

Youth Driving Change: Zambia's Path to Electoral Empowerment



In Zambia, the legacy of youth activism in shaping the nation's political landscape spans decades, from challenging colonial rule to modern-day electoral engagement. With nearly 37% of the population aged 15-35, young Zambians are asserting their influence by actively participating in elections and advocating for increased representation in governance.



MWILA CHRIEDDY BWANGA

CoD YouthLead,
Zambia

Zambian young people have been at the forefront of driving systemic and political change for the past 75 years. When Zambia was battling the shackles of colonialism and its racially driven framework of governance—with no indigenous people allowed the right to lead or vote—it was young people who rose to the occasion. The youth sector fought the colonial system and introduced a democratic system of governance under the leadership of President Kenneth Kaunda, whose government public officials and representatives had an average age of 25.

When President Kenneth Kaunda introduced a one-party system that ran for 27 years in the late 1980s, young Zambians again rose to the occasion to fight and remove the one-party system of governance. As the wind of democracy became loud, Zambia's political landscape gave into multi-party politics in the early 1990s, which ushered in the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) government of President Frederick Chiluba. When President Chiluba concluded his two terms and pushed to run for a third one, young Zambian activists took to the streets and advocated against such an ambition by

the President. Their action forced the idea to be dropped, and President Chiluba allowed for the transition.

After the MMD government had ruled the nation for 20 years, translating into three ruling presidents – namely President Chiluba, President Levy Patrick Mwanawasa, and lastly, President Rupiah Banda – in 2011, young people showed up in numbers to vote for the Patriotic Front's Michael Chilufya Sata, and electing him Zambia's fifth president. Following President Sata's death, as he remained in office, he was succeeded by President Edgar Chagwa Lungu, who would then govern the country for the next seven years. Due to a decrease in the democratic space during that timeframe, in the last elections in 2021, the young people of Zambia expressed dissatisfaction, which resulted in voting out the PF government. Zambia's current President, Hakainde Hichilema, rules for the United Party for National Development (UPND).

As evidenced by those above, it's evident that the dynamic political and electoral landscape of Zambia is attributed to young people. 4.8 million young people aged 15-35 represent

a significant 36.7% of Zambia's population, a number that heavily weighs in deciding elections.[1]

The young sector has now realized the magnitude of the power of an election and has used that power to protect the fabric of electoral democracy. With the exponential increase in the use of social media, young people have also become empowered to actively hold their leaders accountable based on their campaign promises and the merits of the tenets of good governance and democracy.

The current standing regarding youth representation in parliament stands at 2%; at the local government level, it stands at 5%. Though being the determinants of elections, young Zambians lack the much-needed representation in politics – which has proved to be a challenge in passing youth-focused policies and laws. Zambia's next general election is in 2026, and as the election approaches, the resolve from young Zambians is to not only remain mere voters but upgrade their value by running for public office as political candidates.