A brief history of the evolving role, power, and governance of civil society in Zambia

Daniel Hammett
University of Sheffield, UK and University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Zambia is widely championed as one of Africa's leading, stable democracies. It is widely assumed that Zambia's democratic gains result from a strong civic space and vibrant civil society ecosystem. These assumptions correlate with mainstream development donor agendas and approaches that have privileged the role of civil society organisations in service delivery provision, democratisation efforts, and good governance agendas.

This brief paper provides a short historical review of the emergence of civil society in Zambia – primarily addressing the experiences of the three Republics of Zambia since independence from colonial rule. Changing national and international political landscapes have resulted in shifting spaces for and role of civil society within Zambian politics and society. The following sections outline the initial emergence of welfare, trade and faith-based civil society organisations with a primary focus on service delivery to a strengthening of advocacy, governance and human-rights focussed organisations from the 1990s onwards – and the continued challenges faced by the sector.

Pre-1991 Foundations: Colonial roots and the role of religion and trade unions

During the colonial period, there was limited space for civil society in (what is now) Zambia. Civil society initially emerged through Churches, welfare and missionary groups – and later emergent trade unions and professional groups. The focus of these entities was primarily on service and welfare relief in rural areas (and, later, the representation of workers' and business interests).

Following independence in 1964, domestic politics was dominated by President Kenneth Kaunda and the United National Independence Party (UNIP). Under increasingly authoritarian conditions and a one-party state, a partial civil society persisted – led by Trade Unions and the Churches, but with few other major organisations (Sishuwa, 2020). Drawing legitimacy and influence in the civic space from their 'moral monopoly' on Zambian society and active engagement with providing welfare services and education and training, the Churches were influential on Kaunda's rethinking of 'scientific socialism' (Bartlett, 2000: 435). Trade unions meanwhile worked in an 'uneasy alliance' with government to realise better living conditions (Cheeseman and Hinfelaar, 2009).

During this period, trade unions – including the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the Mineworkers' Union of Zambia (MUZ) – formed the de facto political opposition in Zambia in 1980s, responsible for mobilising protests and strikes against economic and other policies (Larmer, 2006; Simuziya, 2021). While some argue that civil society was strong during this period (Sishuwa, 2020), others contend that the political climate under the socialist

authoritarian government of Kaunda meant there was no substantive civil society activism in Zambia during this time – and what activism there was, was largely confined to urban spaces (Simuziya, 2021). This began to change in the late 1980s.

Civil society and the transition from one-party statism to multi-party democracy

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the conditions for civil society changed radically as political and societal pressures resulted in a shift to multi-partyism and the defeat of Kaunda at the ballot box in 1991. Kaunda's abandonment of the New Economic Recovery Plan and renewal of IMF-directed policies in 1989 gave rise to powerful calls for political and economic change from business leaders, Churches, and trade unions. Resultant demands for an end to the state of emergency, electoral reform, civil rights, and condemnation of single-party politics were reflected in protests and marches by civic groups demanding a transition to multi-party democracy (Bartlett, 2000; Cheeseman and Hinfelaar, 2009).

Civil society were integral to – but not the primary actors in – mobilisation against Kaunda's one-party state. Trade unions, churches, student groups, women's groups, lawyers, and others falling under the umbrella of 'civil society' were prominent in pushing for democratic reform, mobilising voters against the UNIP, and developing an oppositional coalition – which would become the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) (Bartlett, 2000; Pinckney, 2023).

The resultant shift to multi-party democracy – and the broader positivity towards civil society as key to the Third Wave of democratisation (Bartlett, 2000) – would have been expected to provide more supportive conditions for a growth and strengthening of civil society in Zambia in the 1990s. The close relations between civil society and opposition leaders in the lead-up to the transition in political power would typically be expected to result in more effective influence towards the new government (Grodsky, 2009). This was far from the case in Zambia in 1991. Instead, Sishuwa (2020) argues, there was a progressive weakening of civil society meaning the sector had very limited power or influence (also Kaliba, 2014/5).

The marginalisation of civil society leaders from multi-stakeholder talks with government on the ending of the one-party state in 1990 and 1991 confirmed the weakness of Zambian civil society. The MMD's rapid move from operating as civil society to functioning as a political party undoubtedly undermined the wider civil society ecosystem at the start of the 1990s. A continuation of 'older political logics' of authoritarianism under the new political dispensation resulted in the continued marginalisation of civil society through the "use [of] state resources and the state coercive apparatus to suppress opposition" as Zambia entered its Second Republic era and despite the possibilities offed by the Bill of Rights (Pinckney, 2023: 112; Bartlett, 2000; Simuziya, 2021).

Civil society during the Second Republic

This weakening of civil society during the Second Republic resulted from both internal and external factors. The strength of centralised organisation of opposition groups by the MMD

before the 1991 elections meant in the post-election years many civil society groups found their independence reduced, their ability to dissent curtailed, and their leadership compromised through the co-option of leaders into state apparatus and political appointments (Pinckney, 2023).

Economic liberalisation resulted in significant (formal sector) job losses and plummeting membership of major trade unions (including ZCTU and MUZ), weakening their collective bargaining power. Reducing in memberships of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ), the Christian Council of Zambia (CCZ) and the Zambia Episcopal Conference (ZEC) amongst other prominent religious organisations also reduced the influence of the Churches on Zambian politics (Sishuwa, 2020).

Nonetheless, there was an expansion in Zambian civil society organisations at this time, driven by both a growing need to 'fill the gaps' in service delivery as public spending declined under IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Policy conditionalities, and donor interest in supporting civil society to consolidate democratic gains (Mumba and Mumba, 2010a). With Western governments keen to capitalise on the Third Wave of Democracy, increased funding for civil society followed – often with a focus on political reform, democratic consolidation, and advocacy alongside conditionalities for recipient states to promote human rights and good governance (Gicholi and Rakner, 2026). Donor policies to work with civil society as implementing partners meant the "share of foreign aid channelled to Africa through NGOs rose from 1 to 20 per cent from 1990 to late 2000" (Gicholi and Rakner, 2026: 612).

In Zambia this resulted in civil society moving beyond service delivery and towards advocacy and policy development (Sishuwa, 2025). However, the potential of this growth was limited by the emphasis amongst donors on "supporting a 'disciplined democracy' that would follow international mandates for structural reforms and support free-market principles than a government that would genuinely represent the will of the Zambian people" (Pinckney, 2023: 114). For critics, this also meant a growing disconnect between civil society and citizens with a growth in self-interested 'civil society professionals' and 'briefcase entities' (Simuziya, 2024). Offering a different perspective, Sishuwa (2025) argues that in the face of cuts to civil service jobs, a civil society career emerged as a key employment option for educated Zambians outside of the political party system.

The growing reliance on donor funding by civil society led to increased suspicions around the legitimacy of CSOs and introduction of government legislation to facilitate increased registration, monitoring and compliance requirements (Mumba and Mumba, 2010a; Simuziya, 2024). Through this period, Bartlett (2000) argues that the potential for civil society in Zambia was restricted by conservative and anti-progressive leaders and an entwining with state institutions that limited civil society independence and functioning. Framing these developments were continued efforts by government to effect constitutional change and other legislation – including multiple efforts to introduce an NGO Bill – resulting in a shrinking of the civic sphere. While some have labelled such processes a 'democratic backsliding', Sishuwa (2025) suggests instead that such efforts remain part of the political status-quo in Zambia

reflecting the resilience of the system as an electoral (but not liberal) democracy (Kaliba, 2014/15).

By the early 2000s, Sishuwa (2020) argues civil society relied on 'borrowed' power from other elites at key moments but struggled for relevance and influence overall. There are exceptions to this, as evidenced in the coordinated civil society response to proposed constitutional change in 2001 (through the Oasis Forum - a civil society alliance constituted by the Law Association of Zambia, the three church mother bodies and the NGOCC. Oasis Forum galvanised Zambians in a powerful but non-violent resistance) – and similar successes in 2011 and 2020 against further efforts at constitutional reform (Sishuwa, 2025). As with the transition from single-party to multi-party politics in the early 1990s, civil society were vital but not sufficient to realise this change (Sishuwa, 2020, 2025). Indeed, Sishuwa (2020: 471) argues that "the transition to multi-party politics has gone hand in hand with the weakening rather than strengthening of non-state actors, as it has in many parts of the continent, demonstrating the limits of civil society." (471)

The controversial introduction (in 2009) and belated implementation (in 2013) of the NGO Act of 2009 under President Banda further limited the functioning and freedom of civil society in Zambia. Introduced to replace five previous Acts that governed the registration, organization, and regulation of civil society,[1] the NGO Act has been criticised as "interfere[ing] with and hamper[ing] the work of NGOs [and] violating fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution of Zambia" (Kaliba, 2014/5: 6). The use of terminology relating to activities being in the 'public interest' have been criticised for providing the Zambian government with over-reaching discretionary powers (Mumba and Mumba, 2010a: 11).

Alongside legislative challenges through the Second Republic – which Simuziya (2021) argues resulted in Zambia returning to a de facto authoritarian state again in 2015 - civil society in Zambia contended with declining levels of civic engagement, concerns with transparency, poor leadership, weak impact, an over-reliance on external donor funding, weak relations with government, and a tendency to be reactive rather than proactive in realising strategic objectives (Kaliba, 2014/15; Mumba and Mumba, 2010b). Throughout this period, USAID's CSOSI reports (e.g. USAID, 2015, 2020) have continually rated Zambian civil society as having 'evolving sustainability'. These reports have commended Zambian CSOs for delivery of basic services and relief across sectors including education, agriculture, health, and water and sanitation. However, key challenges continue including poor infrastructure, staff turnover, constrained and deteriorating legal and operational environments (particularly for CSOs working on governance issues), poor engagement between CSOs and national and local governments, and worsening financial viability resulting from reduced funding and a lack of philanthropic culture within Zambia (USAID, 2015, 2020; also Kaliba, 2014/15). The use of the colonial-era Public Order Act to curtail and cancel public gatherings and demonstrations was noted as a concern, alongside other restrictive legislation.

Nonetheless, Zambian civil society has continued to effectively mobilise reactively against significant political matters – including President Lungu's proposed amendments to constitution (known as Bill 10) that would have rendered Zambia as a constitutional dictatorship. Civil society also played a key role in mobilising the public against authoritarian efforts by President Lungu's

Patriotic Front (including efforts to disrupt opposition politicians, democratic institutions, media and civil society) and ensuring the transparency of the 2021 elections and subsequent peaceful transfer of power (Cheeseman, 2025; Gicholi and Rakner, 2026).[2] Wider success in educating and mobilising the public against corruption in government procurement and practice, on national debt accountability and good governance agendas, as well as advocacy for the 2023 Access to Information Act demonstrate the continued importance of civil society in Zambia during this period. However, critics highlight shortcomings in collective organisation and cooperation within the sector, coupled with a lack of proactive strategic action limited the effectiveness of the sector (Simuziya, 2021). Framing these practices, civil society continued to face significant challenges as President Hakainde Hichilema and the United Party for National Development (UPND) began reverting to authoritarian practices, including arbitrary arrests and detentions of civil society leaders and activists, and restrictions on public gatherings.

The current condition

Civil society remains essential to development. However, in Zambia as with many other African states, relations with the state impede the independence and effectiveness of the sector (Kaliba, 2014/5). Recent reports highlight continued challenges. Civicus (2025) characterise Zambia as having an 'obstructed' civic space and note concerns with arbitrary detention and abuse of journalists, ongoing violations of right to peaceful assembly, and other pressures on civil society. Meanwhile, Freedom House (2025) classify Zambia as being 'partly free' due to continued legal and practical obstacles to opposition political parties, legislation curtailing political space and freedom of expression and demonstration, and the harassment and detention of journalists (see also UN Special Rapporteur, 2025).

In practice, this has resulted in a two-tier operating environment for civil society in Zambia. The Zambian government tends to view CSOs involved in service delivery as partners but treats those operating in advocacy and governance are viewed with suspicion or hostility (particularly if they are reliant on overseas/external donor funding) (this is a longstanding situation – see Kaliba, 2014/5). While scholars of civil society and democracy continue to argue that "the presence of a vibrant civil society that challenges the state and defends civil and political liberties legitimises a democratic system" (Sishuwa 2025, 372) the conditions for this remain limited in Zambia. The recent NGO Bill of 2024 exemplifies various of these concerns, with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) amongst others raising concerns that the proposed legislation contravenes Article 21 of Constitution, would be overly onerous and could be used to curtail civil society independence.

Amidst a general democratic decline across the globe and in Zambia, Zambian civil society remains active despite strategic efforts by political leaders to use legal and other mechanisms to control and curtail the public sphere (Gicholi and Rakner, 2026). Reflecting and continuing challenges from earlier periods, concerns persist not only with legislative efforts to curtail the civic sphere but also with the 'corporatism' of the sector as government seeks to monopolise and control civic space through co-opting of leaders into government roles and the penetration or high-jacking of CSOs (Grodsky, 2009; Simuziya, 2024). In this context, civil society remains

necessary – but not sufficient – for democratic resilience and civic mobilisation, and a vital bulwark against authoritarian tendencies amongst political leaders (Gicholi and Rakner, 2026).

References:

Bartlett, David M. C. (2000) Civil Society and Democracy: A Zambian Case Study, Journal of Southern African Studies 26(3), 429-446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030570700750019655>

Cheeseman, Nic. (2025) Zambia's Cautionary Tale of Democratic Opening. European Democracy Hub. Accessed at <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/zambias-cautionary-tale-of-democratic-opening/> on 8th September 2025.

Cheeseman, Nic., & Hinfelaar, Marja. (2009) Parties, platforms, and political mobilization: the Zambian presidential election of 2008, African Affairs, 109/434, 51–76. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp070>

Civicus (2025) Civicus Monitor – Zambia Report (2025). Accessed at <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/zambia/> on 14th September 2026.

Gichohi, Matthew., & Rakner, Lise. (2026) Democratic resilience in Africa: elections, opposition, and social movements, Democratization, 33(3), 609-631, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2025.2612278

Grodsky, Brian. (2009) From neo-corporatism to delegative corporatism? Empowerment of NGOs during early democratization, Democratization, 16(5), 898-921, DOI: 10.1080/13510340903162093

Freedom House (2025) Freedom in the World 2025: Zambia. Accessed at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/zambia/freedom-world/2025> on 14th September 2026.

Kaliba, Matildah. (2014/15) Toward an autonomous civil society: Rethinking state-civil relations in Zambia, International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, 16(2), 1-11,

Larmer, Miles. (2006) 'The Hour Has Come at the Pit': The Mineworkers' Union of Zambia and the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy, 1982–1991, Journal of Southern African Studies, 32(2), 293-312, DOI: 10.1080/03057070600656234

Mumba, Moonga Hangoma., & Mumba, Rudo Phiri. (2010a) Accountability in Zambia: A Case Study Report on the Status of Civil Society Organisations. ZCSD/University of Zambia

Mumba, Rudo Phiri., & Mumba, Moonga Hangoma. 2010b. Civil Society in Zambia: Challenges and Future Prospects - A CIVICUS Report, CIVICUS - World Alliance for Citizen Participation Zambian Council for Social Development. Senegal. Retrieved from <https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/bd0q02> on 14 Sep 2026. COI: 20.500.12592/bd0q02.

Pinckney, Jonathan (2023) Close but not too close: opposition network strategy and democratization in Zambia, Social Movement Studies, 22(1), 99-121, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2021.2003192

Simuziya, Nsama Jonathan. (2021) A critical evaluation of thirty years of state-civil society relations in Zambia, 1991 – 2021, African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 15(3): 98-108. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPSIR2021.1350>

Simuziya, Nsama Jonathan. (2024) An Analytical Examination of the Extent of Civil Society (Ir)Relevance & Its Historical Materialism in Championing Good Governance: A Critical Review of Zambia, from

2021–2024, International Journal on Minority and Group Rights, 32(5), 963-1004. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-bja10194>

Sishuwa, Sishuwa. (2020) Surviving on Borrowed Power: Rethinking the Role of Civil Society in Zambia's Third-Term Debate, Journal of Southern African Studies, 46(3),471-490, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2020.1730644

Sishuwa, Sishuwa. (2025) Elite and popular basis for legitimacy of democracy in Zambia since 1991, Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines, 59(2), 361-382, DOI: 10.1080/00083968.2025.2492382

UN (2025) Report from the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Accessed at https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5950add2-visit-zambia-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and on 14th September 2026

USAID (2015) 2015 CSO sustainability index for sub-Saharan Africa. Accessed at <https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-Sub-Saharan%20Africa-2015.pdf> on 14th September 2026.

USAID (2020) 2020 CSO sustainability index for sub-Saharan Africa. Accessed at <https://storage.googleapis.com/cso-si-dashboard.appspot.com/Reports/CSOSI-Sub-Saharan%20Africa-2020.pdf> on 14th September 2026.

1 The Acts were "the Companies Act (Cap. 388); the Lands and Deeds Registry Act (Cap. 185); the Trustee Act, 1898 of the United Kingdom; the Societies Act (Cap. 119); and the Adoptions Act (Cap. 54)" (Kaliba, 2014/15: 4)

2 The role of the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), Chapter One Foundation, and Alliance for Community Action are noted in particular by Cheeseman (2025) and Gicholi and Rakner (2026).