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Abstract
In Zimbabwe, the circulation of political protest music has been encountered censorship and state surveillance. In the post-independence period, State-controlled media silence dissent by excluding political protest music from being broadcast. This paper examines how musicians and audiences use home studios to produce, as well as social media platforms and encrypted digital networks to share politically charged music beyond state regulation. We argue that digital media has fundamentally evaded state hegemonic control, transforming political music into a weapon of counter-hegemonic communication. Drawing on Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses theory, this qualitative study combines observation, interviews and netnography to generate data on digital resistance and media censorship. Findings reveal that the advent of digital production and distribution has accelerated the availability and spread of political protest music in Zimbabwe. This aligns with the emergence of strong political opposition in the new millennium. Digital platforms now allow marginalised voices to bypass national media blackouts and reach audiences rapidly and directly through file-sharing, streaming, and encrypted circulation which have helped artists to evade censorship. We conclude that digital technology has eroded state control over cultural expression and repositioned protest music as an accessible and resilient form of political intervention. In Zimbabwe, political music is the 'open letter' used to subversively challenge state repressive apparatus.

Introduction
The Zimbabwean society has inherent inequality resulting from the dominant ZANU-PF elite asserting its hegemony over the subjugated poor (Munyikwa, 2019; Solani, 2021). This has created social inequality, in which those who are pro-ZANU-PF benefit from state resources while others who oppose languish in poverty (Ndawana & Hove, 2023). Zimbabwe is characterised by hegemony and monotheism (Guzura & Ndimande, 2015; Sabao, 2018; Mpofu & Sibanda, 2023) created by the ZANU-PF regime and also aided by a culture of self-censorship by the music artists themselves who very mindful of their safety and freedom after expression given the country's political environment where characters in the mould of Thomas Mapfumo have ended up living in exile for fear of persecution (Marara, 2023). Political protest music has played a historic role in Zimbabwe's history from the time of the liberation struggle to the post-independence era (Muranda et al., 2022). Songs serve as a vehicle for protesting socio-economic, cultural, and political problems in the country, expressing the

marginalised people's shared experiences during an era of ZANU-PF hegemony (Maguraushe et al., 2022).

Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) theory holds that music is deployed to give the state control over analogue media, thereby propelling the dominant ideology. The new digital frontier provides a conduit for those with a counternarrative to challenge the status quo with their counter-ideology. Communication is an integral part of ISA (Althusser, 1971), and in Zimbabwe, the mainstream media (newspapers, radio, television) has been used to disseminate the political ideology and messages of the ruling class, while the opposition has largely capitalised on social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube). Music is a counter-space through which the subaltern speaks back to power, expressing their daily tribulations and criticising the hegemony of the ruling elite who exercise political authority and exploit economic resources (Ureke & Washaya, 2016).

This paper focuses on digital technologies that have ushered in a paradigm shift from a confined location to a liberated, accessible global destination with multiple genres of music. The audience in the new digital location is not limited to a single geographic location, such as Zimbabwe. Cyberspace provides a secure domain with 24/7 access for visitors. Tourists at the referenced location can view, listen to, and experience protest songs at the click of a button. The objectives of this paper are: 1. To examine the extent to which digital technology has facilitated counter-hegemonic protest music in Zimbabwe, and 2. To examine responses to access to political protest music shared through Facebook. We argue that while state-controlled broadcasting services are exclusive to the ZANU-PF government, cyberspace is open to all citizens and serves as a conduit for transmitting and receiving the musical open letter.

The paper is structured in five parts. After this introduction is the methodology, followed by the literature review, theoretical framework, findings and discussion. The conclusion sums up the paper and its main thesis.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, the researchers conducted netnography to examine how the availability of music on the internet has helped counter ZANU-PF hegemony since the advent of digital technology. We immersed ourselves (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024) on the Facebook social media platform to gain insight into political views aired in comment sections. The researchers conducted passive observation (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018) in which we lurked into Facebook sites and presented them as descriptions. Citizens follow trending musical works on online platforms, and are also immersed in public commentary on the political protest messages portrayed therein. To supplement observation, online interviews (Kozinets, 2019) were conducted with five purposively sampled Zimbabwean political commentators and five music fans to solicit their views on how digital technology has enhanced the production and dissemination of political protest music in Zimbabwe. We asked them open-ended questions during online interviews to elicit rich descriptions of their experiences (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019). Their responses are presented verbatim. Data analysis followed Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen for its appropriateness to this study, in which the researchers coded and examined data from multiple participants to identify common themes and ideas. The themes that emerged are: 1. Enhancement of state hegemony; 2. Protest music as a counter-hegemonic tool; and 3. Circumventing state censorship through digital technology.

Literature Review

Music as an enhancer of state hegemony

Scholars trace the roots of Zimbabwean protest music to the nationalist movements in the early 1960s (Moyo, 2017; Mangani, 2019). In Zimbabwe, radio and television broadcasting are nationally

monopolised by the state, just as they were before independence (Mungwari, 2017; Dzirutwe, 2018; Zirima, 2020). The arms of government can control what people listen to on state-controlled radio and television stations. The Zimbabwean government recognised the power of music. It instituted stringent censorship laws, which kept protest music by artists such as Lovemore Majaivana, Leonard Zhakata, Winky D, Hosiah Chipanga, and Thomas Mapfumo off the airwaves. Censorship and Control Unit officials in Zimbabwe banned Winky D's politically charged protest songs from airplay because they were being used in destabilisation programmes by the alleged enemies of the state (Khan, 2021). In the past, a few individuals or entities served as service providers with the autonomy to create and/or appoint content creators. The censorship board had the prerogative and mandate to determine which lyrics/songs were suitable for public consumption, as it worked with the few analogue recording and broadcasting studios that existed (Chimbudzi et al., 2021). However, despite the tightly controlled environment that suppresses freedom of speech in Zimbabwe, music serves as an alternative medium that confronts authoritarian rule, with these musicians exposing the socio-economic inequalities, corruption, marginalisation, and repression that characterise the ZANU-PF rulers (Matsilele & Msimanga, 2022).

After independence in 1980, Thomas Mapfumo continued to write songs that sought to emancipate the people from economic and political oppression. African liberation war leaders inherited colonial systems across almost all domains of governance, including radio and television broadcasting, which remain state-run. The ZANU-PF government permitted the broadcast of liberation songs on radio and television as a form of solidarity with the national agenda to empower the people. The political promises made to the people proved utopian, and people began to express dissatisfaction, but there were no avenues to air their grievances explicitly. The former Minister of Information and Publicity, Prof Jonathan Moyo, proposed reforms that allocated more airtime to local music and arts content on radio and television than before. This was perceived by the opposition as an effort to revamp the dissemination of ruling-party propaganda, while pro-ruling-party people described it as sovereignty. The 100% (later 75%) Local Content policy of 2000 saw the rebranding of radio stations Spot FM (formerly Radio 1), Radio Zimbabwe (formerly Radio 2), Power FM (formerly Radio 3), and National FM (formerly Radio 4), which all advanced the agenda of the ruling party. All efforts to counter ZANU-PF's hegemony in music were shut out, and, as a result, Mapfumo and other protest musicians were left in the cold.

Matiure (2019, p. 89) noted that "There is indeed a very strong relationship between hegemony and music. Music is the vehicle for achieving hegemony when the dominant group superimposes itself on the weaker group." Hegemony is used to reinforce tendencies that empower the dominators to remain powerful. There is a dense hegemonic civil society aligned with ZANU-PF in its advocacy for social change in Zimbabwe, which should be achieved through radical transformation of the relations of social forces of production and through land redistribution. This vision is envisaged to be implemented through Afro-radicalism, force, nativism, persuasion, and radical nationalism.

Political protest music as a counter-hegemonic tool

Some Zimbabwean music artists associated with protest music during the colonial era include Thomas Mapfumo, the late Zexie Manatsa, Tinei Chikupo, and Oliver Mtukudzi.

Even though their audience is the black population, state censorship ensured that all suspected politically charged music never reached the public through radio and television broadcasts. Radio and television broadcasting were analogue and restricted to authorised music (Chimbudzi et al, 2022). There were no other forms of entertainment besides public performances in the township community halls around the country. For the black population, there were no alternative avenues to disseminate protest sentiments. The music artists were under tight white colonial masters' surveillance, and all

those who breached the authoritarian regulations were arrested. All forms of entertainment were subject to Rhodesian government law. Music artists who delved into the political arena laced their songs with subtle political insinuation since explicit and radical content attracted incarceration. For fear of persecution, African musicians opted to sing their songs underground, sometimes under the guise of hymnal tunes. Thomas Mapfumo, a leading figure in Chimurenga protest music, was arrested for singing and recording songs in solidarity with the liberation war guerrillas. The absence of liberal broadcasting services meant that protest music was futile, which gave power to colonial rule. Muranda et al. (2022, p. 3) say:

> Allegations of mismanagement, corruption, and police brutality, coupled with poverty, inflation, shortages, and unemployment, have driven musicians to articulate citizens' discontent through song. This has also happened in Zimbabwe, where music has become political in nature, with artists exposing the ZANU-PF regime's failures.

Their paper chronicles how Thomas Mapfumo's Chimurenga music struggles to unbundle the colonial grip of imperialism.

The rot in the ZANU-PF government after independence is also exposed through political protest music. As it did during the Chimurenga liberation war, political protest music today transmits explicit and implicit political messages to reassert identity and defend social and political space (Khan, 2021). Maguraushe et al. (2022) describe how the popular music soundscape expresses Zimbabweans' gross domestic despondency. Ndlovu and Mlotshwa (2022) revisited the gruesome *Gukurahundi* massacres through Bongani Ncube's songs. This Zimbabwean artist used his podium to address the assassinations that successive Zimbabwean governments have failed to address formally.

Circumventing the state through digital disruptions

Digitalisation has transformed the playing field by crashing the monopoly of the analogue era and opening doors for the marginalised youth and artists. It has given citizens access to cyberspace through various social media platforms. Gadjanova et al. (2022) describe 'pavement media' as the daily communication on trending matters through street discussions, church gatherings, beer halls, songs, sermons, and graffiti. These provide essential links to a wide-ranging media ecosystem. Long-term technological changes in the media landscape have led to a rise in the number of people working in media spaces where digital technology removes the barriers between production and consumption. Toffler (2022) calls them 'prosumers'. These disseminators of banned political protest music are the "new amateurs" who use cheap consumer technology, seek quick returns, and tend to operate outside the state's repressive apparatus, reaching wider audiences. We adopt these concepts in this study. The paper demonstrates how digital technology has led to the demise of content censorship and to wider distribution and greater diffusion of political protest music. We examine specific instances of the musical open letter in Zimbabwe and discuss how the musical landscape of recent Zimbabwean counter-hegemonic political protest music has thrived in the wake of the rise of digital dissemination platforms. Digital platforms have the potential to enhance communication and open channels of response between musicians and their grieving Zimbabwean fans, a potential that cannot be underestimated (de Reuver et al., 2018). In the 21st century, the increasingly digital environment in which financially struggling Zimbabweans live, allegedly due to politicians looting the economy, provides fertile ground for despondency.

In 2000, the labour-driven political movement, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), rose to prominence, leveraging digital technology to advance its agenda for regime change. Opposition politicians persuaded most of the electorate to vote 'No' on the proposed New Constitution in a 2000 referendum. The Referendum result changed the political landscape, as people witnessed the power of social media as a liberal channel of communication since Zimbabwe's independence. The digital

age has seen the establishment of home studios, enhanced evasion of state censorship, and consequently provided a conduit for the dissemination of political protest music, thereby enabling its flourishing (Chimbudzi et al., 2022). Social media has enabled a "digital elite" to create personal networks and evade state media blackouts by brokering and disseminating information outside mainstream media, thereby supporting protest action and transcending geographical and socio-economic gaps by mobilising emotional grievances. Digital technology enhances social interaction and collective action in countries with authoritarian governance. Behir (2022) argues that developments indicate that the new actions enabled by digital technology and the increased use of social media have opened new fronts for using music to expose the national crisis in which political leaders amass wealth while the majority wallow in poverty.

The musical open letter has been accessed because new technology is affordable. The paradigm shifts from a top-down model focused on state-controlled music broadcasts to a digital, open playing-field environment, pointing to changes in access to musical content. The level to which ordinary people can afford digital technology implies democratic access to protest music and challenges existing power structures. It is a new, dynamic, and lucrative avenue of expression through which political activists can serve as the voice of the voiceless. Brusila et al. (2022) concur that social media has expanded significantly in the wake of digital technology. The speed and influence of social media have prompted governments worldwide to enact laws to thwart both explicit and implicit forms of cyber content. Digital technology is increasingly ubiquitous, enabling people to access and use a range of compliant devices worldwide (Terzimehić et al., 2021; Tranos & Ioannides, 2021). The convenience it provides erodes the monopoly of privileges previously enjoyed by a few users during the dominance of analogue technology.

Nowadays, content is distributed online rather than as tangible objects that are limited to storage or road/rail networks. Such content is presented as virtual material that propagates across devices connected to the Internet. In Zimbabwe, Internet usage is close to 50% (Nyambo et al., 2024). Such statistics signal a growing trend on the Internet for a variety of purposes, including counter-hegemonic music compositions. The convenience of the internet spurred a dramatic increase in Internet users, surpassing levels reached after the turn of the millennium. Post-COVID-19, the internet has gained greater prominence, with millions of international visitors. Internet users are increasingly becoming content creators globally, regionally, and locally, even though some of this content is not credible (Mugari, 2020). Without limits, anyone with access to cyberspace can create and upload material for others to consume.

Currently, there are more digital alternatives for disseminating information to the public than the state's repressive machinery can control. Protest music streamed on online digital platforms is accessed by people as they engage in their day-to-day business activities. Chibuwe (2020) observes that political information from online platforms reaches offline spaces through sharing; hence, counter-hegemonic songs also reach people who may not always have connectivity. Even banned songs find their way to the populace through online and offline spaces, including cross-border long-distance buses, heavy truck transporters, iPods, Instagram, smartphones, Internet streaming, file sharing, Internet radio and television channels, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Most current social media platforms are hosted on servers controlled and managed outside Zimbabwe, and the government cannot shut them down. Countries that uphold freedom of expression, association and affiliation permit their citizens to express their views, as long as their actions do not impinge on others' freedom. The state's repressive measures effectively control a smaller segment of the media, while the remainder falls within the realm of social media. However, these studies do not examine how digital technology provides a platform for these counter-hegemonic musical narratives to reach the masses, a gap the current study addresses.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we analyse music's role in making or exposing hegemony and the dominant creed in Zimbabwean politics using Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) theory. Althusser (1971, p. 149) argues that governing elites possess state power and are active within the ideological apparatuses of the state; the ISA subtends the "…interests of the dominant ideology, and thus, the interests of the ruling class." The dominant ruling class uses music to reflect its views and ideology. ISA utilises persuasive propaganda to promote the state and dominant class's ideology, and 'reality' must be accepted as perceived and conceived only by politicians. Against this dominant ideology is always a counter-ideology that challenges the status quo in society and politics. This counter-hegemonic force has found a new lease of life in digital technology, which has aided the dissemination of its counter-narrative beyond state-controlled media. Althusser (1971) says communication is a significant part of ISA. Drawing on this view, this paper examines how the ZANU-PF regime has employed music to disseminate its ideology and reinforce its political messages in Zimbabwe, and how dissenting voices use music in counter-hegemonic narratives.

Findings and Discussion

This section covers the presentation of data gathered through online interviews, observations, and netizens' views on social media platforms. The data is presented and discussed under the following themes: music as the state's enhancer of hegemony, protest music as counterhegemony and sidestepping the state via digital disruption.

State enhancement of hegemony through music

In Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF as the ruling party and the state have used mainstream print and electronic media to disseminate their political ideology and messages, including songs, jingles, advertisements, reports, and billboards, on national radio and television, as well as in newspapers. Musicians who support the ZANU-PF government, such as Bulawayo Choir, Born Free Crew, Chief Shumba Hwenje, Comrade Chinx, Eden Boys, Elliot Manyika, Jah Prayzah, LMG Choir, Mbare Chimurenga Choir, Mabvuku Choir, Passion Java, Pax Afro, Simon Chimbetu, Tambaoga Thando, and the ZANU-PF choir, have recorded supportive songs. Tambaoga is the singer in the jingle "Rambai Makashinga" (Remain resolute) at the height of the fast-tracked land reform in the late 1990s. The jingle was played every 30 minutes on the radio and television broadcasts. Chief Hwenje, in his song, "Vote Mnangagwa" in the 2023 elections, he hypes listeners to "*zvatapinda mutambo wesarudzo kwese kwese vote Mnangagwa*" (as we enter the elections everywhere vote for Mnangagwa). In the song, he implores the populace to vote for ED Mnangagwa. In essence, the songs celebrate ZANU-PF's supremacy as if it is the only party that liberated Zimbabwe. In the comments on the above song, most revealed that while some liked the music, others condemned the song's lyrics and the ZANU-PF party. One netizen commented, "*Vote yangu not a secret vote CCC*" (my vote is not a secret vote, Citizens' Coalition for Change). This shows how they engage in the political debate freely, as their identities are hidden.

Matiure (2019, p. 89) says, "Music is used as a weapon of destruction through propagandistic shenanigans by unscrupulous superpowers in a community. Music is used by the perpetrator to instil fear. Music is also used to enhance the dominant group's supremacy." Musicians receiving gifts in the form of cars are unlikely to participate in anti-ZANU-PF protest music, but this may not stop other protest music from circulating. Some people still think that the ruling party is holding its own despite the advent of social media and the Internet. Key informant 3 said:

> One wonders whether all Zimbabwean musicians are on digital media platforms. Are those musicians who are there countering hegemony. It is now very complex, with some of them being gifted vehicles, such as Toyota Aquas, by ZANU-PF businessman Wicknell Chivhayo.

> Perhaps Thomas Mapfumo and Winky D, yes, but some have sold out. The remainder is in the state's pocket.

The Zimbabwean government's repressive policies on human freedom are intended to gag hegemonic protest music in Zimbabwe. Music is a form of communication, and technology is the conduit to human expression. In this regard, the musician is the messenger that brings the message, and the population, as the audience, is the recipient.

Protest music as counterhegemony

Some Zimbabwean musicians have turned to political open letters to vent their frustration with a failed regime and to expose its ills through explicit and implicit lyrics. Political activists and artists enjoy substantial parity with the ZANU-PF party apparatus in their ability to convey political protest messages to the disgruntled masses, owing to the widespread dissemination of information enabled by the World Wide Web. This transpires directly on the web and indirectly via other media, such as private newspaper reports of the activities taking place. In the comment sections of social media platforms, it is evident that digital avenues of creation and consumption have expanded access to resources that would have been inaccessible without the web. People express their opinions freely in response to protest messages, and one can observe how polarised the nation is, as comments come from both ruling-party and opposition supporters. The song Ijipita by Winky D on YouTube is a protest that exemplifies Zimbabweans as Israelites in captivity in Egypt. He sings that there is hope to get to the promised land, Canaan (liberation). Netizens, mostly Zimbabweans, engage in open debates about the song's content. One notable comment on the song Ijipita on YouTube reads, "even the government could not stop him… true representation of our struggle…" Zhakata, on the banned song Mubikira, says, "*Mutemo wekwedu unosiyaniswa zvichienda nekuti wabuda mumba maani*" (The laws in our land are not applied fairly). This is a direct confrontation, hence the ban. Before the advent of such digital platforms, the narrative was one-sided, with so-called patriotic and nation-building tones imposed on citizens without any counter-narrative. Social media provides the space for many other similar songs to be heard.

We observed that in Zimbabwe, the use of cell phones and Internet connectivity has changed how the state and citizens relate, as evidenced by the possibilities these technologies have enabled. An intriguing situation exists in which digitally networked individuals now enjoy a democratised environment of limitless interaction and freedom of speech, as opposed to the political leadership's frantic efforts to silence subaltern voices. Digital technology networks expand the number of alternative discourses and the portion of the population to which they can be disseminated. They have the potential to become a key campaigning tool for opposition politicians. Thomas Mapfumo and Oliver Mtukudzi have sung songs both in support of and in opposition to the ruling party. Going further, music by Winky D, Hosiah Chipanga, Leonard Zhakata, Raymond Majongwe, and Madzibaba Weshanduko is banned from the airwaves by the Censorship Board. They sing songs with dissenting messages against unfair economic participation, unemployment, high inflation, the soaring cost of living, and a declining national health delivery system. The music's counter-hegemonic agenda has found space on digital platforms and can now circumvent state repressive apparatuses and reach a wider audience.

Digital technology is a conduit for disseminating counter-hegemonic political music in Zimbabwe. Musicians' political protest compositions can now be shared via Facebook, SHAREit, Skype, Telegram, WhatsApp, X, and YouTube, both locally and internationally. Even if one is living in exile, banned albums and verbal attacks on the ZANU-PF regime's political hegemony are accessible to netizens at the click of a button. The counter-hegemonic agenda includes songs by Thomas Mapfumo, '*Nyika yaita mamvemve*' the nation is in tatters, to imply the state of economic quandary; Winky D,

Leonard Zhakata's, '*Mubikira*' articulates the discriminatory application of the law, and Hosiah Chipanga's '*Ivhu ratakatora nderipiko*' (where is the soil that we fought for) is a questioning of which one is the land that people died for (Chitofiri et al, 2017). Those with Internet access view the banned content and share it with friends who may not have Internet access; hence, dissemination continues even offline, a point supported by Chibuwe (2020). One netizen remarked that "protest music is used to bring out unfair practices by the ruling ZANU-PF." Furthermore, another one mentioned that, "protest music is the voice of the many people who are not heard when they cry." In essence, the aforementioned music resists the ruling party's oppressive actions against the masses. We observed that censorship, state control of broadcasting, and repression tend to constrain artistic freedom of expression.

Sidestepping the state with digital disruption

Regardless of the above, the Internet has been a great enabler of the propagation of dissident voices to those in power. It has helped protest musicians to sidestep censorship of opposition, repressive laws and political pressure levelled against the subaltern. Notably, digital technology-enabled communication further polarises society in Zimbabwe. On Chief Hwenje's song '*Vote Mnangagwa*', dedicated ZANU-PF netizen supporters leave comments. Some of the comments were, "*ZANU-PF huchi*" (ZANU-PF is honey), "*PaZANU-PF tsepete tsepete*" (on ZANU-PF make your vote). Such remarks are posted by the ruling ZANU-PF '*Varakashi*' (ruling party deployees) on social media, prompting netizens to comment in support of the actions and policies of the ruling elite. The disgruntled masses find an avenue to express their views and emotions freely through social media. Some of the voices taken from YouTube read, *'Ini ZANU-PF handiidi, asi* Chief Hwenje *vanorova mhanzi'* (I do not like ZANU-PF, but Chief Hwenje plays music skilfully"). Such a remark shows that, despite their love of music, some people still do not like the ruling party. Such a situation is what the ruling elite yearn for. Sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish between genuine commentary and the so-called regime enablers. However, the proliferation of platforms for counter-hegemonic forces and the growing widespread acceptance of human rights discourse have constrained the manoeuvrability of the ZANU-PF regime. One wonders whether this will be sufficient to effect positive political change. It will depend on the ZANU-PF regime's continued capacity and management to make seeming, rather than tangible, concessions.

During the run-up to the 2000, 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, social media, especially Facebook, played a key role in providing the populace with current political information. Baba Jukwa's Facebook page once attracted the attention of numerous Zimbabweans due to its blunt, scathing content targeting the ruling ZANU-PF party. It had the potential to serve as a platform for circulating opposition views prior to the 2013 harmonised elections in Zimbabwe (Mutetwa, 2018). People who posted on the page engaged in debates about crucial political and anti-government issues. There was a frenzy (among anti-ZANU-PF citizens) and panic (in ruling-party circles) about the scathing nature of Baba Jukwa's posts. The messages posted on Baba Jukwa's Facebook page were opposed to the dominant political treatises endorsed by government publications and websites in the mainstream state-controlled media. Although no longer active, Baba Jukwa's page expanded the country's public sphere into a counter-hegemonic platform that the state's repressive machinery could not easily thwart.

We observe that before the advent of the Internet, in some nations, people could face prosecution and possible incarceration for speaking to authorities. In many countries, this has changed in the digital era, in which information is readily accessible. One merit of digital technology is that it facilitates the rapid dissemination of protest songs to distant places. Senders and creators of protest songs can hide their identities in countries that guarantee their safety. The posted information extends beyond the intended recipients and includes state security agents. The Access to Information and Protection of

Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) were established to trace and prosecute perpetrators. The challenge faced in Zimbabwe is that freedom of expression depends on political affiliation. For example, the use of social media by pro-ruling-party supporters is tolerated, whereas those from the opposition are purportedly bent on destroying the nation's image. According to Drury et al. (2022), people can, through social media, build or destroy their own nation, as in Zimbabwe. A raging social media war across all available platforms sees netizens debating political protest, and songs are part of the script. In some instances, people explicitly discuss the lyrical content to inform the electorate about both hidden and openly entrenched meanings.

Most file-sharing platforms are based in Western or Eastern countries. Therefore, the ethics governing their administration are not necessarily aligned with local censorship requirements, and access to them is not centrally controlled. This means users have access to content that is even locally prohibited. In principle, authorities can only effectively control the importation of tangible materials, not digitised materials.

To circumvent state surveillance and the state's despotic power, some people use a pseudonym and a virtual private network (VPN) to access social media when the Internet is shut down. VPN hides without changing the user's identity, the source, or the intended recipients of information. It enables access to banned content while ensuring user security, and allows users to express their views and disseminate protest information freely. During the period leading up to the announcement of the election results in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2023, the government shut down the Internet. Under such circumstances, users can access blogs, email, Facebook, Google Meet, Telegram, TikTok, Twitter, websites, WhatsApp, WeChat, YouTube, and Zoom via a VPN. The aforementioned electronic media provide the populace with a conduit for disseminating counter-hegemonic music to disgruntled, powerless Zimbabweans, especially when the Internet is shut down. Key informant 1 had this to say about the impact of digital technology on counter-hegemonic political protest music in Zimbabwe:

> Digital technologies have liberated counter-hegemonic protest music from traditional restrictions such as censorship, thereby making it more easily accessible to those seeking to consume it. This has been the same with the rest of the "dissident" voices, equally liberated. Publishing is no longer a monopoly of the centre of power. Banning music from national broadcasting stations is now futile. If anything, it accelerates the popularity of the alternative avenues provided by digital technology. Winky D's "*Ibotso*" song showed that recently.

The above sentiments were also echoed by Key informant 2, who said:

> Technology has expanded freedom of speech, including explicit and outright forms of protest, as well as satirical music. The monopoly of recording studios and recording equipment has been shattered to the extent that people can now record music and videos using their phones. They can express themselves willingly because technology affords them disguise. There are so many recordings that pursuing the creators is a waste of time. Those in power have realised that the sense of freedom people derive from music has reduced street protests and confrontation, and on the other hand, social media has become a new war zone, which never has tyre burning, shops vandalised, or bloodshed. To make this war zone appear effective, the government spokesperson has taken it upon himself to respond to cross-cutting issues posted on X and to monitor trending issues on social media. Thus, technology has quashed the bureaucratic red tape that used to hinder their protests by the ruling elite.

The electorate, in both the opposition and ZANU-PF, needs a reprieve from the cost of data, which is just too high. In Zimbabwe, marginalisation of the protest music as the opposition voice tends to

increase visibility of the authoritarian ZANU-PF machinery through social media. The bread-and-butter issues continue to hound the working class, and they protest on social media, which provides a free platform to air their grievances. We noted through informant 5 that, "Social media helps us to confidently say what we feel about the government's repressive laws because we remain faceless with a concealed identity." Another informant, 6, was quick to say, "*Pasocial media havaone kuti ndiyani anenge ataura achisvora ZANU-PF nekuti pane zviuru zvakawanda*." (On social media, they cannot identify anyone who speaks against ZANU-PF because there are many thousands of netizens). With access to social media, netizens worldwide can post their views against unfair and undemocratic issues in Zimbabwe's political arena. The political situation in Zimbabwe is readily available online, allowing anyone with access to obtain up-to-date information on developments.

The ruling ZANU-PF party and the government are under the global spotlight via social media. No one can erase the fact that information about digital technology is available to people globally through social media. Although ZANU-PF has increased its use of social media to counter dissent, it cannot match the current impetus. An effective countermeasure is to facilitate access to state-owned radio and television broadcasting services. Political protest music is restricted on radio and television but it gets to the local population and the world at large through social media. In the future, the state is exposing its hegemonic stance to global audiences as ZANU-PF dominates radio and television political programming, which is tantamount to political hegemony.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that digital technology, particularly information and communication technology, enhances the dissemination of political messages that support or oppose the authoritarian ZANU-PF regime. The ruling party's grip on the public sphere must contend with numerous networks of digital activists who challenge its hegemony. Digital technology has been used to spread information about human rights violations that the state censors. The sharing of music on social media enables Zimbabweans to organise collective action around common grievances and overcome the barriers posed by state-sponsored terror in authoritarian contexts. Information and Communication Technologies enable socially and geographically distant segments of Zimbabwean society to create a united national front that fosters collaboration among group members and provides emotional mobilisation. Consequently, the scale of anti-regime protests finds a fertile avenue for growth courtesy of digital technology.

The present-day government of Zimbabwe may need to liberalise access to state-owned radio and television broadcasting services to ensure all political actors have access. The current status quo favours the ruling party. What may be viewed as an advantage of the radio and television monopolies is, in fact, a detriment, as it can work against them and shut many people out. Access to the Internet is a basic right that ought to be enjoyed by the netizens. The Internet can serve as a supermarket where shoppers can choose the commodities with the quality and price they can afford. The state should ensure that all places in Zimbabwe, urban and rural, have access to the Internet, which can be used by the ruling and opposition parties to reach their supporters. Instead of investing in censorship of protest music, governments should ensure that Internet tariffs are affordable to the populace. Such a move will increase the population's confidence in the government's services.

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