

# Non-state Actors and Presidential Term Limits in Africa: Lessons from Malawi for Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of faith actors and civil society in protecting the presidential term limits in Africa, with particular focus on Malawi and Zimbabwe. It scans through the specific statements made by the faith actors and civil society in the two countries in opposition to the proposed third terms by the respective presidents. The paper is written in the context of Zimbabwe's President Emerson Mnangagwa's bid to extend his term of office beyond 2028, when elections are constitutionally due, in which he would not be eligible. The Malawi case, in which faith actors and civil society blocked President Bakili Muluzi in 2004 is used as a success story from which their counterparts in Zimbabwe should learn. Using the Social Capital Theory, it is found that collective efforts among faith actors and civil society organizations can successfully protect the presidential term limits and promote constitutionalism. It is therefore recommended that the Zimbabwean faith actors and civil society should combine their efforts and block the term extension campaign. The paper is directly informed by desk research in which the specific statements were analyzed against the available academic literature on presidential term limits.

Keywords: Faith Actors, Civil Society, Term Limits

## Introduction and Background

Africa has become one of the most discussed continents regarding the issue of presidential term limits. The matter has dominated political conversations in the past two decades. Ross (2004) notes the amplification of historical tendency for the executive authority to become concentrated in the presidential office and the centrality of patronage networks in shaping national politics. Some African presidents, notably, Bakili Muluzi of Malawi (1994-2004) and Emerson Mnangagwa (Zimbabwe's president at the time of writing) were pressurized to remain in office beyond their constitutional periods. Yet, the two countries had bitter experiences of long-running or 'life' presidency (Ross, 2004). This explains the emergence of presidential term limits as a major element in the democratization efforts in Malawi and Zimbabwe. Wiebusch and Murray define presidential term limits as "explicit temporal restrictions on the ability of the president to hold the top executive office" (2018, 133). Thus, Wiebusch and Murray (2019) are not

concerned with the non-temporary limitations (eligibility criteria) that prevent a person from holding the office of the presidency, such as an age limit. Furthermore, their definition excludes the three monarchies in Africa (Morocco, Lesotho and Eswatini). The current paper adopts this definition offered by Wiebusch and Murray (2019). With particular reference to the Malawi case, Ross (2004) observes that faith actors have proved to be the most effective agents in challenging the ruling elite. The Zimbabwean faith actors can learn from the unity and unanimity shown by faith actors and civil society in opposing Muluzi's bid for a third term. At the time of writing this article, the ruling party in Zimbabwe has initiated the formal implementation of a resolution to extend the term of Mnangagwa as the state president. The Veritas reports that the resolution instructed the following: "The party and government are therefore directed to initiate the requisite legislative amendments to give full effect to this resolution to ensure continuity, stability and the sustained transformation of the nation" (2025, 1).

This article surveys specific public statements issued by faith actors and civil society between 1992 and 2003 and their influence on democracy's final victory in July 2002 against Muluzi's third-term proposal in Malawi. One notes that faith actors and civil society became the custodians of democratic values and the country's constitution, thereby becoming the much-needed voice of the people. The unity shown among faith actors and civil society organizations (CSOs) in opposition to the third-term proposal was the key factor for their effectiveness, according to the literature reviewed for this article. In the same vein, the article also analyzes two public statements issued by the faith actors and CSOs in Zimbabwe in January of 2025 in response to the possible extension of Mnangagwa's term. While reference is made to public statements by other activists, the focus is on the statements of the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) issued on January 13, 2025 and the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) issued on January 5, 2025. The statements issued in Malawi and Zimbabwe are analysed against the broader academic discussion on presidential term limits in Africa.

The particular collaboration manifesting between and among faith actors and the CSOs is discussed within the social capital theoretical framework. The central objective of the article is to motivate the Zimbabwean faith actors and CSOs to learn from Malawi and contribute to the protection of constitutionalism. While reference is made to the broader non-state actors in the two countries, focus is on faith actors and selected CSOs. The paper regards faith actors as separate from the secular civil society. A definition of non-state actors given by Upendra (2018), cited by Mlambo is adopted. It says: "A non-state actor can be defined as an influential organization or individual with the potential to influence the actions of state actors but not allied to a state" (2023, 3),

In line with the argument by Wiebusch and Murray (2019), the article suggests that the conversations on the presidential term limit should be amplified in the African Union (AU)'s existing frameworks that promote constitutionalism and the rule of law, including agreed mechanisms of promotion and protection of the same. Thus, the article is directly informed by desk research on the subject as well as my insider's perspective, as I was (at the time of writing) involved in public academic discussions on the matter in Zimbabwe. Generally, the article concludes that faith actors and civil society's collaborative efforts can influence constitutionalism in Africa.

## Problem Statement

The problem examined in this article is that there has been an increase in African presidents' attempts to stay in office beyond their constitutionally stipulated timeframes. The development has been viewed as a serious violation of constitutionalism in Africa. While different actors have challenged the violation of the presidential term limits, their efforts are often marred by disjointed and uncoordinated actions.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the country under discussion in this paper, the initial responses from the faith actors and civil society organizations have demonstrated a lack of coordination. Thus, this paper aims to motivate non-state actors in Zimbabwe to learn from their counterparts in Malawi who collaboratively and successfully challenged Muzi's bid to stand for a third term. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: How can non-state actors in Zimbabwe collectively challenge Mnangagwa's bid for a third term? What key lessons can be learnt from Malawi?

## Literature Review

The paper notes that scholarly and grey literature on presidential term limits has proliferated over the past two decades (Grauvogel and Heyl, 2021). Nowack (2021) also observes that term limits are of special interest in the study of African politics. In light of these instances of "third-term bids" (Tull and Simons, 2017), the debates on the need to protect constitutionalism in Africa have been reignited. Wiebusch and Murray (2019) share that term limits are a toolbox to protect and promote democracy, complementing regular free and fair elections and human rights protection embedded in African constitutions. By the turn of the millennium, the idea had been widely accepted in Africa and well supported by the civil society in particular. For the sake of cohesion, the ensuing review is synchronic or thematic.

To begin with, African countries have introduced term limits into their constitutions increasingly since the early 1990s (McKie, 2017, cited in Nowack, 2021). The development controlled the duration that African presidents stay in office. It also signaled the need for ending personalist rule and the institutionalization of political power (Posner and Young, 2007, cited in Nowack, 2021). Nonetheless, the trend of attempts to remove or circumvent term limits has recently been observed (Tull and Simons, 2017, cited in Nowack, 2021).

Next, Nowack (2021) discusses attempts to circumvent presidential term limits in African countries, with their successes and failures. He concludes that the puzzling variation of success or failure is due to both international and domestic factors. His analysis is directly in response to the role of international and domestic factors in the attempted term limit circumvention in Malawi from 1999 to 2003. Yet, Nowack (2021) does not link the discussion to other countries, something the current article attempts to do.

Wiebusch and Murray (2019) discuss presidential term limits and recommend the need for strengthening AU's existing mechanisms to protect constitutionalism in Africa. Several countries in Africa have attempted or adopted a flexible interpretation of relevant constitutional provisions to allow incumbent leaders additional terms in the highest office. Thus, Wiebusch and Murray (2019) investigate AU responses to attempts to overturn or weaken term limits on executive power. Their paper is inspired by AU's mechanism against unconstitutional changes of government under the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and other instruments. While the Zimbabwean case emerged in 2024, Wiebusch and Murray (2019) do not

cover the previous actions by Mugabe to remain in power.

Also, Fruhstorfer and Hudson (2022) discuss strategic factors that force the incumbents to want to extend term limits. They share that as presidents approach the end of their constitutionally defined term in office, they face several difficulties, most importantly the deprivation of sources of power, personal enrichment, and protection from prosecution, thereby forcing them to circumvent their term limits. Electoral competition and the post-term fate of previous post-holders emerged as key explanations for presidents to extend their term limits (Fruhstorfer and Hudson, 2022). In the same vein, Kristin (2019) also argues that trends in electoral competition over time best predict term limit outcomes. Thus, for Kristin (2019), non-competitive elections permit full abolition, less competitive ones allow for a one-term extension, while competitive elections lead to failed bids. Kristin's analysis focuses on Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America, where, by 2019, 221 presidents had reached the end of their terms. Thirty percent of them had attempted to circumvent term limits, resulting in either full abolition or a one-term extension of the failed bid. Thus, the current study will add the latest Zimbabwean case, which is currently under public scrutiny.

In addition, Dixon and Landau (2020) contend that presidential term limits are an important and common protection of constitutional democracy. They, however, also note the trend where the limits are often evaded because they raise particularly difficult compliance problems that Dixon and Landau (2020) call "end game" problems. In line with the observation made by Fruhstorfer and Hudson (2022) on the overwhelming incentives for presidents to remain in power, Dixon and Landau (2020) argue that incumbents seek extraordinary means to evade term limits. They conclude that presidents rely on a wide range of devices, such as formal constitutional change, wholesale constitutional replacement, and manipulation of the judiciary. This conclusion is critical when one discusses the Malawi and Zimbabwean cases, where such seemingly constitutional routes were attempted. Omotola (2011), cited in Kristin (2019), holds that presidents who evade term limits through legal routes, thereby technically following the letter of the law, are running afoul of constitutionalism. Omotola (2011), in Kristin (2019), raises concerns that such presidents tend to foster personality cultism and propagate new forms of neopatrimonialism. The process is hinged on the abuse of state resources at the expense of citizens' welfare.

Furthermore, Osei, Akinochi and Mwombela (2021) indicate that in many cases, constitutions are important reference texts that provide some basic rules of governance. Yet, in their analysis of the 'third-term bids,' Tull and Simons (2017) suggest that formal institutions hinged on constitutions matter more as a legitimization of the power of political leaders than as a constraint to it. This suggestion seems to conform to the plans by the pro-Mnangagwa third-term lobbyists to manipulate the constitution, thereby legitimizing the third-term call.

Moreover, Kristin (2019) shares that presidential term limits are meant to promote turnover in the executive office and foster horizontal accountability between the government and the citizens. Precisely, for Ross (2004), term limits are meant to stop the idea of 'life presidency.' Thus, one almost universal constitutional provision adopted across the world is the inclusion of term limits. Kristin (2019) highlights that generally, in Latin America, the countries adopted a single-term system, in Africa, the Middle East and Asia two-term system was adopted. Notwithstanding the varied term limits, the African states have also reignited the need to protect the Presidential term limit. The African Network of Constitutional Lawyers (2025) notes the strategies adopted, including making term limit changes unamendable, establishing high thresholds for amendment, subjecting amendments to judiciary review and excluding incumbents

from the beneficiary's category. The African Network of Constitutional Lawyers further concludes that traditional and religious leaders have been key stakeholders in term limits debates in Africa, particularly where they join forces with other non-state actors who pursue the fulfillment of democracy. The network, however, focuses on the role of traditional leaders without an amplified analysis of faith actors in general, a gap that the current paper seeks to fill.

Finally, Wiebusch and Murray (2019) set parameters for the presidential term limit changes to be considered legitimate. They emphasize three key factors, namely (1) stability, (2) legality, and (3) legitimacy. They particularly discuss factors that signal constitutional manipulation: i.e. instability, illegality, and illegitimacy. Instability can manifest through violence, including police crackdowns, political assassinations and political party-affiliated militia attacks during a process of constitutional change to accommodate presidential term limits abolition or changes. Illegality can be signaled by violations of freedom of expression and other rights, including restrictions and bans on opposition political parties. It may also involve suspension of communication channels and harassment of journalists. Wiebusch and Murray (2019) add that illegality can also manifest through bribery and intimidation of key decision makers such as the judiciary and parliamentarians. Thus, instability and illegality may lead to abuse of state security forces, disregard of the rule of law, and other exclusionary practices. The framework offered by Wiebusch and Murray (2019) directly informs the current paper's analysis of the third-term bid in Malawi and Zimbabwe.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper is informed by Social Capital Theory, which fits well in the study as the case study of the faith actors and civil society is hinged on collective efforts, relationship building, sharing of resources, and an interfaith approach to governance issues in Malawi and Zimbabwe. Interfaith and inclusive efforts discourage individualism among the faith actors and civil society, pursuing constitutionalism. I acknowledge the possible limitations associated with the theory; yet, it allows me to have an appreciation of the collective efforts made by the different actors in response to the call for a third-term bid in Malawi and potentially in Zimbabwe. Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993) developed a theoretical approach they call "social capital" by drawing upon the logic of collective action. They explored conditions for generating strong, responsive, effective and representative institutions.

Perry defines "social capital" as the "capital or resources we gain from existing within a social network" (2022, 23). The concept was derived from social science and is centered on humanity's ability to leverage social connections to solve problems, improve well-being, pursue shared objectives, and take collective action (Gumbo 2022). Cited in Gumbo (2022), Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that social capital is the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Thus, membership in a group provides each member with the support gained from collective belonging. The relationships in a group may exist only in the practical state, materially or through the symbolic exchange of ideas. Robert-Putman (1995) has become the modern face of the Social Capital Theory through his work (Gumbo, 2022).

Social capital is hinged on social relationships and is characterized by social networks, civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and generalized trust. It is a collective asset manifesting through shared norms, values, beliefs, trust, networks, social relations, and institutions that facilitate cooperation and collective action for mutual benefits (Gumbo, 2022). Bhandari and



Yasunobu (2009) agree that social capital is a complex, multidimensional concept with various dimensions, types, and levels of measurement. Some of the types of social capital are structural and cognitive, bonding, bridging, and linking, strong and weak; and horizontal and vertical. Collaborative and collective approaches define social capital, of which the faith actors and civil society work on governance matters are deliberately framed in that way.

Gannon and Roberts (2018) highlight some of the controversies associated with the Social Capital Theory. They argue that social capital remains a challenging concept, such that its utility as an analytical tool has been questioned. For Gannon and Roberts, the criticisms are exacerbated by a mismatch between theoretical coverage of the concept and empirical work. Nevertheless, the current paper does not directly engage that debate. The utility of the theory to the faith actors and civil society in Malawi and Zimbabwe's efforts can, however, be an indirect attempt at testing some of the noted weaknesses in the application of the theory. Thus, to that extent, the paper has contributed to the theoretical value of social capital through translating it into practical use in the fight for constitutionalism in Africa.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper is directly informed by a desk review of the literature on presidential term limits in Africa, with particular focus on Malawi and Zimbabwe. A historical case study (Malawi) was chosen to motivate Zimbabwean faith actors and civil society's approaches to a contemporary matter yet to fully materialize. It specifically analyzes the public statements issued by faith actors and civil society in response to the third-term bid in both countries. Nonetheless, a review of academic literature and media reports on presidential term limits was conducted.

The literature reviewed includes journal articles, online media reports, national constitutions, faith and civil society public statements and others. For Zimbabwe, two statements issued by the ZESN and ZHOCOD in January of 2025 were reviewed from a comparative perspective. Thus, the paper relied on an historical qualitative analysis of specific public statements issued by non-state actors on presidential term limits, media reports on the same, and other key secondary data found on the Internet on the subject. I also utilized my knowledge of the contemporary issues in Zimbabwe. The approach allowed me to track the special role played by non-state actors in Malawi which can be replicated in Zimbabwe.

### **The Malawi Case**

The History Rise (2025) narrates the characteristics of Malawi's first President, Kamuzu Banda, who ruled for three decades with an iron grip as the Life President. There was strict censorship, relentless repression, and the silencing of any opposition (History Rise, 2025). But, the 1993 referendum, in which 65.5% of the voters confirmed the need for a multi-party democracy, marked the country's transition to a democracy. The 1994 multi-party elections ushered in the new regime under the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Muluzi (1994-2004). The subsequent Malawian Presidents were Bingu wa Mutharika (2004-2005) (under the UDF) and 2005-2009 (under the Democratic Progressive Party—DPP); Joyce Banda (2012-2014) (after the death of the President) (she led the People's Party—PP); Peter Mutharika (2014-2019) (the Democratic Progressive Party); Lazarus Chakwera (Tonse Alliance—TA) (2020-2025) and Peter Mutharika (2025- date).

The faith actors in Malawi played a significant role in guiding the successive regimes

with a prophetic voice. That role was well supported by civil society. The faith actors tackled contemporary political issues through ecumenical para-Church organizations (1 Library, 2025.). The organizations included the Malawi Council of Churches (MCC), the Episcopal Conference in Malawi (ECM), the Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM), and the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) (Bone, 2021).

At the tail end of Banda's rule in 1992, the Catholic Bishops issued a strong pastoral letter entitled "Living Our Faith," which was read in all Catholic churches on March 8, the first Sunday of Lent. The Bishops criticized the "evils" of Banda's government and called for Malawians to unite and challenge the regime. This marked the beginning of a strong campaign for multi-party democracy in Malawi. The MCC also issued its pastoral letter that echoed the Catholic Bishops' sentiments. The pressure from faith actors and civil society forced the government to call for a referendum to determine whether the people wanted a multi-party democracy. The majority voted in favor of multi-party democracy (History Rise, 2025), which Malawians regarded as the brainchild of the faith actors.

The PAC was formed in 1992, made up of faith-based organizations (FBOs) and pressure groups. Nonetheless, in 1993, the individual groups were reorganized into political parties that eventually competed in the general elections the following year, notably the UDF and the Alliance for Democracy (Aford). The PAC now acted as a political umbrella mouthpiece for the FBOs in Malawi. The FBOs included the MCC, ECM, EAM, Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), and the Quadria Muslim Association of Malawi (QMAM). The PAC was also a member (national chapter) of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP).

### **Muluzi's Great Betrayal: The Call for a Third Term**

Muluzi's regime was viewed as the savior following the end of Banda's iron rule. The great performance by the new government in social, economic and international relations sectors tempted some elements in the UDF to call for a third term for Muluzi after the expiry of his two terms in 2004. The agenda suddenly spread to every corner of the country; and by 2001, it had gained momentum, leading to attacks against any media house that reported against it (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002). The development sent shivers down the spines of Malawians who valued the constitution and who still remembered the "life presidency" of Banda that stole their freedom. Malawians felt betrayed by Muluzi. What confused the nation further was the manner in which the government handled the third-term proposal. While it had become clear that Muluzi wanted to stand for a third term, his government continued to deny that development.

The denials by the government through its spokesperson clearly contradicted a series of public statements by senior UDF leaders who insisted that Muluzi would run for a third term. There were further public pronouncements made by the UDF members that the party was already preparing a parliamentary motion to amend the constitution and insisted that Malawians should democratically decide on the matter. Zoe Titus of the Media Institute of Southern Africa alerted on May 23, 2002 that, at least 3,000 UDF militant youths and women besieged the premises of Blantyre Newspapers, angered by the newspaper group's stand against the third term bid of Muluzi (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002). Media censorship became the order of the day. The narrative took a different direction when UDF proponents of the third-term proposal churned out the propaganda that if Muluzi did not stand for a third term, the UDF would split. Yet, Muluzi himself did not expressly say he would run for a third term, nor did he publicly deny the

claims (Pambazuka, 2002). Nevertheless, the continued confusion did not deter faith actors and their counterparts in civil society from launching a campaign against the third-term agenda.

### **Faith Actors' Responses**

The Malawi Christian and Muslim leaders, as well as the CSOs, stood firm, arguing that “President Bakili Muluzi must see to it that constitutional provisions are protected and upheld. One should not change a constitution just to suit individual personalities” (Chronicle Staff Reporter, 2002, 1). Cited in Kristin (2019), Ginsburg, Melton and Elkins (2011) confirm the faith actors' view that democracy is about processes, not personalities. They further note that there is something “unseemly about rulers who reengineer law to facilitate personal ambition” (Ginsburg et al., 2011, 1831). The MCC and the Catholics issued separate but similar statements emphasizing that the churches were not concerned about personalities but about the principles of office as espoused in the Malawi Republican Constitution. Thus, amendments to the Constitution should not be done to suit individual personalities since no individual can be the only best person for the office, noted the statement (IRIN, 2001). The Catholics also called for unity among the opposition political actors, civil society, and faith actors to resist what they called the selfish motives of some politicians. They further expressed concern over what they viewed as a gradual weakening of the opposition parties and civil societies, which had been manipulated by the UDF.

The Muslims also chimed in and rejected the third-term proposal meant to amend Section 83(3) of the Constitution, arguing that the section was key for accountability purposes. The MAM indicated that human nature has great potential and a propensity to gravitate towards abuse of power and corruption. The MAM was further concerned about the fact that the third-term campaign was not in the national interest but meant to serve individuals. The Muslims used several platforms to show their concerns with Muluzi, who claimed to be a Muslim. The Muslim Supreme Council of Malawi, in a letter, called President Muluzi “a cheat and a liar” (News24, 2001)) written in direct response to Muluzi’s failure to come out into the open on whether he would seek a third term or not. The Presbyterian Church had also been upset by that when it stated the following: “Simply declare your decision not to seek a third term and we believe this matter will be put to rest” (BBC, 2001, 1). In the same context, the Roman Catholic Church of Malawi had also advised the government to hold referenda on matters that affect the constitution. The Catholics said “We should not allow anyone or any group to manipulate others into eroding the constitution” (BBC, 2001, 1).

The Muslims were not as diplomatic as the Christians in their communication with Muluzi. They said: “You remain in office despite the rampant corruption in your government, bribing and buying support for you to rule even beyond the constitutional requirements. This shows that you are not a true democrat and a true Muslim. You are, in fact, a bad man” (News24, 2001, 1). They added: “Your government is busy politically corrupting some opposition leaders by bribing them and seducing them with money to join your party and denounce other political parties. This does not create a healthy environment but creates an atmosphere of barbarism” (News24, 2001, 1).

### **Civil Society: CONGOMA**

The Council for Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi (CONGOMA) also reacted strongly against the third-term campaign. It raised concern that there had been no official



communication on the President's intention to stand for a third term. Thus, CONGOMA advised legislators to use their constitutional powers in the interest of the people. It called for a comprehensive, broad-based consultative process on the matter. The tendency of legislators to use their power selfishly was cited in the statement by CONGOMA.

Also, the CONGOMA reminded President Muluzi of his mandate to uphold and protect the Constitution. It further reminded Muluzi of his role in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as the Chairperson—hence the need to lead the region by example. CONGOMA members also mobilized their constituencies, supported by the faith actors, against the third-term proposal. On July 4, 2002, the matter was decided in parliament when the pro-third-term campaign fell by only three votes to miss the two-thirds majority required for constitutional changes. Muluzi accepted defeat and pledged that he held no grudge against anyone who had opposed the proposal.

### **The Case of Mnangagwa's Bid in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe's long-running President Robert Gabriel Mugabe led the country for 37 uninterrupted years. His rule was also characterized by massive repression of the citizens' voices, censorship, and suppression of the opposition. He was, however, ousted in November of 2017 by the military, which then facilitated the installation of President Emerson Mnangagwa as the new leader. The government of President Mnangagwa characterized itself as a "New Dispensation" (Vengesai, 2021). The President also emphasized that the "Voice of the people is the voice of God." It also signalled a different approach to governance from that of Mugabe (Vengesai, 2021). Yet, the country immediately slid into further social, economic and political crisis despite the commitment by the new government to address long-standing problems (Vengesai, 2021).

Mnangagwa promised several social, economic and electoral reforms. On several occasions, he reiterated that he was a constitutionalist who would respect the supreme law of the land, which he helped to craft. He is directly reminded of the same pronouncement by the ZESN (2025) in the latter's statement, which is one of the subjects of review in the current paper. He also publicly promised to step down when his term of office expired in 2028. This happened even though there were members in his party who, as early as 2024, were already publicly calling for the extension of his term as President beyond 2028. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) Annual Conference of 2024 in Bulawayo officially endorsed the call for Mnangagwa's term to be extended beyond 2028. The conference resolved as: "...Mnangagwa's term of office as President of the Republic of Zimbabwe and First Secretary of ZANU-PF be extended beyond 2028 to 2030. The Party and Government should, therefore, set in motion the necessary amendments to the National Constitution to give effect to this resolution." (CITE, 2024, 1).

The resolution was reaffirmed at the 2025 ZANU-PF annual conference held at the Mutare Polytechnic. Yet, the Veritas reiterates the constitutional provisions that prohibit Mnangagwa from extending his term. It indicates that "According to section 91(2) of the Constitution, a person is disqualified for election as President or appointment as Vice-President if he or she has already held office as President for two terms, whether continuous or not, and for the purpose of this subsection three or more years' service is deemed to be a full term" (2025, 1). Thus, constitutional reforms will have to be fulfilled to accommodate the ZANU-PF resolution, which is where the role of faith actors and civil society becomes critical to guide the citizens' actions.

Nevertheless, in between the two conferences, some ZANU-PF activists, including senior party officials, had been campaigning for the extension of Mnangagwa's term to 2030. This was resisted by a section of the party, mainly the veterans of the liberation war, led by Runesu Geza, who directly attacked the administration of Mnangagwa from the beginning of 2025 (Zimeye, 2025). Geza openly criticized Mnangagwa for corruption, cruelty, destruction of the opposition, bribery of parliamentarians and other key institutions, and other ills. Calls for national demonstrations against the government were made but failed due to a police crackdown. The government responded by arresting journalists who gave Geza the platform to air his grievances, which were mainly hinged against the possibility of Mnangagwa's extension of his term.

The meeting of parliamentarians in Mnangagwa's Precabe farm in Kwekwe in early January 2025 further confirmed that the third-term issue was alive. A section of the opposition legislators who attended the meeting openly supported the extension of the incumbent President's term of office. One opposition legislator, Sengezo Tshabangu, is cited as having said the following: "If our presence here improves your stay in power and makes the people of Zimbabwe happy, then let it be" (New Zimbabwe, 2025, 1). The development attracted reactions from individual activists, politicians, civil society, academics, and the Church. The ensuing is an analysis of the responses from the Church (ZHOCD) and civil society (ZESN).

On January 13, 2025, ZESN issued a public statement entitled "ZESN Statement on the Ongoing Debates on Postponement of Elections from 2028 to 2030" (ZESN, 2025). The ZESN is a network of civil society organizations and churches that has been observing elections in Zimbabwe. Over the years, the network has also called for electoral reforms. A few days later, on January 21, 2025, the ZHOCD issued its version of the statement titled "ZHOCD Statement on Presidential Constitutional Term Limits" (ZHOCD, 2025). The ZHOCD is an Ecumenical body that brings together four Apex ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe: (1) Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), (2) Evangelical Fellowship in Zimbabwe (EFZ), (3) Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), and (4) Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA), (ZHOCD, 2025). In its title, ZESN carefully chose to emphasize the 'postponement of elections from 2028 to 2030,' thereby clearly avoiding the contentious personalized third-term issue. On its part, the ZHOCD was specific on "constitutional term limits," without also emphasizing the holding of election matters on which the ZESN had focused.

### **Opposition Elements or Members of Parliament and Political Activists**

One notes that both institutions are discussing the same matter and are against the third-term campaign. In the introduction, the ZESN expresses "deep" concern about the discussions as they can potentially lead to the postponement of elections from 2028 to 2030, thereby undermining democratic principles in Zimbabwe. The ZESN particularly singles out "some opposition elements that begin to align with the ruling party" (ZESN, 2025) on the matter. The Malawi case also demonstrates how some opposition members aligned with the ruling UDF led to a narrow democratic win against the third-term bill. Thus, ZESN is preempting such a possibility in Zimbabwe.

The ZHOCD statement also starts by expressing concern (without the "deep" that ZESN included) about pronouncements by "some Members of Parliament and political activists" who are urging President Mnangagwa to extend his term of office beyond 2028 (ZHOCD, 2025, 1). Immediately, the ZHOCD (2025) "prayerfully urge" the President to resist the call for an

extension for the sake of the people. Thus, ZESN recognizes that the nation's good administration and electoral integrity represent the "greater good of the country" as emphasized by the ZHOCD. The ZHOCD is not specific about the opposition elements as the ZESN mentions in its statement. Instead, the ZHOCD broadens the target to members of parliament and political activists (ZHOCD, 2025). It can thus be argued that the ZHOCD senses the existence of similar elements even in the ruling party. One can also note that the ZHOCD has already removes Mnangagwa from the campaign. His only involvement is because he is being "urged" by the said "some MPs and political activist" (ZHOCD, 2025).

In the key recommendation number four, the ZHOCD targets the legislators in general without specifying whether they are from the opposition or the ruling party. The ZHOCD reiterates that they have a key role in ensuring that the constitution is respected. The statement is specific that legislators should block the third-term proposal. The ZHOCD presents the Executive as the instigator of the proposal for a third term—hence, the need for the parliament to help with oversight. In its fifth key recommendation, the ZHOCD targets "All" political parties. Thus, the ZHOCD has been consistent in its treatment of political parties and activists in this statement. Nonetheless, one can question whether the ZHOCD knew the contemporary political context in Zimbabwe. The ZHOCD assumes that there were genuine opposition political parties in Zimbabwe's parliament after the 2023 election. Otherwise, its call should have been correctly directed to the ruling party which, in any case, has the structural capacity to influence constitutional amendments because of its majority command. The Malawi faith actors also raised concerns regarding the bribery of opposition parties by the UDF.

### **Mnangagwa Exonerated**

The ZESN then "commends President Mnangagwa for his commitment to upholding the constitution..." (ZESN, 2025, 1). The network cites the President's public pronouncements in 2024 in which he distanced himself from the campaign for a third term. In a similar version, in paragraph two of the statement, the ZHOCD also "takes relief from the consistent remarks made by President..." (ZHOCD, 2025, 1). The ZHOCD even emphasizes that the pronouncements were made severally, thereby "affirming his commitment to upholding the constitution" (ZHOCD, 2025, 1). The utilization of the word "commitment" by both institutions exonerates Mnangagwa from the matter. The ZHOCD quickly links the public pronouncements to the reinforcement of the "gains of the liberation struggle, good governance, democratic norms and promotion of national peace and unity" (ZHOCD, 2025, 1). The civil society and faith actors in Malawi also reminded Muluzi of his public pronouncements on constitutionalism.

Nevertheless, one can argue that if Mnangagwa was against the push for a third term, it should have been evidenced by determined reprisals of proponents of the agenda. Yet, the ZHOCD still believes that Mnangagwa will "respect his oath to uphold, defend, and respect" (ZHOCD, 2025, 1) the constitution without compromising any part of it. In that belief, the ZHOCD almost contradicted itself through its first recommendation, which urges the same President to "adhere to the constitution" (ZHOCD, 2025, 2). Could this be a diplomatic way of persuading the President to reject the third-term call, one could ask. In the same vein, did the ZHOCD connect with ZESN's fear of the possibility of the 2028 elections being postponed, hence the call for the President to facilitate the elections and subsequent power transfer?

## **Public Trust in the Electoral Process**

The ZESN sustains its argument on elections as it holds that its postponement leads to erosion of public trust in electoral processes. For the ZESN, elections are the pillars of democracy and accountability (ZESN, 2025). In this case, one would have expected the ZESN to go a step further and link the discussion to the removal of presidential term limits. Acceptance of a third term can hinder thorough checks and balances on political activities and good governance (Kristin, 2019). This explains why there is a need to avoid leaving the discussions to the parliamentarians who always push for undermining the opposition in parliament, thereby further compromising democratic processes. This observation resonates with the framework offered by Wiebusch and Murray (2019) when they discussed factor number two on the manipulation of the constitution to effect term limit changes. One can also argue that parliamentary processes always serve personal and selfish party interests at the expense of national interests. While ZESN does not elaborate on the implications of the current debate, the network argues that election timelines should be determined by legal processes and not political aspirations or agendas. The ZESN is not brave enough to mention names or offices that may be instigating the possible postponement of elections in 2028. But, as this paper is being developed, it is now clear that the instigators for changes to the term limit are institutionally the ZANU-PF, as evidenced by the 2025 Mutare Resolution.

The ZHOCD also laments that if the third-term proposal is implemented, public trust in the electoral processes in Zimbabwe will be eroded, an issue that is also noted by ZESN. Nonetheless, the ZHOCD links the possible erosion of trust to the destabilization of the country with serious implications on national unity and peace, which are critical for the much-needed economic and social transformation (ZHOCD, 2025).

## **SADC Chairmanship**

The ZESN is concerned that if the third-term proposal is implemented, the current Chair of the SADC (at the time the statement was issued), the development would have set a wrong precedent in the region. A similar call was made by the CONGOMA in 2002 when Muluzi was then the Chairperson of the SADC. The ZESN also cites the need to respect the SADC principles and guidelines governing democratic elections, since Zimbabwe is a signatory. This call by the ZESN also resonates with Wiebusch and Murray's 2019 recommendation for the African Union to strengthen its control over members who want to change the term limit provisions.

Thus, the possible postponement of the 2028 elections in Zimbabwe is tantamount to a violation of the SADC principles and guidelines that call for the regular holding of free, fair and credible elections (ZESN, 2025). The ZHOCD did not make reference to the SADC issue, choosing to focus on the liberation struggle and other general democratic values to which the President appeared to be committed (ZHOCD, 2025).

## **Call for Electoral Reforms**

Both statements call for the implementation of electoral reforms in Zimbabwe. In that regard, the ZESN directs its call toward political will, which is key to the realization of electoral reforms. The ZESN assumes that other key stakeholders are ready to fulfill the necessary electoral reforms, save for the political leadership. I argue that other institutions such as the military and

the electoral bodies should have been addressed too. The ZESN statement calls for “meaningful and genuine” reforms, insinuating that the country has been discussing “reforms” that may not have been effective but merely meant to advance political interest. The ZESN advises that the reforms should be informed by the observations and recommendations suggested by the electoral observer missions (ZESN, 2025). The network reiterates its commitment to advocating for the reforms and pinpoints adherence to election timelines as it concludes its statement.

The ZHOCD also supports the need for electoral reforms as it elaborates on the significance of holding regular, free, and fair elections (ZHOCD, 2025). The Church holds that such elections ensure accountability, transparency, and the peaceful transfer of power. The call for reforms is targeted at the government. Yet, the ZESN just mentions “political will” (ZESN, 2025). In essence, political will can mean the willingness of several political players, including the government and individual political players. The ZHOCD combines this with the call for the promotion of multi-party democracy as the country gears up for the 2028 elections (ZHOCD, 2025). This is the first point in which the ZHOCD almost hints that Zimbabwe is currently dominated by a single party that has bought out “opposition” legislators. The Malawi faith actors were direct in their statements about the ruling party’s bribery of opposition parties.

### **Reaching Out to Citizens**

The ZHOCD openly calls for “All Zimbabweans to clearly pronounce themselves in support of the call to put Zimbabwe first and uphold the Constitution of the Country” (ZHOCD, 2025, 2). In the best-case scenario, the ZHOCD should have reached out to civil society and willing political players, including legislators, students, vendors, and other faith actors belonging to other organizations, something the Malawi faith actors did in their statements.

The case of Malawi demonstrates how such collective approaches to constitutional matters require citizens’ opinion. Indeed, social capital resident in various stakeholders is key to such a national process.

### **Key Lessons for Zimbabwe**

While the ruling party members officially adopted the resolution to confirm the informal campaign already pursued by the pro-extension section, individual activists, civil society, and faith actors pronounced their concerns. This paper focused mainly on the two statements issued by the ZESN and ZHOCD in early 2025. It, however, notes comments made against the resolution as confirmed in October of 2025 by the ruling party. Generally, commentators question the intentions of Mnangagwa’s bid to extend his term in office. Nevertheless, I am concerned that the ZESN and the ZHOCD, which initially issued comprehensive statements on the matter, have become mum when the campaign for a third term was officially reconfirmed at the 2025 ZANU-PF Annual Conference. The silence partly motivated this paper—hence, the need to learn from Malawi, where the advocacy against the third-term bid was sustained for more than two years, leading to the yielding of the positive outcome.

The ZHOCD and its civil society partners should collectively mobilize their members for coordinated resistance to the third-term bid. They should collectively ask the questions: For whose benefit is the presidential term extension? Is it really necessary, considering the other priority issues that face the country? The faith actors and civil society in Malawi galvanized support around such questions.



The faith actors and civil society in Zimbabwe should deliberately engage the opposition legislators to influence them against the proposed third term. Trust should be cultivated between the citizens and the opposition elements in parliament. This paper further recommends that the faith actors and civil society should campaign against allowing key constitutional issues such as the presidential term limit, to be decided by legislators when the latter have a direct interest as potential beneficiaries.

Another key lesson noted is that it is always important for the faith actors to work closely with other non-state actors on key national matters. This was demonstrated by the Christian and Muslim leaders in Malawi from the campaign for multi-party democracy to the rejection of the third-term proposal. The unity and unanimity with which these stakeholders opposed the proposal were the key to their effectiveness in the campaign. Such unity was demonstrated between faith actors and civil society in Zimbabwe in 2000 during the constitutional referendum through the formation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA). A similar approach can be repeated when the time comes to decide on constitutional matters such as third-term extension proposals.

While emphasis has been placed on non-political actors' collaborative efforts, the Malawi case also shows that there is a need to work with willing political actors. These could be members of the ruling or the opposition political parties. Strategies need to be developed to protect the identities of those from the ruling party who may be exposed to harassment once it becomes clear that their sentiments resonate with the non-state actors. Their voices matter in crucial processes such as mobilization against or for a particular national matter. The statements from different actors in Malawi made a general call to all citizens across sectors and political divisions to cooperate in opposing the third-term proposal, and that worked. The ZESN and ZHOCOD statements are not bold enough in their invitation of other stakeholders to increase the social capital necessary to stop the third-term campaign.

The other key lesson from Malawi was that the faith actors and civil society chose diplomatic ways of conveying their message. Nonetheless, some of the statements issued became too personal and undiplomatic rather than focusing on real issues. Thus, to cultivate positive reactions from the audience, communication should be diplomatic and issue-based, away from the persons involved.

The paper further notes that popular regimes that replace autocratic ones normally perform well at the initial stages due to the overwhelming support they are likely to receive from stakeholders. The Muluzi and Mnangagwa regimes manifested this observation. Such performance will thus tempt members of the public or at least members of the ruling parties to become overzealous to the extent of calling for unnecessary constitutional changes to protect or force their leaders to remain in power. Thus, leaders should not be swayed away by such 'public demand' as that may soil their legacies. Such calls usually come from party activists who may want to cover up for their corrupt practices.

The paper also demonstrated the importance of coordinated government communication on matters of national importance to avoid unnecessary anxiety that can be caused by contradictions in official communications. Stakeholders were upset by the lack of proper communication on the third-term issue and which attracted toxic responses from some sections of society, particularly the Muslim community. This could have been avoided had the government opened up well on time about the issue. Similarly, the failure by Muluzi and Mnangagwa to publicly express their real intentions caused a lot of anxiety among the people, with the potential to cause violence in the two countries.

The Malawi case also confirms that citizens should not put all their trust in their legislators, as the latter can betray them. The literature on the Malawi case shows that money was used to 'buy' the vote of the opposition legislators. While the legislators may have been enticed to vote for the proposal, the move was detrimental to the people who voted them into parliament. It is further suspected that the source of the resources used was the government coffers. Thus, as the Zimbabwean faith actors and civil society gear up for the anti-third-term campaign, engagement of legislators becomes critical to confirm their real position on the matter and avoid abusing citizens.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Based on the findings in this paper, it can be concluded that the two statements issued by the ZESN and the ZHOCD were very rich in terms of the message communicated on the possibility of term limit provisional changes. While ZESN focused on election timelines and the need to respect such, it touches on the contentious issue of the presidential third term from a strategic angle. The ZHOCD approach is targeted at enhancing constitutionalism. Yet, both institutions are diplomatic in their communication about the President's position on the third-term issue. They chose to entice Mnangagwa by citing his claimed commitment to constitutionalism. The call for constitutionalism by both institutions should be the rallying point for citizens to influence the debate on presidential term limits. The debate has serious implications for electoral processes and social and economic transformation.

The Zimbabwean faith actors and civil society should carefully study the Malawi case and learn from how different stakeholders handled the matter of the third term without pursuing strategies that are likely to lead to bloodshed. The faith actors played their part, and so did the politicians, the media, and civil society and, in the end, democracy won the day. The ZHOCD and ZESN, in particular, should reignite their call for the promotion of democracy in a more coordinated manner and utilize the social capital resident in each other's membership. More importantly, after galvanizing support locally, the faith actors and civil society should advocate for strengthening the regional and continental instruments that restrict unnecessary changes to term limit provisions. Advocacy at such levels requires strong social capital among key stakeholders.

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