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Did Hichilema bring "over 2.5 million children into school"?

Continues on page 4



OPINION

The Politics of Self-Interest: Why Voters Share the Blame

Continues on page 5



The Billboard and the Promise: Five Years of Hichilema

Continues on page 3

Who Protects the Watchdogs?

As Zambia prepares for general elections, journalists report intimidation, attacks and growing self-censorship despite repeated government assurances that press freedom will be protected.

By Womba Kasela

Nearly five years after President Hakainde Hichilema and the United Party for National Development (UPND) came to power promising democratic reforms and greater media freedom, journalists across Zambia continue to report intimidation, harassment and political interference.

The allegations come as Zambia prepares for general elections on 13 August 2026.

Only months before the Mpongwe incident, the Zambia Police Service publicly declared that the safety of journalists was “non-negotiable”.

Speaking at a police-media dialogue forum in Livingstone in September 2025, police assured journalists and human rights defenders that media practitioners would be allowed to operate freely without fear of harassment, intimidation or violence.

Yet interviews conducted by MakaanDay suggest a widening gap between those assurances and the experiences of journalists working across the country.

A day of celebration

Mpongwe Radio Station Director Machova Musanshi said a paid-for programme was airing around 20:00 hours when the officer-in-charge at Mpongwe Police Station and two other officers entered the station and ordered the presenter to stop the broadcast.

The programme featured two UPND members openly expressing dissatisfaction with the outcome of intra-party elections held earlier that day.

Musanshi says suspected UPND cadres entered the station shortly afterwards and the programme was abruptly halted.

“This was not the first time we faced threats,” Musanshi told MakaanDay.

He alleged that cadres had previously threatened to shut down the station for hosting voices perceived to be critical of government or the ruling party.

He further claimed that police had at one point prevented opposition members

from appearing on radio, allegedly arguing they lacked the necessary permit.

The station did not report the incident, questioning how it could seek justice from the same officers accused of interfering with the programme.

Attempts to obtain a response from the Zambia Police Service were unsuccessful. Police spokesperson Godfrey Chilabi’s phone was repeatedly unreachable, and subsequent calls went unanswered. He also did not respond to WhatsApp messages seeking comment.

Efforts to obtain comment from the officer-in-charge and a senior officer to whom we were referred also yielded no response.

A pattern beyond Mpongwe

The Mpongwe incident is not an isolated case.

According to data provided by MISA Zambia, 35 media freedom violations were recorded between 2022 and 2025. MISA says most involved attacks, threats, intimidation, censorship or unlawful arrests linked to political actors or public officials.

Community radio stations are particularly vulnerable because they frequently host live programmes that allow citizens and political actors to express their views directly.

In December 2022, PASME Radio journalist Lovemore Phiri was allegedly assaulted by suspected UPND cadres while hosting a breakfast programme in Petauke, the Eastern Province.

The programme focused on complaints from farmers over delays in the distribution of agricultural inputs. As criticism mounted during the broadcast, Phiri says two cadres entered the station and demanded that the programme be stopped.

“When I resisted, they switched off the main power line, which shut down the station automatically. They grabbed my phone and K300 cash before leaving,” he said.

Phiri said he later attempted to flee after seeing cadres waiting outside the station but was allegedly pursued before local residents intervened. Police arrested two suspects he identified, but he says they spent only one night in custody and the case remains unresolved nearly three years later.

“Whenever I follow up, I am told investigations are still ongoing,” he said.

Former Serenje Radio journalist Sheila Kalunga reported being physically assaulted by suspected UPND cadres at Serenje Police Station during a ward by-election in 2023. Online journalist Gilbert Simaanza says he has also received threats linked to his reporting and social media publications.

The hidden cost: Self-censorship

Beyond physical attacks and online threats, journalists say fear itself has become a powerful form of censorship. Several journalists interviewed by MakaanDay described routinely avoiding certain stories because of concerns about retaliation.

One journalist said: “Even when I know I can work on a story, I avoid certain topics because I fear being threatened. I have been threatened before.”

Media freedom advocates warn that self-censorship is becoming increasingly common, particularly among journalists working in rural districts where political actors often wield significant influence over local media institutions.

Justice rarely comes

MISA Zambia National Director Austin Kayanda says accountability remains one of the biggest challenges. According to Kayanda, MISA has supported 39 media freedom cases that reached court level over the past decade. Yet very few result in meaningful justice.

“Some cases are settled out of court, others are withdrawn, while some journalists are pressured not to continue,” he said. “The challenge is that some

journalists are threatened by employers while others are offered money to settle quietly.”

Kayanda said some media institutions themselves are reluctant to pursue cases because of political or commercial relationships.

The legal environment

Media rights advocates say threats to press freedom extend beyond physical attacks. Free Press Initiative Executive Director Joan Chirwa argues that recently enacted cyber-related legislation risks creating additional barriers for journalists.

“The government ignored our plea on certain provisions in the cyber security laws that violate freedom of expression,” she said.

Chirwa argues that Zambia’s Constitution should provide stronger and more explicit protections for press freedom. She also expressed concern about the conduct of law enforcement officers.

“There are incidents where journalists are attacked by political cadres in front of police officers and they do not intervene, especially when ruling party cadres are involved,” she said.

Progress and persistent concerns

International observers acknowledge that Zambia’s media environment has improved since the change of government in 2021. According to the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Zambia improved from 115th place in 2021 to 77th place globally in 2025.

However, the organisation warns that the legislative environment remains fragile and that journalists critical of authorities can still face questioning, detention and intimidation.

Journalists interviewed for this investigation say improvements recognised internationally have not always translated into greater safety on the ground, particularly outside major urban centres.

Who Protects the Watchdogs? cont....

Government response

Ministry of Information and Media Permanent Secretary Thabo Kawana acknowledged that attacks on journalists have occurred but maintained they are isolated incidents rather than a widespread pattern.

Kawana told MakaanDay that government remains committed to protecting journalists and ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.

He assured journalists that government would protect media practitioners before, during and after the elections.

Who protects the watchdogs?

For journalists such as Lovemore Phiri, those assurances offer little comfort.

Nearly three years after reporting his alleged attackers to police, he says he still has no answers.

Today, he thinks carefully before discussing politically sensitive issues on air.

The contradiction remains unresolved.

International rankings suggest Zambia’s media environment has improved since 2021. But for journalists working far from Lusaka, press freedom is measured less by rankings than by whether they can report controversial stories without fear of intimidation, violence or political interference. As election day approaches, that question remains unanswered.

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From front page

The Billboard and the Promise: Five Years of Hichilema

Five years after winning power on a platform of reform, freedom and accountability, President Hakainde Hichilema is seeking a second term. But as his campaign posters dominate Lusaka’s skyline, questions remain about how much of the promised democratic transformation has been achieved.

By Charles Mafa

Driving into Lusaka from the eastern side of the city, motorists crossing the Munali flyover bridge are greeted by a towering campaign billboard of President Hichilema.

Mounted high above one of the capital’s busiest roads, the poster presents the incumbent smiling confidently beneath the slogan “Zambia Forward Together”. For many commuters, it is difficult to miss.

What is perhaps more striking, however, is what is missing.

Despite 14 presidential candidates having entered Zambia’s August general election, few rival campaign posters are visible in prominent parts of the capital. In some locations, it is as though Hichilema is campaigning against no one at all.

Whether this reflects superior organisation, greater resources, incumbency advantages or simply the early stages of the campaign is open to debate. But the image offers a fitting backdrop to a broader question confronting Zambia as it heads towards a crucial election: has the administration that came to power promising democratic renewal delivered the reforms many citizens expected, or has the gap between promise and reality begun to widen?

Assessing Hichilema’s performance largely depends on the lens through which it is viewed.

His objective of the 2026 election is clear: secure a renewed mandate and project Zambia as a stable,

democratic nation that is open for business despite growing criticism from sections of the opposition and civil society.

Hichilema is making his case before an electorate of more than 8.7 million registered voters. Fourteen political parties have fielded presidential candidates, while 226 constituency-based parliamentary seats are up for contest.

However, the election campaign has not been without controversy. Allegations emerged that some independent candidates perceived to be aligned with the ruling party were pressured to withdraw from parliamentary races. As a result, 16 candidates from the United Party for National Development (UPND) have already secured victory even before the vote is cast.

For critics, these developments raise questions about the competitiveness of the electoral process.

Hichilema’s election in August 2021 was widely viewed as marking a new chapter in Zambia’s democratic journey after years of concerns about democratic backsliding under the Patriotic Front (PF) administration of the late former President Edgar Lungu. His victory raised expectations of democratic renewal, stronger institutions, greater respect for civil liberties, and expanded media freedom.

In the early years of his presidency, Zambia received international praise for achieving another peaceful transfer of power and for rebuilding relations with key international partners. The government has also highlighted efforts to strengthen governance and restore confidence in public institutions.

However, questions have increasingly emerged about the durability of these democratic gains. Critics have raised concerns about an alleged shrinking civic space, claims that legal and administrative processes have been used against political opponents, allegations of executive influence over public institutions, and the slow or uneven implementation of some promised reforms.

According to Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2025 report, Zambia remains classified as “Partly Free”.

The organisation states that while the country continues to hold competitive multiparty elections and respects a range of civil liberties, opposition parties face legal and practical obstacles to fair competition, while laws restricting political space and online expression remain in force.

Similarly, Human Rights Watch has raised concerns about the use of the Public Order Act to restrict opposition activities, as well as broader issues affecting freedom of expression, assembly and civic participation. These concerns have contributed to an ongoing debate about the state of Zambia’s democracy and whether the institutional reforms promised in 2021 have been fully realised.

Questions have also persisted in other areas central to Hichilema’s reform agenda. Media organisations and press freedom advocates have welcomed the generally more open environment compared to previous years, but some journalists and civil society groups continue to report incidents of intimidation, political pressure and restrictions on access to information.

Debates have also continued over the pace of constitutional and institutional reforms, and the extent to which key state institutions are able to operate independently of political influence. Some critics point to the comparatively rapid establishment of the Cyber Security Agency, while the full implementation of the Access to Information Act has progressed more slowly, as evidence of uneven reform priorities.

Supporters of the government, however, argue that meaningful progress has been made in strengthening democratic governance and modernising state institutions. Critics counter that some of the structural reforms promised in 2021 remain incomplete as the country heads into another election.

Yet governance is only one measure by which voters are likely to assess Hichilema’s first term. Economic performance is expected to play an equally important role in shaping electoral choices.

Economy: Strongest Area of Performance

The Billboard and the Promise: Five Years of Hichilema cont...

One of the biggest achievements of Hichilema's administration has been progress in restructuring Zambia's debt and restoring overall economic stability after the country defaulted on its external debt in 2020.

The International Monetary Fund has repeatedly cited Zambia's progress under its economic reform programme, pointing to advances in debt restructuring, fiscal consolidation and efforts to restore macroeconomic stability. IMF officials have praised the government's progress in reducing economic imbalances and restructuring debt despite significant domestic and external shocks. Meanwhile, Zambia's Ministry of Finance projected economic growth of 5.8 percent in 2025, a forecast supported by improving economic indicators following years of debt distress.

International financial institutions and investors have also pointed to Zambia's debt restructuring agreements as a significant achievement, helping restore investor confidence and improve the country's economic outlook.

The government has highlighted a number of achievements during Hichilema's tenure, including the introduction of free education, increased allocations to the Constituency Development Fund (CDF), and expansion of mining investment. These initiatives have been presented as evidence of efforts to improve public services, stimulate economic growth and strengthen the country's financial position.

However, economic recovery has not translated equally across society. Many Zambians continue to face significant challenges, including a high cost of living, food insecurity, persistent youth unemployment and slow growth in household incomes. While key macroeconomic indicators have shown signs of improvement, many citizens say the benefits have yet to be fully felt at community level, particularly among poorer and more vulnerable households.

Although former President Edgar Lungu was decisively defeated in the 2021 general election, his political legacy remains a significant factor in Zambia's political landscape ahead of the August 2026 polls. Following his death, many of his supporters have shifted their allegiance from the Patriotic Front (PF), which is not fielding candidates in this year's election, to parties aligned with the Tonse Alliance.

Much of that support has coalesced around Brian Mundubile, the Tonse Alliance presidential candidate. However, Zambia's opposition remains fragmented, with Citizens First leader Harry Kalaba, Socialist Party president Fred M'membe and several other candidates also competing for support from voters dissatisfied with the current government. Political analysts note that unless opposition forces can coordinate more effectively, the anti-incumbent vote risks being split among multiple candidates.

Ultimately, the 2026 election may be less a contest between political personalities than a referendum on Hichilema's first term in office.

Hichilema enters the race with achievements he can point to: debt restructuring, improved international standing, free education, expanded CDF funding and relative macroeconomic stability. Yet he also faces criticism from those who argue that democratic reforms have been incomplete and that economic gains have not sufficiently improved the lives of ordinary citizens.

As voters head to the polls in August, they will be asked to decide whether the promise of 2021 has been fulfilled, whether it remains a work in progress, or whether a different path is needed.

Back on the Munali flyover, Hichilema's billboard continues to tower above the traffic below. The election will determine whether the optimism it projects still resonates strongly enough with Zambians to secure him a second term.

The author is the Editor of MakaanDay Centre for Investigative Journalism

From front page

FACT CHECK: Did the Hichilema administration bring "over 2.5 million children into school"?

Verdict: Unsupported by available Ministry of Education data

By Charles Mafa

During a campaign rally in Choma, President Hakainde Hichilema credited his administration's free education policy with bringing "over 2.5 million children into school."

"The reason why this country is moving forward is because you selected a government through the President, but the President does not work alone. The President cannot go into Parliament to vote for laws, it is the MPs," he said before citing the employment of 45,000 teachers and "bringing back over 2.5 million children into school."

The claim is central to one of the UPND government's flagship policies ahead of Zambia's August 2026 general election. But do official education statistics support it?

What the data shows

According to the Ministry of Education's 2025 Education Statistics Bulletin, total enrolment increased from 5,025,614 learners in 2021 to 6,833,236 learners in 2025.

That is an increase of approximately 1.81 million learners, not 2.5 million.

The same bulletin reports total enrolment in 2025 at 6.83 million learners, including 706,049 in early childhood education, 4.69 million in primary education and 1.43 million in secondary education.

What about the President's other figure?



President Hichilema also said free education was introduced to benefit "the 2.5 million children currently in school".

However, the Ministry's latest statistics put total enrolment at 6.83 million learners, meaning the figure of 2.5 million does not correspond to the number of children currently enrolled in Zambia's education system.

Could he have been referring to something else?

Possibly. Government officials have at times referred to beneficiaries of free education rather than net enrolment growth. However, the President did not explain how the 2.5 million figure was calculated, and the Education Statistics Bulletin does not show that more than 2.5 million additional learners entered school between 2021 and 2025.

Verdict

The Ministry of Education's own statistics do not support the claim that the Hichilema administration brought "over 2.5 million children into school."

Official enrolment figures show an increase of approximately 1.81 million learners between 2021 and 2025. Unless State House or the Ministry of Education provides a different methodology for calculating the figure, the claim remains unsupported by publicly available data.

OPINION

The Politics of Self-Interest: Why Voters Share the Blame

From front page

In our editorial last week, we argued that Zambia's political class is among the country's greatest challenges as we head towards the August elections. But are politicians alone responsible for the state of our politics?

The answer is no.

Voters, too, bear a share of the responsibility. Too often, electoral choices are influenced not by a candidate's competence, integrity, vision or ability to provide effective leadership, but by personal connections, family ties, ethnic affiliation, regional loyalties or the expectation of personal gain. In such circumstances, support for a politician is driven less by considerations of the national interest and more by narrow self-interest.

This is not a uniquely Zambian problem, but it has become deeply embedded in our political culture.

Every election cycle brings with it a scramble for proximity to power. Citizens align themselves with political camps not necessarily because they believe in particular policies or ideas, but because they hope to benefit if their preferred candidate wins. Politicians understand this reality and often exploit it.

Campaign promises are increasingly framed around access to opportunities, jobs and appointments rather than long-term solutions to the country's challenges.

For many people, a successful election is one that results in personal rewards. It may mean securing a government job, obtaining an appointment to a diplomatic mission, joining the board of a state-owned enterprise, winning a government contract, or ensuring that a relative is placed on a list of prospective public sector recruits. Politics becomes less about public service and more about access to resources.

The Constituency Development Fund, one of the

government's flagship decentralisation programmes, has not been immune from these dynamics. Investigations by MakaanDay have repeatedly uncovered allegations that access to certain CDF opportunities—including skills training bursaries, empowerment grants and other benefits—is sometimes influenced by political considerations.

In several communities, residents have complained that opportunities are disproportionately awarded to ruling party supporters or those perceived to be sympathetic to the governing party, rather than being allocated transparently and on the basis of need or merit. Whether these allegations are isolated incidents or evidence of a broader pattern, they reinforce a dangerous perception that public resources are rewards for political loyalty rather than assets belonging to all citizens.

The consequences are profound. When votes are exchanged for promises of personal benefit, accountability suffers. Politicians learn that they do not necessarily need to deliver effective governance or fulfil campaign promises. Instead, they need only satisfy a relatively small group of supporters and beneficiaries. Citizens, meanwhile, become less likely to scrutinise leaders they perceive as advancing their own interests.

This transactional approach to politics creates a toxic environment in which opportunities are viewed as rewards for political loyalty rather than rights or entitlements available to all citizens on the basis of merit. Public institutions become vulnerable to patronage. Meritocracy weakens. Corruption flourishes. National development takes a back seat to political survival.

Perhaps most worrying is that this culture encourages voters to view politics as a competition

between groups seeking access to state resources rather than a contest of ideas about how best to govern the country. Elections become battles over who gets to eat rather than discussions about how to create prosperity for everyone.

Politicians deserve criticism when they manipulate these tendencies. But voters must also reflect on the role they play in sustaining them. A democracy cannot function effectively when citizens demand personal favours instead of good governance,

or when loyalty to individuals outweighs commitment to principles.

As Zambia prepares to go to the polls, the challenge is not only for politicians to offer better leadership. It is also for voters to demand it. The quality of our democracy ultimately reflects the choices we make. If we continue to reward self-interest, we should not be surprised when self-interest becomes the defining feature of our politics.

The future of Zambia will be shaped not only by those who seek office, but also by those who elect them.



from the

EDITOR



MakaanDay

FACTS. FIRST.

This week in the Bulletin & Record

The independent hairdresser whose radio fights back

Zambia has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa but so far the economic benefits have not trickled down to the majority of the population. But despite the pressures, not all Zambians allow themselves to be crushed, writes Charles Mafa.

Take Justin Silungwe, 37 now. Since 2011, businessman Silungwe, fondly referred to by his customers and peers as Uncle Jah (not for his dreadlocks but a short form for his first name, he says) has made his living by clipping men's hair around Avondale Township, east of Lusaka. On a good day he can make more than K100. He charges K6 for a haircut and a shave, K3 for children, or as little as K2 for trimming.

Uncle Jah's characterful barbershop sports a display of the name of his workplace. Inside on the table are three electric hair clippers, each reserved for a different hairstyle. A small plastic container filled with paraffin also rests there along with a half-empty bottle of methylated spirits and a radio set which stubbornly resists his efforts to reduce the volume before a conversation with the B&R. "The volume has a problem, let me just switch it off," he says.

He says. "I like radio so much more than TV because I can tune in to many channels and follow current affairs. I can't afford to put up a satellite dish here for me to have the luxury of tuning to various TV channels. So this radio set is my best friend."

He lost his first job and went around in search of another but his street-wisdom brought him back to the talent he had learned as a young man growing up in Ndola under the watchful eye of a strict brother. "Initially I did not take my talent seriously. I was just forced to learn how to cut people's hair by my brother whom I was staying with in Ndola," explained Uncle Jah in his Bemba dialect.

Mr Silungwe is business savvy, cheerful to his customers and strict when it comes to his work. He likes a drink and a smoke but only outside work hours. Business is tough and he has to compete with several barbershops in the area, some in well-sheltered and plush places. He says his success lies in knowing the craft. "Many people come here because they know they will get a good hair cut.

It is the same customers who advertise for me, when they go out they tell others about my brilliant work."

Uncle Jah's business sustains himself and his wife and two children in a country where millions of young people are jobless. In order to remain in business he has to be good to his customers and perform his work professionally. His tiny barbershop is not just a place for a haircut but it brings together people from different categories of society.

Some are directors, others are from the poor suburbs and they all meet here he says. He knows how to create a favourable environment for everyone, and he has to be up to speed with current affairs.

"I have customers from diverse backgrounds. The well-travelled, plus ordinary ones, and this is more like a central meeting place. So when they're here I have to engage with them in conversations that meet their taste,"

he says. "I would know once you walk in that this one loves sport, this one it is politics, this one business. That is how it goes."

Politics, he says, "is at the centre of everything. We can't ignore it. We recently changed government but life is the same. People complain about politicians that they promised a lot of things. Yes they (PF) made a lot promises. I was also promised

but they can't achieve everything within a short period of time. What the politicians should know is that we need basic facilities like schools, hospitals for our children near us. We're not interested in luxuries. No."

Uncle Jah made the decision to start his own business when he was sacked from his previous job. He has never regretted his decision because he is more comfortable now when he is his own boss. "Discipline is very important when you're working on your own," he says. "I have to make sure that I am here at 08:00hrs in the morning and knock off around 19:30hrs or so."

He says those who do not use their talents to survive are just "cutting their own throat". He says the greatest "capital for a poor person is knowledge and strength". "If you don't possess those things, it means you're nothing. There are some of our colleagues who are confined to a wheelchair, they're doing something. What about us? We can do menial jobs but the secret lies in how we use the money we earn."

Uncle Jah started his business from his own savings. He says that in modern times people "dig their own graves" through the kind of lifestyle they choose. "Alcohol, drugs and engaging in sexual immorality are killing society today," he concludes.

The story was first published in the June 2014 edition of the Bulletin & Record Magazine.

