

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Zambia

Preelection assessment

General elections set for August 2021

Zambia will hold general elections in August as the country's democracy comes under increasing strain. President Edward Lungu's tenure has featured pressure on democratic institutions and civic space, including a failed attempt to pass constitutional amendments that would vest the presidency with increased powers over election processes and the judiciary. Lungu, who leads the ruling Patriotic Front (PF) party, assumed office in 2014 upon the death of his predecessor and was reelected in 2016. Zambia's highest court—composed entirely of Lungu appointees—ruled in 2018 that he was eligible to contest the 2021 elections and that constitutional provisions limiting a president to two five-year terms did not apply. Lungu's main challenger in the August elections is perennial presidential candidate Hakainde Hichilema, the head of the United Party for National Development (UPND), the primary opposition party. The election is expected to be highly contested: Lungu won re-election in the 2016 general elections with only 13,000 votes over the required 50 percent margin. Alongside the presidency, 156 of the 167 National Assembly seats will be contested.

Serious concerns over the administration and credibility of the 2021 elections have already emerged. In 2020, the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) announced that registered voters would be required to re-certify their registrations, reversing a 15-year-old policy of retaining voter rolls. Hichilema and others in the opposition have criticized a provisional voter register published in March 2021 that, when compared to the 2016 register, contained over 266,000 more voters in provinces that have historically supported the PF and almost 100,000 fewer voters in provinces that have historically supported the UPND. Meanwhile, PF officials accused Hichilema of corruption in late 2020 related to his 2004 purchase of a farm, leading to a police investigation that sparked rumors of Hichilema's impending arrest. The 2016 elections were marred by restrictions on opposition-aligned media, misuse of public resources by the PF, election-related violence between PF and UPND supporters, and restrictions on opposition rallies. Following the PF's victory in 2016, Hichilema was arrested on politicized charges of treason and Lungu imposed a state of emergency that constrained media freedom and empowered law enforcement.

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Arrests and prosecutions for online activities are common in Zambia, particularly for defaming Lungu. Social media users have also been arrested on charges of publishing false news and seditious publication with intent to cause fear and alarm. In March 2021, Lungu signed a cybercrime law that establishes expansive new provisions for online speech, as well as broad authority for online surveillance. The new law, which includes a ban on publication of "obscene" content and disclosure of information about criminal investigations, further adds to the arsenal of legal tools that the government may use to silence online critics during the electoral period, particularly journalists.
- **Internet shutdowns:** Widespread connectivity disruptions were reported alongside mass protests over the outcome of the disputed 2016 presidential election. The disruptions, which

lasted between 48 and 72 hours, were localized to areas with strong opposition support, leading to strong suspicions of government interference. Opposition-led protests ahead of or after the elections could prompt similar restrictions on connectivity.

- **Influence operations:** Media reports and statements from officials indicate that the PF has invested in efforts to shape the online media environment. Both progovernment and pro-opposition social media accounts have been known to spread false news stories online. Reporting in 2020 alleged that the PF's strategic plan for 2018 to 2021 included the establishment of a media intelligence unit for covert operations consisting of bloggers, hackers, and reporters to influence media narratives. The heightened tensions of the elections season may make the online media landscape more prone to manipulation by domestic political actors.

Zambia has a score of 59 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a history of regular multiparty elections marred by alleged irregularities, and a trend of restrictions on media freedom and human rights. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 54 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties and **Partly Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 59 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Zambia country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).