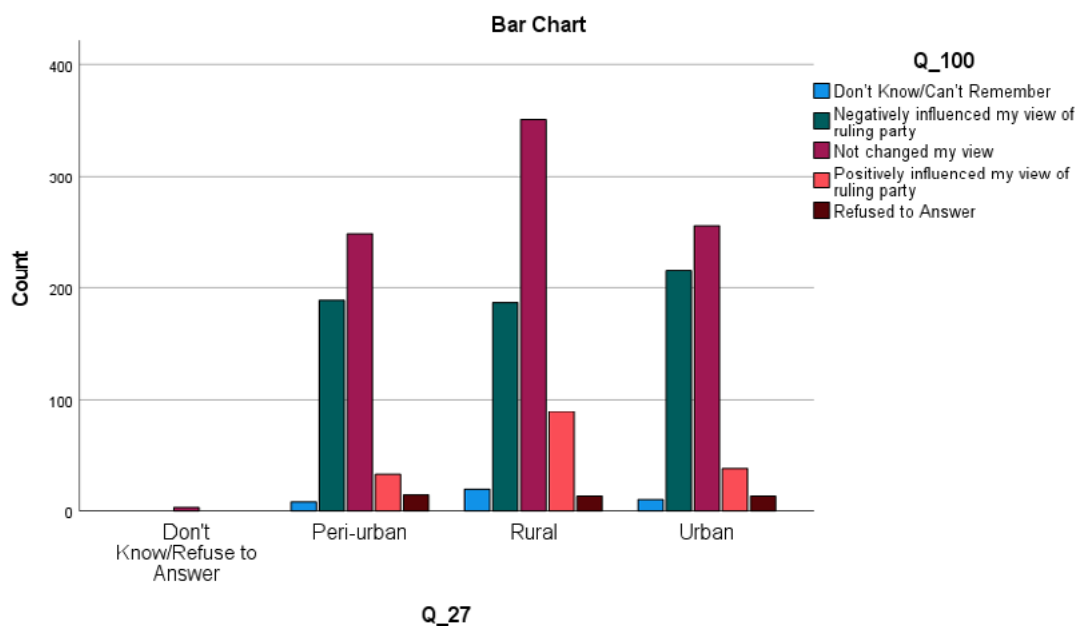


Figure 1: Responses to the question "Have the actions of PF party cadres changed your view of the ruling PF party?" Source: Lust et al. 2021

The Zambian Election Panel Survey (ZEPS) found that the actions of party cadres have influenced perceptions of political parties ahead of the 2021 elections. In response to the question “How have the actions of party cadres influenced your view of the ruling PF party?”, 35% of the 1,700 respondents reported a negative perception of the ruling party due to cadre actions. Of these, more urban citizens than rural reported becoming dissatisfied with the PF due to the actions of cadres. This is likely to have some effect on the PF’s vote share in 2021.

The ZEPS survey also suggests that a significant proportion of citizens fear being a victim of violence or intimidation if they go about everyday tasks. As much as 17% of respondents feared being a victim of violence or intimidation if they buy goods at the local market, whilst 20% of respondents feared the same if they take a local bus. These levels of fear are greater in urban areas. Critically, such violence may be a significant deterrent, especially to women’s participation in local government, contradicting the emphasis placed on gender empowerment and equity that both the PF and UPND included in their party platforms.

## 6. Scenarios

Based on the dynamics discussed above, there are a variety of possible scenarios that might emerge from the 2021 elections, which hold implications for donors interested in supporting development and democracy in the country. Given how close the UPND came to winning in the 2016 elections, and its growing popularity in certain cities outside of its Southern and Western strongholds (as suggested by recent [Afrobarometer](#) data), one imaginable scenario is that the UPND wins more city councils while the PF retains power at the national level.

This may repeat the pattern of 2006, when the PF took control of Copperbelt and Lusaka local government structures without winning power nationally. The PF opposition then aimed to use local government structures to demonstrate its capacity to deliver jobs and services, and the MMD reacted by cutting off virtually all central government funding to these local government bodies and preventing them from collecting revenues themselves. Similar processes have been visible in Livingstone in the last five years where the mayor was from the UPND. Such scenarios - which are characterised as “vertically-divided” authority - can have negative implications for intergovernmental transfers and bureaucratic turnover.

If, alternatively, the UPND wins the national elections, there may be some attempt to “rationalise” local government and “bring order” to the culture of political cadre-ism at a local level. Most incoming administrations have promised as much without being able to deliver, so early efforts in this regard would be critical to winning citizen trust.

Whoever wins the election nationally, there will be a significant turnover of ward councillors and mayors. Development projects funded by line ministries and associated with the central administration, or under Constituency Development Fund and Ward Development Fund programmes and thus associated with MPs and councillors, are often designed to attach honour to the incumbent. Some of these projects require ongoing investment and maintenance. Such projects are likely to stall since there will be little incentive for incoming postholders to support projects associated with their predecessors.

Given the absence of formal title for many land-holders, and drawn out legal contests to establish ownership, a change of administration that pulls the rug from under a local political



settlement can have predictably violent effects: as new actors come to power, the tendency to reprisal, and to more or less coercive eviction and resistance to that, is a major source of post-election violence and ongoing political instability.

There is a need to recognise that much of the institutional chaos and lack of capacity in Zambian local governance systems result both from overlapping and frequently changing donor priorities, and an over-emphasis on institutional reform as opposed to capacity development and funding of extant structures. Expectations of a transformation of Zambia's political economy via a reform of its political institutions, local or national, should be tempered.

In a resource-poor setting, the complete insulation of a political “public sphere” from contests over the distribution of wealth and life opportunities is implausible. There just is not enough money and there are not enough or jobs to go around, or a sufficiently dynamic capitalist market present for an emerging “owning class” or for potential employees, to conclude that they ought to avoid political networks, and instead stabilise their strategies through the acceptance of a neutral “policeman state”. In both economic and political life, many elite and non-elite actors thus seek not economic independence, or self-sufficiency, but forms of secure dependency.

## 7. Policy recommendations

At least three key recommendations emerge from the foregoing discussion. First, while national elections receive most attention from the donor community, this brief highlights that much is at stake at the local level, with even more immediate implications for citizens' access to goods and services, and for their participation in policy processes that directly affect their communities.

Deepening decentralisation requires donors to deal not only with technical issues related to public sector and public finance reforms but also to support party strengthening and other democratic practices at the local level. While politics and party competition can sometimes derail service delivery, supporting more apolitical processes undermines the democratic elements of the rationale for decentralisation.

Second, electoral violence is largely linked to cadre activity; improving both the prospects of peaceful elections and reducing the negative impacts of extortionary activities on council finances requires effectively tackling the cadre issue. This likely requires donors to better understand the underlying political economy motivating cadre activities and supporting citizen accountability mechanisms to track cadre activities in a systematic way.

Third, constitutional reform will likely emerge on the policy agenda again in the near future. Yet, it will be critical that any reforms do not try to re-centralise power away from locally elected leaders, as the failed Bill 10 attempted to do by removing the ability of mayors to be directly elected by citizens (a provision that had just been added to the 2016 Constitution), rather than indirectly selected by ward councillors.

## References

- Caritas Zambia, *A Study Report on the Constituency Development Fund (CDF): Allocation, Disbursement and Utilisation* (Lusaka, Zambia, 2011).
- Chikulo, Bornwell, "Local Governance Reforms in Zambia: A Review," *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, 2009, 98-106.
- Fraser, Alastair, "Post-Populism in Zambia: Michael Sata's Rise, Demise and Legacy". *International Political Science Review* 38, no. 4 (1 September 2017): 456-72.
- Gilbert Siame et al., "The Formal-Informal Interface through the Lens of Urban Food Systems: The Soweto Food Market in Lusaka, Zambia", in *Reframing the Urban Challenge in Africa*, ed. Ntombini Marrengane and Sylvia Croese (Routledge, 2020), 18-41.
- Hampway, Godfrey. 2008. "The Limits of Decentralisation in Urban Zambia." *Urban Forum*, Vol.19: 347-361.
- Mukanga, Chola, "Fiscal Decentralisation in Zambia", *Zambian Economist*, 2014 <http://www.zambian-economist.com/2014/07/fiscal-decentralisation-in-zambia.html> [accessed 17 November 2014]
- Resnick, Danielle, Gilbert Siame, Peter Mulambia, Dorothy Ndhlovu, Beverly Shicilenge, and Bhavna Sivasubramanian. 2019. "Deepening Decentralization in Zambia: Political Economy Constraints and Opportunities for Reform." *IFPRI Discussion Paper 01893*. Washington, DC: IFPRI.
- Sinkala, Zanzi. "The Sweet Life of a Cadre: How Markets and Bus Station Revenue Funds Political Hooligans". *Zambia: News Diggers!*, 17 June 2021, sec. Lifestyle. <https://diggers.news/lifestyle/2021/06/17/the-sweet-life-of-a-cadre-how-markets-and-bus-station-revenue-funds-political-hooligans/>.
- Zambia Governance Foundation, "Constituency Development Funds," *Social Accountability and You - Zambia*, 2014 <http://say-zambia.org/thematic-areas/cdf/> [accessed 7 November 2014]

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating directly in 33 countries, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

 [www.wfd.org](http://www.wfd.org)

 [@WFD\\_Democracy](https://twitter.com/WFD_Democracy)

 [@WestminsterFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/WestminsterFoundation)

Authors:

Nicole Beardsworth, University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg

Alastair Fraser, SOAS University of London

Danielle Resnick, International Food Policy Research Institute

Gilbert Siame, University of Zambia



**WFD**