The Role of Internet Based Platforms (IBPs) in Youth Political Participation in Zimbabwe

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Abstract:- The paper examines the heterogeneity in conceptualization of political issues across Zimbabwe in relation to youth political participation which needs more articulation especially in the era of globalization, digital technology and social media. The paper gives an in-depth analysis of the participation of young people in politics through the use of social media platforms. Their participation as active/passive supporters or opponents is worth studying. Researches on African politics is still ongoing aimed at comprehending and unpacking the conditions under which competitive authoritarian regimes administered by hegemonic parties can lose their clutch on power enabling transitions to open competitive electoral democracies in the era of social media. Therefore, this paper underscores objectively how internet based platforms have created an opportunity for young people to participate politically in Zimbabwe.

Keywords:- Internet- Based- Platforms, Political Participation, Youths, Democracy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet based platforms (IBPs) have become one of the most powerful instruments used for political participation especially for the youth. Social media has gained much credit for influencing the lives of so many people than never before as it has gained much access in day to day life not only among individuals but also governments and organizations. As noted by Engelman (2010), it has become one of the most powerful elements used in the "bully pulpit" or direct communication between politicians and citizens to affect change or support. IBPs now play a significant role in the manner through which politics and state security positions itself. In Zimbabwe, social media is employed to express political grievances, opinions and to expose corrupt acts by public officers. It is in this regard that paper extrapolates and offer a deep analysis of political space in Zimbabwe which has been revolutionized by social media and created space for young people to act as actors.

However, it is imperative to highlight that it has in some cases affected national security through organization of illegal protests and political disobedience. National security concerns are the main reasons why governments are interested in monitoring IBPs thereby undermining freedom of association and individual privacy. The Zimbabwe media law has been made to prevent national insecurity through organizations such as Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ). An entirely operational democracy necessitates a population that is well-versed by manifold competing foundations of news. Mukasa (2003) postulates that, the media and politics are like peaceful neighbors sitting side by side yet media has got hidden agendas that it plays either it serves lapdog role that sees no evil, hears no evil and writes no evil or as watchdog role that is very vocal and sees evil, hears evil and writes evil. IBPs have therefore created an arena where the youths can debate and share political ideas and share their experiences. The authors therefore, interrogated the crisis shaping democracy through an analysis of the role of IBPs in youth political participation with reference to Zimbabwe.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

According to Bimber (2014) social media platforms have not only become important to business organizations but politicians have also understood its use particularly in capturing the youth as they are the majority of the voters. In the political landscape, social media was popularized firstly by Barack Obama in his presidential campaign in 2008. African governments have embraced the platforms as critical and those who have managed to engage the youths in these platforms have succeeded in winning their votes. In modern day politics, one of the major challenge affecting citizens' active involvement in politics of the day is lack of access to information pertaining political issues. The difference in age is a critical matter in politics as age usually associates itself with certain ideology in politics. For example, Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa (EISA) (2000) highlighted that the youth in Africa in the past has often lacked access to political engagement hence their participation in political matters was limited. However, Resnick and Casale (2017) are of the opinion that times have changed and the majority of the youth are now available on social platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter that make them available on internet platforms at relatively cheap cost as compared to other forms of internet use. Others factors that have also been cited include lack of motivation or the will to engage and no political connection to get involved. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are used by politicians to engage their electorate with their policies. Equally the youthful electorate uses the same platform to question, protest, engage in online activism and dialogue on political issues.

Social media platforms have been used to engage in organized protest and campaigns against governments that suppresses human rights and engage in corrupt activities.

Protest have been initiated through social media in Tunisia which resulted in the removal of former president Ben Ali, in Egypt protest which started on social media later resulted in the removal of Mubarak. However, most African countries deal ruthlessly with protesters. In Zimbabwe, social media protest has often resulted in people being arrested for treason on the charge of trying to overthrow a constitutionally elected government. This is despite the rights to protection and freedom of expression being guaranteed within the confinement of constitutional law (Booysen, 2014).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researchers used the Social choice theory, first propagated by scholars such as Condorcet and Jean-Charles de Borda. The thrust of the theory mainly focuses on a varied models and efforts concerning the amalgamation of individual inputs such as preferences, votes, judgements and welfare which leads to outcomes such as collective decisions and policies. Central to the theory in politics are notions of how can a team of individuals choose a winning team or policy/candidate in an election, the ideal voting system in place and how democratic the processes can be. Through the usage of social media in political participation, the theory was vital in issues of societal epistemology, collective youth political decision making procedures and explanation of how political institutions are designed in Zimbabwe.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research approach. According to Titchen and Hobson (2005) phenomenology is the study of lived, human phenomena within everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspectives of those who experience them. The aim was to obtain information on the usage of internet-based-platforms by the youth in political participation in Zimbabwe. Methods such as interviews and focus group discussions were used complemented by contemporary methodologies such as online surveys of data collection. Bryman (2012) mentioned that an open-ended questionnaire is used to gather data supplemented by interview, digital ethnography from sources such as Twitter and Facebook and document analysis methods review of (Constitutions, Human Rights Organizations articles, Government publications and Court judgements) were used. Through purposive and snow ball sampling, a final sample of 70 participants was used. The sensitivity of the matter makes it critical to design the research instrument in such a way that was not frightening to respondents and the researchers gave them a guarantee of discretion. On data analysis, thematic data analysis was in examining, categorizing, illustrating and evaluating data using logical reasoning.

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The use of internet based platforms by the youth in political participation

The unrelenting penetration of IBPs in Zimbabwe can be attributed mainly to an increased availability of devices that are capable of accessing the internet. This shows that the accessibility of social media platforms where individuals can interact has also added to the rise in mobile internet usage. For that reason, IBPs have become the main vehicle for the exercising of the rights to freedom of expression and access to political information. This is ascribed to the internet's physiognomies which include worldwide reach, speed and relative concealment.

IBPs have eased the capability of youth to seek, obtain and divulge political information and thoughts of all types promptly and economically even across national boundaries, by massively intensifying the capacity of youth to enjoy freedom of expression which is an enabler of further human rights. Fortified with a Bible and a mobile phone, Pastor Evan Mawarire rose to prominence in 2016 with a campaign which was code named *#ThisFlag* that capitalized on the power of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. This campaign was aimed at highlighting the political and economic problems that were bedeviling the country under the late former President Robert Mugabe.

There is a positive correlation between the political use of social media and online political participation. It was noted that if social media users believe that they are politically conversant and adept in influencing the political process, they will be more interested to discuss politics on social media platforms, follow political characters or retweet about a political issue than others. Clarke et, al (2006) pointed out that the success of a democratic government relies on the citizens' confidence and competence of the government in governing. It was however noted that most Zimbabwean young people are not fast to speak out when it comes to political thoughts. This can be attributed to the fear of being victimized as noted in the cases of such prominent political activists such as Itai Dzamara whose whereabouts are still yet to be established but despite that one respondent has this to say:

"There was a campaign in Zimbabwe in 2016, which was code named #This Flag movement and it was led by Pastor Evan Mawawire. It started on social media platforms, hinting the general public to stay away from work for 24 hours. Almost 75% of the working class boycotted their work for 24 hours, henceforth awarding victory to social media".

Consequently, when social media exposes corrupt activities within the government, it cannot be regarded as a threat to national security. In Zimbabwe social media was a tool for mobilization and civil unrest as thousands of young people who gathered in the streets had been informed about the protests through social media where the actual protests were planned. This is in line with the arguments raised by Castells (2012) that social networks can be valuable for

political activism, through the creation of weak ties, the anonymity provided by the internet, and the egalitarian nature of online communication. Weak ties are useful in providing information and opening up opportunities at a low cost. The advantage of the internet is that it allows the forging of weak ties with strangers, in an egalitarian pattern of interaction where social characteristics are less influential in framing, or even blocking communication. Social media networks are based on these weak ties with other people whom one might share common interests or goals with, or may have mutual friends. However, such communications can be used by revolting forces to incite citizens to go against the constitutionally elected government in power.

Government's reaction to the use of IBPs in relation to youth participation in politics

National security is a complex issue which needs to be ensured. In Zimbabwe, the government instituted two pieces of legislations namely, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and Public Order and Security Act (POSA) so as to help safeguard national security. One of the crucial qualities of law in any state is its progressive nature to address specific changes within a modernizing world. However, any piece of legislation the world over has those who support as well as those who oppose it. The discourse of freedom of expression is full of literature that opposes various pieces of legislation found in many countries across the globe. POSA and AIPPA have also received a fair share of support and criticisms depending on one's perspective. A respondent argued that:

"AIPPA and POSA have managed to safeguard national security from social media threats because it suppresses freedom of speech. Insulting the president and passing out information which brings about political, social or economic instabilities in the country can lead to imprisonment. With this in mind, the laws have managed to instill fear to people so that they can mind what they say or write."

For another respondent:

"AIPPA and POSA are a necessary evil in the country even though they stifle freedom of speech and independent media reporting. These laws are a weapon of the government to regulate the issues of false information, in order to prevent havoc in the country."

The evidence from the findings shows that, AIPPA and POSA are operational laws that safeguard the dominance of repressive state apparatus and national security in Zimbabwe. A country's survival, growth and development is contingent to well-crafted and consciously implemented national security laws that AIPPA and POSA has acted as a yardstick of national security laws. Moyo (2004) argued that, media legislation exists to guard Zimbabweans against propaganda as well as to spearhead a new cultural revolution. AIPPA permits public bureaucrats to hold on to information for thirty days after a request is made which is a real set back according to journalists' operations (MISA, 2009). Worse still the thirty days may be

extended if permission is sought from the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC).

Evidence from this research concurs with Moyo (2004) who argues that the operation of the media in Zimbabwe has been a contested terrain since the development of the media industry during the colonial era. Although, the governing elite have continually claimed that traditional media is impartial, but antagonistically media is usually used as a weapon of manipulation and control by those in authority, both under Rhodesia and now Zimbabwe. According to Moyo (2004) monopoly on media was being done under the guise of 'national interest', 'national security' or 'national sovereignty'. The government has a craving to retain information undisclosed on national security basis to chase its own self-interest, but social media continuously desires to explore the information held by public office bearers.

Evidence from documentary sources, given to the researchers by some respondents shows that, the Postal and Telecommunications Regulations Statutory Instrument 95 of 2014 (Subscriber registrations) advocates for all telecommunication companies to create a data base of their customers. The database should be regularly updated and accessible to everyone. The regulation further provides that the centralized database would be managed by POTRAZ (CIPESA, 2016). Mandatory SIM card registration threatens the right to privacy in the country, especially in the absence of data protection legislation. There is also concern that one entity will end up controlling all internet gateways and infrastructure, making it technically easier to monitor, filter, or even block internet traffic (CIPESA, 2016). With this in mind, one can note that mass surveillance and interception will be an easy task and controlling the abuses of social media in the interest of national security will be attainable.

The Interception of Communications Act (ICA) of 2007 sets out the legal basis for authorities to conduct communications surveillance. The Act provides for the lawful interception and monitoring of certain communications in the course of their transmission through a telecommunication, postal or any other related service system (CIPESA, 2016). According to CIPESA (2016) Section 2(2) of the Act defines interception as to listen to, record, or copy, whether in whole or in part communications sent through telecommunications or radio systems and to read or copy the contents of communications sent by post. The Act punishes interception without a warrant or the consent of at least one of the parties to the communication, an offence punishable by a fine, or imprisonment of up to five years.

Since the Cyber and Patriotic Bill is still in motion and noted yet legislated into law in Zimbabwe, the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act of 2004 is the government weapon to punish and criminalize both the online and offline offenders. It is popularly known as the 'insult law.' Under section 31 and 33 the Act criminalizes publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state and undermining authority of or insulting the

President (CIPESA, 2016). Police officers caught those who have violated this law publicly or privately, including those who facilitated protest online. Edmund Kudzayi (journalist)) was 'allegedly' to be the character known as Baba Jukwa and was charged under this law, for allegedly been behind the Facebook character Baba Jukwa. He was accused of influencing Zimbabweans to overthrow the government. He was arrested following the indication that the SIM card that was used had been registered in his name Jukwa (Techzim, 2016). A respondent pointed out that:

"Internet shutdowns and blockages have become the most preferred control mechanisms governments have used to curtail the right to freedom of expression and access to information online especially from 2016 onwards".

A Zimbabwean government official had this to say:

"As policy makers we do not want to ban social media but we only need to control it especially when we see people engaging into destructive and retrogressive tendencies smearing the reputation of the government. That is against the national interest and it is vital that we control that interaction and if people, civil societies and opposition parties cross a certain line there are consequences and some these include a fine and a jail term and also the government cannot continue to fold its arms while citizens recklessly violate the constitution through social media".

The study also revealed that all SIM cards in Zimbabwe are registered in the name of the user. Perpetrators can easily be identified. Therefore, any members of the public or any person caught in possession of generating, sharing or passing on abusive, threatening, subversive or offensive communication message, including WhatsApp or any other social media messages that may be deemed to cause despondency, incite violence, threaten citizens and cause social unrest, will be arrested and dealt with accordingly in the national interest. The evidence from the field seemed to be consistent with the argument advanced by ZimSitRep, (2016) that, government, through state regulator Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe now uses, its database to identify those sending out subversive messages and this has enabled government to monitor, filter or even block specific internet services like WhatsApp and twitter from a central point.

VI. CONCLUSION

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter just to mention a few are playing an instrumental role in providing the citizens around the world a platform to discuss and take part in active politics in their respective countries. The youth being the majority users of such platforms are on the forefront in their expression of their disgruntlement against governments that are involved in [13].

malpractices of repression against critics and corruption involving government officials. However, governments around the world have reacted to the upsurge of the use of social media as a means of political expression by enacting laws that help them to regulate the conduct of individual citizens on social media platforms (Lee et al., 2013).

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