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## The risk of authoritarian renewal in Zimbabwe: Understanding ZANU-PF youth

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What contributes to the reproduction of authoritarianism? Research conducted with politically active youth in the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) demonstrates their motivations and actual practices, feeding into the ruling party's wider systems of dominance and repression, ultimately reproducing authoritarianism.

## Key messages

- ZANU-PF recruits well-educated youth through student associations and low-income groups through patronage in the informal economy.
- Young people who grew up in families with war veterans or active ZANU-PF members are more likely to develop genuine loyalty to the party, especially if their education is paid by ZANU-PF.
- Youth who became active with ZANU-PF on their own initiative hoped to have access to material benefit and career opportunities.
- ZANU-PF youth respect ZANU-PF leaders for their role in the liberation war but are highly critical about corruption, rights violations, nepotism and state of the economy.
- ZANU-PF youth are unhappy about having limited influence in the party. The few who reach influential positions mainly do so through family networks.
- Some might be dissuaded from joining ZANU-PF if they have access to educational and employment opportunities. Yet in this context, employment interventions and scholarships are likely to be captured by the regime.

## Summary

In an age of global democratic backsliding, what contributes to the reproduction of authoritarianism? Debates on Africa's large youth population have focused predominantly on young people's protest, and on their disengagement from formal politics. Yet some do get actively involved in authoritarian ruling parties. Research conducted with politically active youth in the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) demonstrates their motivations and actual practices. Their numbers might be relatively small and 'party youth' do not necessarily hold authoritarian values. Yet the pressure and incentives to 'stay relevant' keeps them locked into party structures. Their practices feed into the ruling party's wider systems of dominance and repression, ultimately reproducing authoritarianism.

*'I looked at my friends who came from a ZANU PF background and managed to secure scholarships. I looked at my peers within the opposition. I said to myself - what's in there for me?'*

## ZANU-PF's efforts to attract and contain urban youth

ZANU-PF has been in power since Independence in 1980, with only one term serving jointly with the main political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in a Government of National Unity (2009–2013) after violent, contested elections in 2008. ZANU-PF's sustained political repression and economic mismanagement have produced multiple crises, pushing large populations of

urban youth into the informal economy. Aware of existing urban support to the opposition, especially the Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) which incorporated young, former MDC politicians, ZANU-PF has developed strategies to maintain some control and influence in cities, including strategies of patronage and co-optation targeting urban youth. Scholarships, youth revolving funds and job opportunities, including in the informal economy, are used for party patronage and informally channelled to party cadres.

Having limited economic prospects, young people need to navigate this political landscape and decide whether to opt into ZANU-PF networks or not. ZANU-PF membership may not reflect actual loyalty and support as it is a common tactic to secure access to scarce opportunities. Yet while large numbers of especially urban youth are disillusioned and unhappy with the ZANU-PF regime, some young people do get actively involved in the ruling party.

The key message of this policy brief is that these active ZANU-PF youth are important for the prospects of democratic governance in Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF youth might sustain authoritarianism after the 'aging' political and military leaders with Liberation credentials have left, by reproducing ZANU-PF systems of coercive distribution and even repression. This policy brief is based on 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with youth active in civil society and political parties in urban Zimbabwe between 2019 and 2022. Of these respondents, 20 were actively involved in ZANU-PF bodies like the Youth League, party-aligned student associations, and in cell, district or provincial-level committees.

### ZANU-PF activists: a diverse group

The study shows that ZANU-PF youth are diverse and become active for the party through different pathways. Many of those who presented themselves as loyalists were 'born into the party': their parents or other important adult relatives were active in ZANU-PF and/or they were war veterans. These youth were raised with respect for the role of the liberation heroes and ZANU-PF in liberating the country. A strong transmitter of ZANU-PF loyalty appeared to be through the payment of education by the ruling party, for instance when the individual's parent(s) were war veterans or connected to political elites. This instilled a sense of having to 'give back' and respect ZANU-PF. For instance, ZANU-PF offered students 'Presidential Scholarships' to study abroad (e.g. in South Africa, Algeria, Cuba and recently China).

Others were recruited by ZANU-PF agents or friends, often with the promise that engagement would lead to opportunities. These youth expressed a mix of fear ("What will happen to me if I say no") and a desire for material opportunities as the main reasons for their active engagement. ZANU-PF's recruitment strategies varied by class. Better-educated youth were recruited through party-affiliated student associations, while offered scholarships and white-collar jobs like in the civil service. Low-income groups were recruited with opportunities in the informal economy and positions in local party structures.

### Once part of ZANU-PF, what do party youth do?

Our findings show how ZANU-PF youth are concerned with the notion of 'staying relevant': to stand a chance to benefit, one has to be useful to the party and its key figures. One then becomes noticeable and will -hopefully- be rewarded. For well-educated youth, staying relevant implied making their professional skills available, for instance by writing texts and endorsing ZANU-PF on public fora. They could do so online too, by delegitimizing or trolling the opposition parties and ZANU-PF critics as '*varakashi*' (troll or thrash ZANU-PF critics). Youth belonging to low-income groups could 'become relevant' by actively mobilizing other youth to attend party meetings, events and marches, and during election campaigns.

Those working in the urban informal economy could reproduce ruling party patronage, for instance when allocating informal trading spaces based on party membership. Some party youth, both educated and informally employed, disclosed they were eventually asked to do the 'dirty jobs' like gathering intelligence on political opponents or factions. In the past, some of those belonging to poorer groups had been mobilised in vigilante groups that thrived through rent seeking practices and they spearheaded violent political campaigns for ZANU-PF. And if one wanted to make a career in the party, one had to 'stay relevant' and attend the ZANU-PF Chitepo School of

Ideology; a training programme named after a Liberation hero.

Most active youth admitted they did not genuinely support ZANU-PF in their hearts and might even vote for the opposition. They perform loyalty due to circumstances and felt compelled to choose for a way of life 'inside' the party in order to progress in life. They carefully navigated expectations and requests by party agents. They expressed they did not want to be 'at the forefront' to avoid risk, nor in 'the back' as they might miss opportunities, but to be firmly 'in the middle' and on the lookout for potential opportunities. While acknowledging that opportunities to benefit through corruption were tempting, some refused to take up such opportunities out of principle. They believed that grants from revolving funds and government jobs should not only be made available to party youth, but to anyone.

*'I should acknowledge what the party has done for me. Ever since my father's death, primary school, high school and tertiary education were all covered by ZANU-PF, so I could never ever join any other. I hope you understand.'*

### Shades of activism: loyal and critical ZANU-PF youth

ZANU-PF youth do not simply echo ZANU-PF rhetoric and many actually critique the party and its senior leaders. Some questioned the ideology propagated through the Chitepo School of Ideology, which they feel is reproducing a culture of silence and docility among youth; promotes a narrow form of patriotism; and is complicit in the corrupt activities of senior political elites. Most acknowledge the role of its leaders during the Liberation war, but they were highly critical of the ways in which leaders betrayed liberation values through corruption, nepotism, rights violations, and their failure to deliver services and maintain a healthy economy. All party youth rejected physical forms of political violence. Loyalists, however, blamed violence on 'rogue elements' in the party rather than systems of repression maintained by the regime. They were quick to point out that opposition parties were also responsible for violence, and suggesting that they were supported by Western governments. While loyalist attribute the country's protracted economic crisis to existing sanctions, other party youth blamed it on the endemic corruption in the government. However, when prominent ZANU-PF Youth League members such as Godfrey Tsenengamu and Lewis Matutu publicly questioned corruption by businesspeople linked to top ZANU-PF politicians, they were suspended and required to attend the Chitepo school before being allowed back in.

The existing shades of activism of ZANU-PF youth has implications for thinking about interventions aimed at

strengthening democracies and countering authoritarianism. Considered on an individual case by case basis, the practices of ‘staying relevant’ did not constitute significant political acts. Yet together, they contribute to the reproduction of ZANU-PF dominance and control. The need to ‘stay relevant’ or otherwise lose out, in combination with the potential threat of repercussions and exposure to coercion when ending the engagement, keep ZANU-PF youth locked into its networks and systems of operation. Thus, even moderate ZANU-PF youth help sustain the broader systems of dominance, patronage and repression through their practices.

True loyalists, especially those who become actively engaged in ZANU-PF due to their families’ upbringing, are less likely to be dissuaded from engaging in ZANU-PF than the more moderate youth who became active for social connects and career and/or material opportunities. It is the relatively moderate youth that might be offered alternative networks and opportunities. However, conventional youth employment interventions are at risk of becoming appropriated by political elites in this context. ZANU-PF has in the past effectively redirected youth funds to its own party cadres, furthering the reproduction of authoritarian rule. A sole focus on economic opportunities furthermore overlooks the importance of other recruitment avenues, like social networks and associations at educational institutions. However, youth-focused interventions alone will not be enough to resolve authoritarianism in a dominant party-state like Zimbabwe. They need to be part of concerted efforts aimed at protecting civic space and political freedoms.

### Policy recommendations

- Multi-lateral and bilateral donors that support democratic governance interventions need to integrate a focus on youth and youth participation. Without adequate investment in young generations, the networks and opportunities availed to them by authoritarian and hegemonic political parties may attract even relatively moderate youth. Considering the multiple avenues of party recruitment, including by offering scholarships, interventions need to target economic and educational opportunities, and support associational life that is relevant to youth.
- Existing programmes on youth civic education and participation need to integrate modules about risks and implications of recruitment. They should promote the kind of peer networks that can promote a sense of belonging and help young people progress in life.

- Donors operating in repressive regime settings need to design out-of-the-box strategies for identifying and working with moderate and reformist ruling party youth. True party loyalists are unlikely to be dissuaded from engagement in authoritarian parties, whilst moderate youth can be supported to be part of pro-democracy alliances.
- Donors and civil society organisations (CSOs) implementing youth employment and entrepreneurship interventions in authoritarian regimes need to design sound risk mitigation strategies to prevent political elites from capturing and manipulating such interventions. Well-intended interventions may feed into the reproduction of authoritarian politics when they are channelled to party cadres. On the other hand, job rich economic development may redress the need to join ruling parties for accessing economic opportunities, and may hence weaken regime control over patronage economies.
- CSOs need to promote meaningful peer networks in combination with educational and economic opportunities, to dissuade young people from feeling they need to engage in party networks in order to progress in life.

*‘I didn’t mind doing gathering intelligence [on peers]. For me I had nothing to lose. It was like backstabbing them, but these ZANU-PF guys were providing a better offer. But it was very dangerous.’*

### Further reading

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