# Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space

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## Abstract

This article situates its discussion of young Zimbabwean men's performance of masculinity in a restrictive political space in a broader continental context in which the majority of young people are politically and economically marginalised. It addresses how the older generation's domination and monopolisation of political space presents obstacles to the youth's aspiration to perform normative masculinity. The article also discusses various strategies the youth in Zimbabwe are devising to claim space in a political arena that can be characterised as a gerontocracy. The youth seek relevance in Zimbabwe's congested and gerontocratic political space through strategies that range from co-opting gerontocratic masculinities to subverting them. Notwithstanding the divergence in these strategies, young people who adopt them to create and occupy space in Zimbabwe's political terrain legitimise their choices by appealing to culture, thus showing how culture can be harnessed for contradictory objectives in the performance of masculinities. The strategies also draw from global trends involving the youth's engagement in non-traditional political participation facilitated by their dominance of virtual, social media space.

**Keywords:** youth, gerontocracy, masculinities, political space, marginalisation, Zimbabwe

## Résumé

Cet article discute des performances masculines des jeunes zimbabwéens dans un espace politique restrictif et un contexte continental général dans lequel la majorité des jeunes sont politiquement et économiquement marginalisés. L'article aborde la manière dont la domination et la monopolisation de l'espace politique par la vieille génération font obstacle à l'aspiration des

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jeunes à exercer une masculinité normative. L'article aborde également diverses stratégies élaborées par les jeunes du Zimbabwe dans leur revendication d'espace dans une arène politique qui peut être caractérisée de gérontocratie. Les jeunes recherchent la pertinence dans l'espace politique congestionné et gérontocratique du Zimbabwe par des stratégies allant de la cooptation des masculinités gérontocratiques à leur subversion. Malgré la divergence de ces stratégies, les jeunes qui les adoptent pour créer et occuper un espace sur le terrain politique du Zimbabwe légitiment leurs choix en faisant appel à la culture, démontrant ainsi comment la culture peut être exploitée pour des objectifs contradictoires dans l'exécution de masculinités. Les stratégies s'inspirent également des tendances mondiales impliquant l'engagement des jeunes dans une participation politique non traditionnelle facilitée par leur domination de l'espace virtuel des réseaux sociaux.

**Mots-clés :** jeunesse, gérontocratie, masculinités, espace politique, marginalisisation, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Compared to other parts of the world, the youth constitute the largest percentage of Africa's population (de Bruijn and Both 2017; Dzimiri 2014; Sommers 2007). In Zimbabwe, in 2014, young people aged between 18 and 35 years constituted 53.74 per cent of the country's adult voting population (Hodzi 2014). Yet, scholarly literature and policy documents indicate that the youth (and women) are among the most marginalised populations in terms of occupying political office and having access to economic opportunities (de Bruijn and Both 2017; Sommers 2007). This is also the case in Zimbabwe whose present political organisation around gerontocracy can be traced back to precolonial cultures. The main difference is that precolonial cultures were structured in ways that legitimised gerontocracy, while modern political organisation renders gerontocracy anomalous and problematic. The post-colonial political configuration in Zimbabwe continues to be gerontocratic, and this has left the youth with few avenues for performing a normative form of masculinity built around leadership, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. In post-independence Zimbabwe, the toxic and restrictive political environment has left many young people apathetic, hopeless, and resigned. In spite of this environment, many young people in Zimbabwe, and indeed, in many other African countries, still wiggle into the political field monopolised by older men locally referred to as 'old *madhala*'. Young men assert their presence in Zimbabwe's political terrain by devising strategies of performing masculinities that range from co-opting gerontocratic masculinities to subverting them.

On the one hand, the agency of youths in political parties is constrained by structural dynamics (Hodzi 2014). Political parties, especially the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), are organised around gerontocracy, and perceived legitimacy deriving from having participated in the war of liberation which ushered in the country's independence on 18 April 1980. The youth in the ruling party narrow the generational gap and seek relevance by subordinating and aligning their interests with those of the old generation. In short, they exercise a masculinity that enjoys the patronage of gerontocracy in return for their deference and loyalty. Older politicians in charge of political parties reward the loyalty of the youth mostly with material rewards, small-scale projects, and government jobs. This dynamic has created a situation of mutual exploitation, dependence, and cooperation between the youth and older men on the one hand, and the punishment of youths who are deemed to be insubordinate, disrespectful, and non-conformist on the other hand.

The gerontocracy's strategy of co-option through incentives and coercion creates a situation in which young people ironically perpetuate their own subordination and exclusion through their submission to older men. Youth participation in this strategy sustains the very gerontocratic system that marginalises them from leadership positions beyond the political party youth wing. Some segments of the youth, however, have sought alternative routes to participation in Zimbabwe's politics by performing a masculinity that challenges and subverts gerontocracy. These youths have critiqued and represented the current Zimbabwean gerontocracy as devoid of the wisdom, foresight, and relevance from which gerontocracy derived its legitimacy in precolonial cultures. This contestation for legitimacy pits young men against the older generation in the performance of masculinity in Zimbabwe's fractious political field.

## Masculinity in Historical and Global Context

Masculinity as an acquired rather than intrinsic trait means that culture rather than biology transforms boys into men. In Zimbabwe, where male and female circumcision is not practised by the main cultures, masculinity was traditionally achieved through socialisation in a male space known as *dare* in the Shona language (Shire 1994). In this space, the respect for age hierarchy or gerontocracy was reinforced in boys and young men. Gerontocracy was not simply about older men occupying a higher social status and wielding authority and influence over younger men. Rather, it had a patriarchal and reciprocal logic based on a *quid pro quo* relationship, which made it socially and culturally sustainable. Elders earned young men's respect and loyalty

by providing them with land and bride-wealth as well as passing down to them cultural norms, values, leadership qualities, wisdom, and various skills integral to normative masculinity. Boys and young men thus grew up understanding that the same deference they had for elders would be given to them when they became the elders. In terms of political organisation, a king or chief earned his subjects' respect through reproduction of the *dare* (male space) concept at his traditional court (also called *dare*) where he upheld the principles of equity, fairness and justice (Chimuka 2001; Gwaravanda 2011; Masitera 2019). These principles and mutual dependence among men occupying various ranks provided a system of checks and balances by which the king or chief's hereditary and ascriptive status was held in check by the loyalty and goodwill of those he governed.

Older men's exercise of power did not exclude younger men outright. Indeed, as boys matured into men, fathers and grandfathers would gradually cede control over family matters to them as part of preparing them to become elders. This cycle in the reproduction of masculinity, repeated generation after generation, became deeply embedded within Zimbabwe's cultures and norms in respect of manhood. This process of the reproduction of masculinity would face its stiffest competition during colonialism, when the British sought to dismantle indigenous Zimbabwean political structures and cultural norms. Though the colonisers were not able to completely dismantle these structures and norms, they eroded them by introducing new political and social structures. The current system of government, which is partly a product of the country's colonial experience, embodies contradictory attitudes towards gerontocracy. Although it is at odds with the idea that leadership and authority should be premised on royal birth, it has inherited the gerontocracy that is an integral part of the traditional political system.

During colonialism, new versions of masculinities emerged, creating a spectrum of masculinities. Normative masculinity is the apex of this spectrum, while other versions occupy lower rungs of the ladder. These versions are subject to varied forms of subordination, marginalisation, and even ridicule. Normativity derives from conformity to culture-specific expectations of adult male or manhood as opposed to boyhood and femininity (Jaji 2009). Normative or socially approved masculinity in many African countries is a blend of precolonial masculinities and those stemming from the continent's encounters mainly with Islam and Christianity, as well as the colonisation process (Barker and Ricardo 2006; Odhiambo 2007). In Zimbabwe, then a British settler colony known first as Southern Rhodesia and then Rhodesia (1890–1980), gerontocratic

masculinities faced their strongest challenge from Western education, Christianisation, and labour migration.

Across Africa, European colonisation supplanted the elders and eroded their authority over young men by creating new avenues for young men to acquire economic independence outside the traditional gerontocratic system (see Gilmore 1990; Lindsay 2003; McKittrick 2003; Miescher and Lindsay 2003). Young men were able to earn incomes in the monetised economy, wean themselves off economic dependency on the elders, and transfer their loyalty from the traditional to the new political economy. This was the case with regard to access to land and bride-wealth. The socio-economic legacy of this cultural dislocation is observable in contemporary Zimbabwe where young men who have successfully integrated into the modern economic system have turned the pre-colonial gerontocratic system on its head. They wield more power than the elders through financial resources that place them in a position where they provide for the elders and make important decisions.

Despite the dislocations and transformations of African masculinities brought about by colonialism, pre-colonial masculinities have proved to be tenacious. They still persist and even dominate contemporary spaces such as modern systems of government. The power that economic independence bestowed on the youth at family level did not necessarily translate into occupation of important positions in national politics, which is intertwined with economic opportunities in post-independence Zimbabwe. Changes effected by the colonial economy in age relations between young and old men were not transferred to the post-colonial political dispensation as much as this dispensation was modelled along the modern system of governance responsible for upsetting the pre-colonial gerontocratic political and economic order. Rather, gerontocracy has turned out to be a force to reckon with in Zimbabwe's fractious politics due to its influence on who has access to which political positions and economic opportunities. It has become the cornerstone of Zimbabwe's post-independence political and economic configuration on which the 'old *madhala*' exercise a firm grip. The irony is that the old men who are reluctant to relinquish power became leaders when they were young but appear to have very little trust in the capacity of the youth to lead.

African masculinities are not immune to contemporary forces of globalisation in which masculinities are no longer rooted in cultural containers fixed in specific geographical locations. Masculinities have become deterritorialised and globalised with improvements in communication technology and the media providing diverse options on how to be a man

(Jackson and Balaji 2011). Despite assumptions that situate Africa on the periphery of globalisation, the youth have not escaped simulation, in postmodern terminology, of masculinities originating outside the continent (Barratt and Straus 1994; Phillips 2006). African men have become adept at blending, juggling, and adapting masculinities embedded in both indigenous and external sources to respond to the situation. In Zimbabwe, young men have become adroit at performing varied masculinities in the country's bellicose political field. They appropriate globalised masculinities accessible through contemporary information technologies and deploy them as an additional resource for them to critique and subvert gerontocratic masculinities that are detrimental to their interests in Zimbabwe's political economy.

## Youth Masculinities, Gerontocracy, and Politics

Although colonisation dismantled cultural structures that had perpetuated gerontocracy and imposed a new system of governance, this does not mean that gerontocracy died a natural death. Gerontocracy survived the colonial onslaught and was transplanted to the post-colonial era and blended with the Western political system premised on the governed choosing their leaders through elections. However, gerontocracy as it is practised in the modern political system in Zimbabwe does not prepare young men to become future leaders as was the case in the country's pre-colonial cultures. Instead, it thrives on a culture of silencing young men in the political space without tangible prospects for older men reaching the twilight of their lives ceding power to younger men. Decades of this age-based exclusion have left the majority of youth passive and apathetic in many parts of Africa (see Adebayo 2018). In Zimbabwe, youth apathy is exacerbated by the restrictions imposed by gerontocratic political structures and a lack of information and funds (Musarurwa 2018). Their lack of resources makes it difficult for young people to take the initiative and chart their own political path outside the patronage of older men who assign themselves the role of distributing political goods among the youth.

Conflation of the traditional and the modern in Zimbabwean politics has created a situation in which older politicians become fathers and mothers to the youth. In Zimbabwe, the now deceased former President Robert Mugabe[1] and leader of ZANU PF, who ruled the country from independence in 1980 until 2017 when he was forced to resign by the military, was known as *baba* (the Shona word for father). Mugabe's first and, later, his second wife were referred to as *amai* (the Shona word for mother). Young people in ZANU PF saw their role as defending Mugabe from his

political opponents and reining in disobedient 'children' who challenged his authority. In the early years of independence when the government enjoyed widespread support, the political activism of university students was focused on defending the government.

Modern politics and election systems are ideally about ideas, but the reality is that their entanglement with traditional gerontocratic understandings of leadership and authority has enabled older generations to treat the youth as people who run political errands for them rather than adults with the capacity to run the country or mature people who should be groomed to take over leadership positions in future. Hodzi (2014:56) notes, 'In almost all major political parties in Zimbabwe the low-level workers and volunteers tend to be the youth, while the leadership is dominated by older people.' Even in the youth wing, some of the leaders are well outside the youth age group. Absolom Sikhosana and Pupurai Togarepi led ZANU PF's Youth League at the ages of sixty-eight and fifty-four in 2017 and 2019 respectively (*Daily News* 2019). Youth, it is evident, is more a question of political positioning than age.

While young people occupy leadership positions in the youth wings of the different political parties, they are excluded from these parties' national executives (see Hodzi 2014). This has resulted in members of the ZANU PF youth wing performing stunted masculinities as they continue to play the role of social and political 'children' even after they have become full-grown adults. Party restrictions of their aspirations to lead the country mean that they occupy a liminal space as men-boys or men-children *vis-á-vis* older men in the party. It is not surprising that ZANU PF enjoys less support among urban youths than the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) whose founding leadership was much younger than that of ZANU PF. The party's current leader, Nelson Chamisa, is forty-three years old. Even so, the MDC is not immune to the problem of youth subordination or party youths running political errands for the older leadership. Thokozani Khupe, a senior female party member who launched a legal challenge against Chamisa's takeover of the leadership of MDC following the death of founding president Morgan Tsvangirai in February 2018, was subjected to harassment by the party's youths for challenging Chamisa's attempt to succeed Tsvangirai. The MDC has split a number of times, indicating major dissent among those who feel disenfranchised. Being an opposition party, it lacks the state resources that ZANU PF has at its disposal to punish errant youths. In addition, the presence of young people in the party's leadership suggests it is a more conducive environment for young men to graduate from political errand boys to leaders.

The way traditional and modern structures and institutions are intertwined has also brought about a paradoxical situation in Zimbabwean politics. Political leaders rule with the absolute power of ancient monarchies and attribute this power to anointment by God, while at the same time claiming to have been chosen by the people through elections. Election results in Zimbabwe since the beginning of the twenty-first century have been contested. Although gerontocracy plays a key role in Zimbabwe's post-colonial political configuration, it has been stripped of the economic, social, and political relevance which sustained it in pre-colonial times. Young men outside political parties rely more on employment in the modern economy than on the benevolence and patronage of their elders. The 'divine right to rule' rhetoric closes party political opportunities for the youth, yet some of them ironically play an active role in sustaining this attribution of legitimacy to the supernatural. The ZANU PF youth wing unquestioningly accepted the views of the Politburo, the party's decision-making body, and went along with its endorsement of President Mugabe (Hodzi 2014). This continued to be the case even when it became clear that he had become incapacitated due to his advanced age and his apparently poor health after numerous trips to Singapore for medical treatment.

Members of ZANU PF's Youth League declared numerous times that President Mugabe was ordained by God to rule Zimbabwe and the youth were 'prepared to die' defending his rule. One of these youths, Kudzai Chipanga, made this pronouncement during a press statement as clouds for the 'soft coup' that dislodged Robert Mugabe from power in November 2017 gathered. A few days later, military tanks rolled into the streets of Harare and forced Mugabe to resign. Chipanga beat a hasty retreat from this pronouncement and apologised to the army. It appears that older politicians manipulate the youth in the party by leveraging their hubris, but abandon them in the face of the military that has kept Zimbabwean citizens in check for the greater part of the country's post-independence life.

Over the years, the most conspicuous errands that youth have run for older politicians known as 'boss' or 'chefs' have been intimidation, surveillance, and violence. The National Youth Service (2000–2008), colloquially referred to as Border Gezi, the name of a youthful and charismatic ZANU PF politician who died in 2001, became synonymous with youth mobilisation for violence against opposition politicians and supporters (see Oosterom and Gukurume 2019). The growing youth violence in Zimbabwe is a product of political ideology, the scarcity of available resources, and the inequitable distribution of resources (Dodo, Mateko and Mpofu 2019). Youth wings of both dominant political parties – ZANU PF and the MDC-

Alliance – have been implicated in perpetrating acts of violence against their political opponents. In particular, the ZANU PF Youth League was accused of perpetrating violence in rural areas in the run-up to the run-off election in 2008. Like other voluntary associations such as labour unions in Zimbabwe, youth associations have split along lines of political affiliation. For example, through political party interference, the student body split into the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) perceived to be aligned with the MDC, and the Zimbabwe Congress of Students Union (ZICOSU), which is pro-ZANU PF (Oosterom and Gukurume 2019; see also Hodzi 2014).

Young people who are active in politics usually support the leaders of the political parties to which they are affiliated to such an extent that the leaders are treated as deities who are beyond reproach, at least publicly. As such, it was only after the military made its intentions clear in 2017 that youths affiliated to ZANU PF finally abandoned Robert Mugabe. Even so, this shift was not a youth initiative. The youth only did this when it became clear that older people in the party wanted Mugabe to leave office. Subordinated youth are expected to play a cheer-leading role for older masculinities and run errands such as intimidating and perpetrating violence on their opponents in return for feeding on the crumbs that fall from the table of gerontocratic political power. This *status quo* is perpetuated by the fact that youths who are co-opted by gerontocratic masculinities see the relationship as a *quid pro quo*, even though the scale of power is tilted in favour of older masculinities. This kind of exploitation and manipulation of the youth in party politics has been noted in a number of other African countries (e.g., David and Manu (2015) and Umar (2003) on the situation in Nigeria; Kang'ethe (2014) on South Africa, Botswana, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kenya; and Reuss and Titeca (2017) on Uganda).

Young people's sustenance of gerontocracy particularly in the ruling party continues in the post-Mugabe era. More young people have publicly declared their loyalty to President Emmerson Mnangagwa who is seventy-six years old. At the end of February 2020, youths affiliated to a group called Concerned Citizens Forum announced that they intended to camp at the homes of three of the opposition MDC-Alliance leaders who they accuse of calling for sanctions imposed by the West on Zimbabwe in 2002 and 2003. Group leader Taurai Kundishaya declared, 'We want to take over [sic] power from these people in the MDC and hand it over to the President [Mnangagwa], so we want to take power to the President and not to these people' (*Bulawayo 24 News*, 2020). Youths in ZANU PF understand that

the older masculinities in their party do not hesitate to jerk the leash when young men threaten to veer off track.

The grip of older men on party youths has been illustrated on numerous occasions when youths who failed to toe the party line by expressing views that were either critical of the leadership or against its interests were punished by suspension from the party, demotion from leadership positions, or outright expulsion. Indeed, the 2017 coup which forced Robert Mugabe out of power was a result of the 'old guard' in ZANU PF's quest to wrestle power from younger members of the party referred to as G40 (Generation 40). The fact that seventy-six-year-old Emmerson Mnangagwa is now the party and country's leader is a sign of victory for gerontocracy (Southall 2019). In February 2020, Pupurai Togerepi, one of the leaders in ZANU PF Youth League was expelled while two other leaders in the League, Lewis Matutu and Godfrey Tsenengamu, were suspended after they denounced some businesspeople who they labelled as 'cartels' and accused them of corruption and being responsible for the economic misery in the country. While Matutu obeyed the party's recommendation requiring him to attend its school of political ideology, Tsenengamu refused to obey and said he would only be willing to go to this school as a teacher, not as a student. He was expelled from the party when he criticised President Mnangagwa for failing to fulfil his election promises.

Marginalised young people can easily be manipulated by people who see them as an asset in their criminal activities (Sommers 2007). Zimbabwe is currently grappling with the problem of machete-wielding youths terrorising residents and villagers in mining districts and towns where they are forcibly taking gold from small-scale miners. While at face value this youth violence is attributable to the high youth unemployment rate in the country, allegations have been thrown around in Zimbabwe's public political discourse that the youths are engaging in this violence at the behest of powerful politicians in the country who are after the gold stolen from small-scale miners and who also use these youths to intimidate opposition supporters (Tinhu 2020). It is argued in the same discourse that involvement of powerful people in the country is the reason why it has taken so long for law enforcement to tackle the violence.

Media coverage of the machete gangs indicates that their violence has been extended to the general populace with women and girls being raped and murdered in some cases (Chibamu 2020; Tinhu 2020). It remains to be seen whether the police crackdown on the violent youth criminals at the beginning of 2020 will contain the problem. Youths who are co-opted into committing crime and political violence when political tensions

in Zimbabwe rise are subjugated by the older men who direct them and benefit from their illegal activities. In view of the hierarchical and exploitative nature of relations between old and young men's masculinities in Zimbabwean politics, young men who perpetrate violence are vulnerable and need protection (Dzimiri 2014). They are vulnerable to manipulation and threats by 'old *madhala*' to the extent that they can be referred to as 'victim perpetrators', a subject which the author of the current paper addresses in a forthcoming publication.

Although many youths who participate in Zimbabwe's politics do so as subordinates to older men in the political field, there has been resistance to older men, mostly at the country's universities. While university students supported the ZANU PF government in the first few years of independence, this changed in 1988 when the students proclaimed themselves to be representatives of the downtrodden, resisted structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s, and made common cause with the urban revolt over worsening economic and political problems that followed (Zeilig 2008). University students became the first civic organisation to challenge the gerontocratic social order in Zimbabwean politics through a political masculinity constituted of 'hardcore' activism (Hodgkinson 2013).

This political masculinity was the antithesis of the subordinate masculinity performed by political party youths because it was independent of patronage from older male politicians. As a result, the political space available on university campuses became restricted when the government unleashed anti-riot police to quell student demonstrations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The youth movement was also infiltrated by state security agents and weakened by interference by political parties (Gukurume 2019; Hodzi 2014). Student demonstrations have become rare on the country's university campuses with students splitting into ruling and opposition party-affiliated unions as already mentioned above. This is happening at the same time that the government is clamping down on youth political activism in opposition parties. Examples include the murder of Tonderai Ndira, an MDC youth activist in Mabvuku-Tafara, a residential area in Harare East (see Wilkins 2013), and continual arrests of opposition party youths.

Apart from the repression, youth activism on university campuses has also fizzled out because of a realisation that attempting to dislodge the old people, locally referred to as the 'old guard', was a futile exercise. The 'old guard' in ZANU PF has never missed the opportunity presented by election cycles to declare that the country will never be ruled by people who 'did not fight in the war'. The liberation war narrative continues to

be used by liberation movements that morphed into political parties after independence to legitimise their continued stay in power in countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Uganda (Oosterom and Gukurume 2019). Naturally, a time will come when 'people who fought in the war' will die out and it seems many people have become resigned to waiting for nature to take its course. Invocation of the liberation war narrative has its greatest exclusionary impact on the current generation of youths, all of whom were born after independence. It has created a situation in which young people do not get what they want, they simply accept what is given to them. Protests and subdued murmurs of dissent clearly indicate that the youths are dissatisfied with this situation. For instance, there has been a steady growth in the number of well-educated but unemployed youths in a continually shrinking economy. Because they are unable to put their qualifications into practice and lack work experience, their skills become degraded, and this political exclusion of young people leads directly into their economic marginalisation. The irony is that young people are unemployed in a country where older people who are politically connected or work for the ruling party remain employees in various offices beyond the retirement age.

## Alternative Pathways to Masculinity and Reclamation of Space

There is a growing trend of young people directing their energies to civic engagement and activism outside traditional forms of political participation such as membership in political parties, canvassing, and voting (Quintelier 2007). In Zimbabwe, many disaffected people see political processes such as elections as futile. Many people who have yearned for political and economic change for decades have lost hope that they can influence the country's trajectory through traditional party politics. In Mali and Chad, youths are redefining themselves as global citizens in their quest for structures that offer them legitimate representation (de Bruijn and Both 2017). They are directing their attention to activities that have global resonance, for example, environmental activism, advocacy for gender equality, human rights, good governance, and peacebuilding, among other globally relevant causes.

The United Nations has taken a clear stance and encouraged young people to actively participate in these activities. This has enabled the youth to redirect the energy they could have expended on party politics towards areas where they can challenge older politicians whom they perceive as out of touch and, by reason of their advanced age, irrelevant for the future. Focusing on the future enables the youth to create space for civic and political engagement and legitimise their activism through the argument

that the older generations will not be part of the future. Civic activities enable the youth to shift the meaning of masculinity from emphasising dominance to emphasising empathy, the common good, global citizenship, and taking responsibility. The youth accuse older politicians of lacking these constructive qualities, particularly in African countries where politics is principally dominated by men advanced in age and widely criticised for marginalising their predominantly young populations.

Many young people around the world have created civic space through information and communication technology (see de Bruijn and Both 2017; Pathak-Shelat and Bhatia 2019). In Zimbabwe, urban youths who appear to be apathetic are much more active on social media platforms where they criticise the national leadership under their real names or using pseudonyms. Social media platforms have proved to be a more reliable alternative in a country where student activism has been curbed through the deployment of state security agents to engage in surveillance of students and lecturers alike, leading to 'self-censorship' reminiscent of Michel Foucault's study of biopolitics (Gukurume 2019). Young people in Zimbabwe utilise social media platforms as spaces where they congregate regardless of physical or geographical location to express dissent and strategise on how to protest the excesses of a repressive government (Gukurume 2017). For example, #ThisFlag, Tajamuka, and #ThisGown movements have utilised the internet extensively to spread their messages. #ThisFlag successfully mobilised citizens to engage in a stayaway in July 2016 in protest against repression, high unemployment, and corruption, among other grievances against the Mugabe government (Oosterom and Gukurume 2019).

#ThisFlag also mobilised Zimbabweans in November 2017 to protest together with war veterans and political parties against Mugabe, and the citizens' march increased the pressure that led to his resignation a few days later. However, #ThisFlag leader, Pastor Evan Mawarire, was arrested several times for calling for protests, most recently in January 2019 when protests against fuel price increases resulted in a brutal crackdown by the police and the army. Platforms such as Facebook became important in the run-up to the 2013 elections. In a country where free speech is restricted, the platform acted as a counterweight to state-controlled media and reached a wide audience through its transnational character (Karekwaivanane 2019; see also Matingwina 2018). Some young Zimbabwean men, some of whom are part of the diaspora, also post videos containing political satire on YouTube, and share political messages on WhatsApp. The importance of social media was illustrated by the government blocking internet access in Zimbabwe during the fuel protests and the crackdown that ensued in January 2019.

Instead of completely shunning politics, the youth have found the internet to be an important alternative space where they engage in political discussions with limited disruption and control by older politicians, most of whom are not as technologically savvy as they are. Online platforms enable the youth to engage in traditional politics outside political parties and on platforms that give issues global resonance. The internet provides an ideal platform for individual pursuits. For example, during the 2013 elections, Zimbabwean youths were driven by 'individual interests rather than collective grievances or political identity' (Hodzi 2014:48). Instead of forming political parties, they form movements and civil society organisations that challenge older political leaders using platforms that are not political parties. Civil society groups and citizens' movements enable young people to address issues relating to human rights, peacebuilding, gender equality, and other civic issues. This enables them to occupy the high moral ground and chide gerontocratic masculinities whose leadership in Zimbabwe's post-independence history is marred by human rights violations and violence.

As they raise awareness on the repressive politics of the older generation, the youth in civil society disrupt the cultural configuration in which the elders are seen as repositories of wisdom and morality, which they customarily deploy to guide and contain youth masculinities. Conversations between older men in politics and the youth in civil society on various social media platforms subvert the usual situation where the old reprimand the young; rather the young rebuke the old. This is a clear case of the youth appropriating the moral dimension of normative masculinity. For instance, Pastor Evan Mawarire who started #This Flag critiqued President Mugabe's government in a way that was well-thought through, issue-based, respectful, and clearly articulated. He was able to draw citizens' attention so strongly that many people heeded his call for a stayaway in 2016. Situated within Zimbabwe's gerontocratic traditional cultures and the ZANU PF political ethos, this was a curious case of a young man in his thirties rebuking a president in his nineties.

Even as they dominate virtual spaces, young men realise that their ideas cannot really change the political and economic situation in the country unless they find themselves in positions of power. 'Generational consensus', which calls for youth inclusion in politics, business, and society, has become the rallying cry for young people opposed to gerontocratic masculinities' monopolisation of the political field in Zimbabwe. This has resulted in activism in some instances turning full circle into traditional politics when young men stand for election to political office. For example, Nelson Chamisa started as a student leader, joined the MDC, and became one

of its youngest Members of Parliament in his early twenties. Pastor Evan Mawarire of #ThisFlag stood for election as a Harare councillor, but lost to a youthful MDC-Alliance candidate whom he congratulated on Twitter.

Thus, alternative spaces are found not only in civic organisations and virtual space, but also in opposition politics as shown by the growing trend of young opposition leaders exemplified by Nelson Chamisa in Zimbabwe, Julius Malema in South Africa, and Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu (popularly known as Bobi Wine) in Uganda. These young leaders represent an unambiguous challenge from the youth to rigid gerontocratic political structures as illustrated by their unequivocal insistence that the youth are the future. For instance, Godfrey Tsenengamu, who was expelled from ZANU PF, stated in a press conference on 3 January 2020 that he was speaking out on corruption because young people would not have a country to inherit if the current levels of the scourge continued unchecked. He also stated that he was fighting for 'our children and grandchildren' (*Nehanda TV*, 2020).

Young men in Zimbabwe appear to be realising that if they do not take the initiative, the country will continue in its current trajectory characterised by gerontocratic politics in which older men rule until they die. This creates a situation in which young people can only have their turn to rule when they are themselves old. However, considering the heterogeneity that characterises the youth in Zimbabwe, there are varied opinions on the best way to tackle the current gerontocratic politics stifling young people's aspirations and creativity. This is illustrated by the fact that while some people encouraged Pastor Evan Mawarire to participate in the council election and even in the parliamentary election, some of his followers were of the view that he should remain in his citizen movement instead of joining politics and they expressed this sentiment after he lost the council election. This seems to point to the mistrust that young Zimbabweans now have for politics and wariness due to the old adage that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

## Conclusion

Although post-independence Zimbabwe adopted the modern political system brought to the country through British colonial rule, the country's leadership adapted aspects of traditional political organisation such as gerontocracy to the new system. This did not appear to be the case in the early years of independence when the new black leadership was made up of relatively young men, most of whom had participated in the war of liberation. As most of the men who assumed positions in government at independence continue to occupy the same positions or to be shuffled

around in the system, young people are not left with much space to assume leadership positions in government and in the ruling party, which, unlike the main opposition party, the MDC-Alliance, is dominated by older men. Many young people interested in active politics within the framework of political parties who join ZANU PF are relegated to positions where they exercise a form of power which is deferential to older men in the party on pain of suspension and expulsion for challenging or defying these older men. In urban Zimbabwe, youths who choose to participate in political parties mostly join the MDC-Alliance, which they perceive to be more in touch with their generation and their needs and aspirations. Over the years, as politics has proved to be unreliable for young people yearning for change and space, many have lost interest in active politics.

There has been a growing trend of young people joining civil society and engaging issues that have global resonance. These new spaces have coincided with availability of virtual platforms that are dominated by young people in Zimbabwe and around the world. These two factors have coalesced to provide alternative spaces where youth masculinities can pursue their aspirations outside the carrot-and-stick approach to politics exercised by older men in Zimbabwean politics. At the same time, there is growing realisation that Zimbabwe and Africa at large cannot be changed through activism outside political office. For this reason, young people are forming their own political parties or taking over leadership in existing parties, especially in opposition parties seeking to dislodge deeply entrenched ruling parties led by 'old *madhala*'. Zimbabwe awaits the time when leadership will be transferred from older men to the youth. Meanwhile, the contest between gerontocratic and youth masculinities is growing. Calls for 'generational consensus' are becoming more strident. It remains to be seen whether the older generation will genuinely accommodate the youth's interests and allow them into leadership positions, or whether 'generational consensus' will carry the day by catapulting the youth into leadership positions without the blessing of the 'old *madhala*'.

## Note

1.  Former president, Mugabe, died on 6 September 2019 in Singapore at the age of ninety-five. His remains were repatriated to Zimbabwe where he was buried at his rural home instead of the 'prestigious' Heroes' Acre in Harare where the remains of the majority of the people he and his party declared national heroes are interred.

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