



He who laughs last laughs the loudest: the 2021 *donchi-kubeba* (don't tell) elections in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Most Africanist scholars stress the importance of clientelism in determining electoral outcomes and patrimonialism and the use of force in enabling ruling parties to prolong their stay in power. This article, which draws upon various instances of participant observation and interviews regarding the 2021 elections in Zambia, contributes to the few studies that emphasise the limits of clientelism and patrimonialism in African politics and the agency of voters or subordinate groups to hold their leaders accountable. It does so by showing how Zambian voters sought to secure benefits from clientelist campaigns, patrimonial rule and trade union campaigns to win changes in state policies, publicly promising reciprocity and loyalty when under the gaze of the ruling party actors, only to vote them out of power.

Rira bien qui rira le dernier : les élections *donchi-kubeba* (ne dis pas) de 2021 en Zambie

RESUMÉ

La plupart des chercheurs africanistes soulignent l'importance du clientélisme et du patrimonialisme dans la détermination des résultats électoraux, ainsi que dans l'usage de la force pour permettre aux partis au pouvoir d'y prolonger leur séjour. Cet article, qui s'appuie sur diverses observations et entretiens de participants aux élections de 2021 en Zambie, contribue aux rares études qui soulignent les limites du clientélisme et du patrimonialisme dans la politique africaine, mettant plutôt en avant l'agentivité des électeurs ou des groupes subordonnés à tenir leurs dirigeants pour responsables. Il le fait en montrant comment les électeurs zambiens ont cherché à tirer profit des campagnes clientélistes, de la règle patrimoniale et des campagnes syndicales pour obtenir des changements dans les politiques de l'État, en promettant publiquement réciprocité et loyauté aux membres du parti au pouvoir, pour ensuite les y chasser.

KEYWORDS

Zambia; elections; patrimonialism; gatekeeper; clientelism; *donchi-kubeba*; agency

MOTS-CLÉS

Zambie ; élections ; patrimonialisme ; gardien ; clientélisme ; *donchi-kubeba* ; agentivité

Introduction

On 24 August 2021, Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND), who had lost five previous elections, was sworn in as Zambia's seventh

president after beating incumbent Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front (PF). Hichilema got 2,852,348 votes against Lungu's 981,568 votes. The number of UPND members of parliament also increased by 24 seats above its total in 2016, to 82 out of 156 seats (ECZ 2021). Commenting on Hichilema's win, Victor, a Kitwe resident, said: 'I now understand what people mean when they say "He who laughs last laughs the loudest".'¹ Victor made this comment in reference to Lungu for ridiculing and stopping the opposition from campaigning and distributing money and gifts to people before the elections in the expectation that this (clientelist) generosity would be rewarded with political support. This article examines how Zambian voters in the 2021 elections understood the political morality of their relationship to parties.

Most Africanist scholars stress the failure of the opposition to win elections because incumbents often manipulate them in their favour (Cheeseman 2015; Bleck and van de Walle 2018; Cheeseman and Klaas 2018). The manipulation of elections takes various forms: when politicians 'play an ethnic card' (Kramon and Posner 2016; Hultin and Sommerfelt 2020); through corruption (Szeftel 2000; van de Walle 2003; Kasoma 2009); restricting the opposition (Goldring and Wahman 2016; Beardsworth 2020); or outright rigging (Chaturvedi 2005; Calingaert 2006). As such, elections are often said to count for little, being mere 'window-dressing rituals' lacking any real political meaning other than the stuffing of the ballot boxes behind closed doors (Adejumobi 2000, 66).

Beyond elections, the ruling elite use patrimonialism to prolong their stay in power (Bayart and Ellis 2000; De Oliveira 2015). Chabal and Daloz (1998, xvii–xix) characterise the African state as typified by the 'political instrumentalisation of disorder, a system of widespread patrimonialism involving governmental and administrative inefficiency, absence of institutionalisation, disregard for the rules of the formal political and economic sectors, and a resort to personal(ised) and vertical solutions to the societal problem'. Bayart and Ellis (2000) see most African regimes as kleptocracies (literally, corrupt thieves) and 'politics of the belly', which means that a man who is able to amass and redistribute wealth becomes a man of honour, as the African way of politics. However, the top-down approach of these studies often exaggerates the political power of the ruling elite at the expense of the voters' agency, presenting Africans essentially as scared of authority within the state, within the village and within the home.

This article builds upon the few studies that stress the limits of clientelism and patrimonialism (Bwalya and Maharaj 2018; Siachiwena 2021; Resnick 2022) and contributes to long-running debates about subaltern subjectivities and agency (Scott 1985). Recent debates about trade unions emphasise how trade liberalisation, privatisation, global restructuring and democracy have weakened trade unions and how and why they are able to reassert themselves as workers' representatives (Pitcher 2007; Uzar 2017; McNamara 2021). In contributing to this discussion, this article focuses on workers' and trade unions' use of the '*donchi-kubeba*' political system to successfully press their demands on the state, despite existing structural weaknesses. Moreover, I extend the understanding of the term '*donchi-kubeba*' from merely a political slogan (Sakala 2013; Goldring and Wahman 2016; Fraser 2017; Bwalya and Maharaj 2018; Beardsworth 2020) to consider the term as encompassing a wider political morality that extends to those in power: police, ministers, trade unions and candidates within their homes.

The article draws upon my ethnographic fieldwork in Kitwe (Nkana), Mufulira (Kankoyo) and Chililabombwe (Chililabombwe). I observed protests organised by unions against the behaviour of global mining conglomerates operating Zambia's privatised copper mines. The first that I observed was against Konkola Copper Mines (KCM) in 2019. I also participated in the two protests in 2021: against Glencore in Kitwe, when it announced that it would put its two mines in Kitwe and Mufulira onto a care-and-maintenance regime; and against Stanbic Bank, for charging abnormal interest rates on loans extended to mineworkers. I also attended meetings in 2021 between President Lungu and mineworkers at the Mopani Mine South Ore Body (SOB) shaft, and at Parklands Secondary School; meetings between parliamentary aspirants and voters in their respective constituencies; informal and random meetings lasting from 10 minutes to less than an hour; door-to-door campaigns of the UPND and PF; and five virtual rallies – two by the UPND and three by the PF. I studied various political programmes and advertisements on radio and television, discussions on Facebook, and WhatsApp and newspapers. I also conducted several formal and informal interviews. The interviewees comprised more men than women, reflecting existing historical gender inequalities in political participation (Evans 2015). The employed (my target group) represented a larger sample than the unemployed. I chose these three constituencies because of their long histories of mining labour radicalism and opposition movement mobilisations dating back to the colonial period. They were the epicentre of the PF's local resource nationalism in its campaign, and senior PF ministers of mines and of national planning (key players in the nationalisation agenda of the mines) and a PF permanent secretary stood in the respective constituencies (Table 1).

This article provides an account of *donchi-kubeba* as political morality or culture and uses it to explain voters' behaviour during Zambia's general election campaigns of 2021. This approach draws inspiration from Scott's 'weapons of the weak' and describes how subordinate groups challenge or resist power. According to Scott, 'the powerful actors may write the basic script for the play but, within its confines, truculent or disaffected actors find sufficient room for manoeuvre to suggest subtly their disdain for the proceedings' (Scott 1985, 26). I demonstrate how Zambian voters showed up at PF meetings, switched their identities manipulatively, acted as discreet opposition supporters and on election day voted otherwise. *Donchi-kubeba* rests on avoiding open resistance with the rulers to lull them into a false sense of security. The article begins with a brief background of the birth of PF, then explores the political and economic context before the elections and *donchi-kubeba* in action, before concluding.

Table 1. Research methods.

	Total	Muf	KT	Chil	M	F	E	U/E	PF	UPND
Interviews	50	20	15	15	31	19	31	19	5	5
Constituency meetings	6	2	2	2					3	3
Door-to-door campaigns	10	4	3	3					5	5
Informal/random observations	19	6	7	6						
Virtual rallies	5								3	2
Protests	4		4							
Meetings addressed by President Lungu	2		2							

Notes: Mu – Mufulira; KT – Kitwe; Chil – Chililabombwe; E – employed; U/E – unemployed; PF – Patriotic Front; UPND – United Party for National Development.

The PF in power: the PF, the election of Sata and his death

On 29 October 2014, Zambia's fourth president, Michael Sata, died following a long illness. Sata, a veteran politician, formed the PF in frustration after Zambia's second president and leader of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD), Frederick Chiluba, ignored his claims as nominated successor in favour of Levy Mwanawasa.² Sata then left the MMD, set up a new opposition party, the PF, and fought in and lost the 2001 and 2006 elections to Mwanawasa. After Mwanawasa's death he narrowly lost again in the consequent election to Rupiah Banda, who had served as vice-president under Mwanawasa. However, by 2006 Sata's ascendancy had already begun, winning in urban centres – especially Lusaka and Copperbelt, gaining from the MMD and undermining the UPND's advance beyond their Southern, Western and North-Western strongholds (Larmer and Fraser 2007). Although Sata lost the 2006 elections, his emergence and articulation of populist politics were more notable than the MMD's victory (Larmer and Fraser 2007). In 2011 Sata won the election.

Sata's death precipitated a succession crisis in the PF that ultimately led to Lungu gaining the party leadership. After Sata, Fraser (2017) argues, the PF was left without a charismatic figurehead. 'Sata's replacement', Resnick (2022, 74) observes, 'lacked Sata's charisma, theatrics, and witticisms, which had bolstered his popularity'. Lungu assumed the party leadership with a damaged reputation as a thief for having stolen money from his client, a widow, when he served as her lawyer (*Zambian Observer* 2020). During his initial public speeches, Lungu's voice was barely audible and many people attributed this to his alleged alcohol abuse. Lungu won the 2015 elections but after the elections many PF heavyweights, such as Geoffrey Mwamba and Sata's wife, son and nephew, resigned from PF together with former vice-president Guy Scott and his wife, all of whom joined the UPND, which, alongside the PF, had been Zambia's main opposition party during MMD rule, and had run the PF close during the 2015 presidential by-election. Winter Kabimba, secretary general of the party, also resigned and formed his own party. These changes significantly weakened the PF going into the 2016 general elections (Goldring and Wahman 2016; Fraser 2017; Beardsworth 2020). The rest of this section describes Lungu's legacy as president.

The 2015 presidential election

Lungu's initial task was to (re)build his reputation by presenting himself as a humble Christian. He also capitalised on Sata's popularity, taking Sata's body to all the 10 provinces before burial, and during the campaigns, using Sata's larger portrait besides his smaller one and promising to complete Sata's vision rather than his own. He escaped all the presidential debates organised by independent private media. Although Lungu won the 2015 elections, Hichilema, who came third in 2011 with 18%, received 47% of votes compared to Lungu's 48.8%, a difference of just 27,757 votes (ECZ 2011, 2015). Lungu responded to this threat by adopting 'gatekeeper' tactics, i.e. attempting to hold on to power through resource distribution, patronage and force (Bayart and Ellis 2000; De Oliveira 2015). Given the 11.3% reduction in revenue from the privatised mines between 2015 and 2019 (Oxfam 2021), the PF relied on external borrowing to build roads, schools and hospitals. In the elections of 2015, 2016 and 2021, the PF

consistently framed its campaigns around the slogan *Sonta-epowabomba* (point at your achievements) in reference to the built infrastructure. *Sonta-epowabomba* praised Lungu while undermining Hichilema, accusing the latter of tribalism, of having profited from the privatisation of the mines, and intimating that Hichilema, if elected, would sell the country to foreigners; these messages were delivered especially through the PF campaign songs (see, for example, Mambwe 2019; Lumbwe 2020; Kalobwe 2021). By 2021 the PF claimed to have: increased power generation capacity and constructed 4527 houses for the Zambia Police Service, the Zambia Army and the Zambia National Service; and constructed 45 district hospitals, four general hospitals, 650 health posts and 24 mini hospitals, 14,235 primary and 4690 secondary schools, 14 trades schools, seven universities, an 8000-km road network, 4300 km of feeder roads, three mega bridges, and 4151 boreholes (PF 2021, 24–65).

The 2016 general election

Fraser (2017) describes the PF under Lungu as featuring a ‘post-populist’ legacy of hyper-partisanship, violence and authoritarianism. Resnick (2022, 71) sees Lungu’s presidency as one of ‘democratic backsliding’ when Zambia’s democratic ratings dropped to those of a ‘highly defective democracy’. During the 2016 elections the PF adopted various strategies to create an unfair advantage for themselves, such as the ‘liberal use of government resources for electioneering purposes; muzzling the media; bribing cadres to intimidate voters and use violence against the opposition; preventing the opposition from campaigning freely; and interfering with voter registers ballot papers and election results’ (O’Callaghan 2020, 88). *The Post* (Zambia’s leading independent newspaper), Muvi TV, Komboni Radio, and Itezhi Tezhi Radio were forcibly closed. *The Post* was liquidated under the pretext of a disputed tax bill, two months before the 2016 elections (Goldring and Wahman 2016).

After the 2016 general election

After the 2016 elections, opposition leaders became victims of arbitrary arrests. In 2017, the president of the United Progressive Party, Saviour Chishimba, was detained for several days following his criticism of the government’s decision to invoke a state of emergency (Africa News 2017). Police also violently arrested and detained Hichilema for four months on treason charges. Upon his release, the judge warned: ‘[t]his is not an acquittal as you can be arrested any time over the same offence’ (Mfula 2017). In 2018 and 2019, the government tried to deregister two opposition parties, the Democratic Party and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), both led by former cabinet ministers in the PF government (Amnesty International 2021b). In 2018 MMD president Nervous Mumba was sentenced to three months’ imprisonment for providing false information to state investigators (*Lusaka Times* 2018). In 2019, the leader of Patriots for Economic Progress, Sean Tembo, was arrested and charged with defamation of the president for questioning the purchase of a US\$400 million presidential jet (*Lusaka Times* 2019). In October 2020, Chishimba Kambwili, the NDC leader, a former PF strongman and strong critic of the government, was sentenced to one year of imprisonment for forging his company’s tax return (*Lusaka Times* 2020a). He was only pardoned after resigning from his party, rejoining the PF and campaigning for Lungu. The clampdown

on the media also intensified with the closure of the independent broadcaster Prime TV (Sishuwa 2020). Yet the opposition political parties were continuously denied coverage by the state-run broadcaster.

The law regarding defamation of the president was also often deployed to undermine freedom of expression and to arrest and detain critical voices. In September 2019, 68-year-old Justin Chikonde was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for insulting Lungu (Kademauga 2019). Peaceful protests were violently suppressed by the police. In 2018, for example, Vesper Shimuzhila, a university student, died after the police threw a tear gas canister into her room while dispersing a student protest. In December 2020, police shot and killed two unarmed people at a gathering of opposition supporters who turned up at police headquarters in Lusaka to support Hichilema, who had been summoned for questioning on flimsy charges (Amnesty International 2021a).

Under Lungu, Zambia experienced what Chabal and Daloz describe as the 'institutionalisation of disorder': Lungu repeatedly undermined the constitution, allowing ministers to continue in office after the dissolution of parliament with access to government resources during campaigns, refusing to hand over power to the speaker of parliament when the UPND challenged his election, and pressuring the courts to throw out the UPND's petition against his victory in 2016 without hearing its case and to allow him to make an unconstitutional third-term bid in 2021 (Africa News 2016; *Lusaka Times* 2017, 2021a). PF cadres gained more power and were brutal in declaring certain areas – such as the Copperbelt, Lusaka and the North-Eastern provinces – no-go-areas for the opposition, and forcing markets and bus stations to exclude opposition activists.

Lead-up to the 2021 elections

These tendencies intensified prior to the 2021 elections as the PF tried to make the playing field even more unlevel: they had the support of state institutions such as the judiciary (*Lusaka Times* 2021a), civil society organisations and some churches, and the state-controlled media which they used to spread negative propaganda against the main opposition, the UPND and Hichilema, persistently accusing the latter of being a Satanist and profiting from the privatisation of the mines (Zambia Daily Times 2020).³ The PF had the support of almost all popular musicians, whom they paid to compose campaign songs and to perform at PF rallies. The Zambian police worked tirelessly to prevent the opposition from campaigning. For example, in August 2021 the police detained Hichilema at the airport in Chipata for two hours, allowing him to enter the town only at night (*Lusaka Times* 2021c). The PF was supported by all major unions in the country. The Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) banned rallies in the name of Covid-19 prevention but allowed Lungu to campaign on the pretext of inspecting government projects (*Lusaka Times* 2021d). Moreover, the PF continued to label the UPND a tribal party. Lungu's running mate Nkandu Luo and Kambwili discouraged the people of the Northern Province from voting for a Tonga because she claimed that in the Southern province Tongas would never vote for a Bemba (Sakala 2020).

While the PF concentrated on securing its hold on power, Zambia's external debt rose to over US\$14 billion from US\$1.9 billion in just 10 years of PF rule (Ofstad and Tjønneland 2019; GRZ 2021b). In November 2020, Zambia defaulted on a sovereign debt payment when it missed a US\$42.5 million Eurobond interest payment (Africa News

2020), while loan repayments in 2021 accounted for about 40% of the national budget (GRZ 2021a). The rise in debt coincided with a sudden unexplained accumulation of wealth by PF leaders. In 2015 Lungu declared just over 2 million Zambian kwacha (ZK) worth of assets during the presidential nominations compared to almost ZK24 million in 2016, when his total earnings for this period amounted to less than one million (*Lusaka Times* 2016).

While reiterating its claims of physically transforming the national infrastructure, the PF also implemented a more targeted form of clientelist distribution, delivering 'benefits' to both individuals and communities that – they were quite explicit – were expected to return the favour in the form of votes. In September 2020 foreign affairs minister Joe Malanji handed over a bus worth US\$270,000 to youths in his constituency; in March 2021 PF members donated over ZK300,000 cash in Chililabombwe (*Lusaka Times* 2020b; Malunga 2021). In April, Vice President Inonge Wina was captured on video distributing cash to supporters in the North-Western province (Zambia Watchdog 2021). Between May and August, the PF used expensive branded vehicles, distributed cash, t-shirts, *chitenges* and food, placed adverts in most media houses and spent over ZK13.5 million on campaign songs (Shalubala 2022). Several of the videos that went viral in the run-up to the elections were utterly explicit in their imagery, featuring PF cadres waving bundles of cash (Zambian Protector 2021).⁴ Lungu also allowed his running mate Nkandu Luo to use government resources to which she was not entitled, such as helicopters and motor vehicles.

Financial crimes also increased. For example, suspected financial crimes valued at ZK6.1 billion in 2018, ZK332 million in 2019 and ZK2.2 billion in 2020 were recorded by the government's Financial Intelligence Centre in its typology report on tax evasion and corruption (FIC 2020). There were scandals involving the purchase of ambulances and fire tenders at inflated prices, and in 2021, the supply by a PF-allied contractor of fake condoms and medicines (Mawarire and Miti 2018; Bwalya 2021). Economic conditions continued to deteriorate. In 2020 Zambia recorded the first economic recession (of 1.2%) since 1998 and double-digit inflation averaging 15.7% throughout 2020, reaching a high of 22.2% in February 2020 (ADB 2021). The annual cost of living for a family of five in Lusaka rose from ZK2900 when the PF came into power in 2011 to over ZK8000 in 2021, while the average wage remained at just above KW4000.⁵ In 2021, nearly 60% of the Zambian population lived below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per day (compared to 41% across sub-Saharan Africa) (African Arguments 2021). While the PF did build hospitals, clinics and schools, most hospitals lacked the most basic medicines, equipment, infrastructure and blankets, and schools lacked desks, books and teachers (*Zambia Daily Mail* 2015; Mwamba 2022) Clearly, Lungu used all the tactics that sustain the ruling parties in Africa in power as he went into the 2021 elections bubbling with confidence that 'I will win this election by over 500,000 votes' and that he would 'hand over power to myself' (*Zambian Observer* 2021a, 2021b). In assuming that a combination of 'delivery' of infrastructure, clientelist bribes and tilting of the electoral playing field would deliver victory, however, Lungu underestimated the power of *donchi-kubeba*.

The *donchi-kubeba* elections

In 2011 the PF declared the clientelist gifts given by the MMD to be resources plundered from the public and encouraged its supporters to attend MMD rallies and collect these

goods, ‘but don’t tell them – *donchi-kubeba* – that you would vote for the PF’ (Fraser 2017; Bwalya and Maharaj 2018). *Donchi-kubeba* was then popularised countrywide through a song composed by Dandy Krazy, a local artist. Existing scholarship understands *donchi-kubeba* as simply a catchphrase whose impact on election results is unclear (Bwalya and Maharaj 2018); a ‘primarily theatrical’ performance (Fraser 2017); a defensive practice against the violent PF supporters (Goldring and Wahman 2016; Beardsworth 2020); or the ‘icing on the cake’ that gave life to the PF’s campaign promises (Sakala 2013).

I argue, however, that these studies underestimate both the political significance of the term and the various meanings it carries in the famous ‘Donchi-Kubeba’ song by Dandy Krazy and as used by the PF. *Donchi-kubeba* is an instruction to ‘accept the gifts but not to tell your real intentions’ and ‘not to cry’ (*wilalila ash*). *Donchi-kubeba* reminds listeners of growing unemployment, low wages, deteriorating infrastructure, environmental degradation, lack of medical staff and medicines in hospitals and teachers in schools, and corruption. *Donchi-kubeba* highlights the MMD’s clientelism and inequalities, suggesting that chiefs are given worthwhile assets such as vehicles and cash, while poor women only receive a *chitenge*; laments that the government’s failure to provide fertiliser to farmers exacerbated poverty countrywide; and bemoans the status of urban roads, describing them as swimming pools, graveyards, or gardens. And the song encouraged people ‘to watch silently’, but remember their suffering on voting day. By 2021, I would suggest that four behaviours that might be described as a political morality or political culture of *donchi-kubeba* had appeared on the Zambian political scene that made for a novel form of party–voter linkage. Their ubiquity and effect on the electoral outcome marked 2021 as the *donchi-kubeba* election, characterised by voters making claims and then voting otherwise.

Claim-making (*ukulyamo*)

‘Without money to dish out, I don’t go out to campaign because everyone wants money’, complained Matambo, a PF candidate during the campaigns in June 2021. Matambo was right, as I observed in almost all constituencies that whenever candidates visited during the campaigns, ‘youths and even children often shouted ‘*tulyemo*’ (give us something). These claims underscore the extent of poverty in Zambia and how politicians are perceived as distributors of bribes to win electoral support. During campaign meetings, attendees expected to be fed and provided with drinks and cash. Otherwise, the meetings collapsed.

This is what Michael, one of the candidates, learnt at his expense. Over 50 people gathered on 20 July at his house. One hour into the meeting, one member asked when the meals and drinks would be provided. Michael replied, ‘Bear with me, we do not have any drinks and food.’ Another member asked ‘OK, how much cash are you giving us for attending the meeting?’ Michael responded ‘Sorry, there is no cash today.’ Within 10 minutes almost everybody left. The provision of goods to voters with the expectation of reciprocation in the voting booth is perhaps the iconic illustration of clientelist systems in African politics. Nonetheless, the use of public policy and state regulation to affect the distribution of goods among target constituencies also features in descriptions of clientelist and patrimonial systems, all the way back to Robert Bates’ (1981) work on urban bias. The political morality of *donchi-kubeba* limited the efficacy of this kind of collective bribery during the Zambian elections of 2021.

Elections also provide opportunities for the revitalisation of unions. In April 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on global trade, Glencore, the owner of Mopani Copper Mines, sought to put its two mines in Kitwe and Mufulira onto a 'care and maintenance' basis – literally, closing the mines. By the time Glencore made this announcement, it had already terminated some contracts, leading to a loss of 5000 contract jobs and threatening the remaining 11,000 workers (5000 direct and 6000 contractors) (author's research notes). On 9 and again on 17 April I joined hundreds of protesters in Kitwe, led by their union leaders, challenging Mopani's decision. During the second protest, in a public address, Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ) president Joseph Chewe challenged President Lungu 'to nationalise Mopani, and force Glencore to pay workers retrenchment packages', arguing that 'Glencore breached the privatisation agreements, [and] disrespected the government and people of Zambia' (Chewe 2021). National Union of Miners and Allied Workers (NUMAW) president James Chansa said, 'If you want our vote again, speak on our behalf. Our demand is that you tell Glencore to rescind its decision or go back where it came from' (Chansa 2021). These demands were built on earlier calls by the unions for the renationalisation of Konkola Copper Mines (KCM) in 2013 when KCM announced its intentions to retrench over 1500 mineworkers, which resulted in the liquidation of the company in 2018 (Ng'ambi 2022). Recognising the widespread indebtedness of its members, the public service union which had by 2017 already been demanding the cancellation of its members' expensive loans with commercial lenders restated these demands during the 2021 election campaign (*Lusaka Times* 2021b).

In response, the PF renationalised Mopani, notwithstanding the abnormally huge cost of over US\$1.5 billion-plus-interest payment to Glencore (Kaunda 2002). Miners then demanded the payment of retrenchment packages, an end to subcontracting, house plots, debt relief and cheap mealie-meal (Chewe 2021). In turn, Lungu ordered Mopani Copper Mines (MCM) to pay mineworkers retrenchment packages and to keep them in their jobs (Nsofu 2021). This was also the case earlier for KCM employees following the liquidation of the company. When KCM delayed the payment of retrenchment packages, on 3 March 2020 workers protested, forcing KCM to pay (*Industrial All* 2020).

That these responses were meant to attract votes is confirmed in the union leaders' responses. On 7 August at Parklands Secondary School in Kitwe, when Lungu returned to Kitwe, Chewe said, 'Mr President, we have been paid our benefits as you promised ... we will give you our vote.' He also told miners that 'Lungu is a good person; let us give him the vote' (Chewe 2021). Chansa added, 'Mr President, you answered all our questions, and because of that we don't see it a problem to give you a vote.' Moreover, just before the elections, the government signed an agreement with the unions for the government to clear civil servants' bank loans and replace them with much cheaper government loans. I argue that the renationalisation of KCM and MCM, two major mining corporations on the Copperbelt, and the debt swap for civil servants are largely explicable in terms of a short-term electoral calculation, and the ruling party's understanding of demands coming from workers. On the face of it, we can characterise the above-mentioned political behaviour as 'politics of the belly', which means, as noted above, that a man who is able to amass and

redistribute wealth becomes a man of honour (Bayart and Ellis 2000). On closer inspection, however, this was not the case.

Voting otherwise

Despite the promise of the vote, Lungu lost the elections. Tables 2 and 3 show a substantial and decisive swing in the share of votes cast for PF candidate Lungu from 50.35% to 38.71%, to Hichilema whose votes increased from 47.63% to 59.02%. In the Copperbelt in 2016, Hichilema got only 189,562 votes against Lungu's 345,275 votes in the province. In 2021, Hichilema got 420,443 votes (more than double the number he received in 2016) compared to Lungu, who received 300,413 votes. A similar swing in votes is observable in the three mining constituencies (Table 4). Also, in all three constituencies covered by this research, the PF parliamentary aspirants lost (Table 5).

These results show that people can play along with leaders and accept their gifts but still make independent decisions on Election Day. *Donchi-kubeba* also enabled the revitalisation of the unions which have been weakened by economic liberalisation, retrenchment and labour subcontracting and legal changes deliberately aimed at weakening them (Pitcher 2007; Mulenga 2017). Uzar (2017) noted that the election of the PF in 2011 briefly reawakened the political strength of the mineworkers' unions, but within five months, the PF quickly demobilised and disciplined them again. She was less optimistic about the union's ability to regain its strength, believing that the PF under Lungu was keen on working with the unions. McNamara (2021) shows that the union reoriented towards entrepreneurship and that the growth of membership comes from the 'neoliberalisation' of the unions, and their turn to 'servicing' rather than representing members. This article shows how unions recovered their bargaining power around the 2021 elections, under Lungu's regime, as the party was still desperate for Copperbelt voters. Union militancy continued even after the elections as public service unions resisted the new government's mandatory imposition of vaccination (Mwamba 2022).

As noted by Uzar, however, after the elections mine unions once again disciplined themselves, this time by abandoning their support for the liquidation of KCM after the new government dropped the liquidation case from the courts and adopted a softer stance towards Vedanta, the same company the union had strongly accused of mismanaging KCM (MoneyFM 2020; *The Independent Observer* 2021). Also, public service workers conceded to the new government's decision to withdraw the debt swap for civil servants (*Times of Zambia* 2022). But still, I think that elections can be important for union revitalisation. The rest of this section shows the performance of *donchi-kubeba*.

Table 2. Zambia presidential election results, 2016 and 2021: national.

National	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
Lungu (PF)	1,860,877	50.35	1,870,780	38.71
Hichilema (UPND)	1,760,347	47.63	2,852,348	59.02
Others	74,486	2.02	109,635	2.27
Total valid votes cast	3,695,710	100	4,832,763	100

PF – Patriotic Front; UPND – United Party for National Development.

Source: Electoral Commission of Zambia; tabulations of election results provided by Dr Roy Moobola.

Table 3. Zambia presidential election results, 2016 and 2021: Copperbelt Province.

Copperbelt Province	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
Lungu (PF)	345,275	63.59	300,413	40.29
Hichilema (UPND)	189,562	34.91	420,443	56.39
Others	8152	1.50	24,698	3.31
Total valid votes cast	542,989	100	745,554	100

PF – Patriotic Front; UPND – United Party for National Development.

Showing up and playing along

On 1 August 2021, I attended a PF meeting in Chililabombwe alongside 50 other people, all dressed in PF regalia. When called upon to repeat the words ‘it is Lungu for president’, the positive response was unanimous. There was equally vocal support for expressions of tribal politics advanced by the organisers: ‘this fight is between the Tongas [a stronghold for Hichilema] and us, if we give them the vote, they will just appoint themselves. During party time everyone sang and danced to the PF songs. However, after the meeting Bwalya, who had been there, screamed: ‘Nonsense! I have always voted for Lungu, my fellow Easterner, but when he became president he enjoyed the money with his family and forgot about us.’ At a local bar, Jacob told the barman to ‘stop that PF song.’ Kapembwa said, ‘That song annoys me.’ When I pointed out that they had just been dancing to the same song at the meeting, Peter responded ‘*ni-donchi-kubeba*’. Stanley added, ‘[t]he PF will have a rude shock when results come out.’ Lastly, Samson said, ‘if we fight them openly, we will not eat their money.’

Similarly, on 7 August 2021, President Lungu addressed miners at the Mopani South Orebody mine in Kitwe. However, most of the people in the meeting were not miners, but *jerabos* (the informal small-scale miners at the dumpsites), mine suppliers, call-boys, unemployed youth, marketers, and party supporters bussed in from other constituencies and towns, mine unions branch executives, who were paid an allowance, and provided vehicles to mobilise miners, and their retrenched colleagues. Given the importance of miners as a voting bloc, it was necessary for unions and party officials to show Lungu that he had the miners’ support. Attendees dressed in ways designed to convey this message. Almost everyone wore some form of mine-related personal protective equipment –

Table 4. Zambia presidential election results, 2016 and 2021: selected mining constituencies.

Kitwe-Nkana	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
Lungu (PF)		67	15,321	40
Hichilema (UPND)		32	22,912	59
Others		1	46	1
Total valid votes cast		100	38,729	100
Chililabombwe	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
Lungu (PF)		62	14,705	37
Hichilema (UPND)		37	24,913	62
Others		1	463	1
Total valid votes cast		100	40,081	100
Mufulira-Kankoyo	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
Lungu (PF)	8755	66	6721	45
Hichilema (UPND)	4316	33	8104	54
Others	86	1	175	1
Total valid votes cast	13,157	100	15,000	100

PF – Patriotic Front; UPND – United Party for National Development.

Table 5. Parliamentary results.

Kitwe-Nkana	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
PF	18,993	71	8927	23
UPND	6993	26	8638	22
Others	766	3	903	2
Independent	0	0	20,017	52
Total valid votes cast	26,752	100	38,485	100
Chililabombwe	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
PF	16,310	60	10,533	32
UPND	10,151	37	22,112	67
Others	941	3	308	1
Total valid votes cast	27,402	100	32,953	100
Mufulira-Kankoyo	2016 (votes)	2016 (%)	2021 (votes)	2021 (%)
PF	7932	60	6767	41
UPND	5341	40	7911	53
Others	0	0	211	6
Total valid votes cast	13,273	100	14,889	100

PF – Patriotic Front; UPND – United Party for National Development.

mining helmets having been particularly associated with the PF since 2006. However, this support disappeared behind the curtains. As Chishimba, a jerabo, said, ‘I just came to receive the money, I am not voting for Lungu.’ Siame, an informal trader said: ‘I came to collect the money they stole from us.’ According to Jackson, a former miner who was paid ZK1500 for attending the SOB meeting, ‘I can never vote for Lungu.’ Geoffrey, an underground mineworker who was not even a registered voter said: ‘Lungu is going nowhere after this election, whether he likes it or not.’ But there were also discreet supporters.

Discreet supporters

Discreet supporters included people who showed allegiance to the PF publicly but privately went further than those simply planning to vote for the opposition – they provided active but discreet support for opposition campaign activities. This behaviour extended even to elements of the state machinery such as police officers. In June 2021, in Mufulira more than 20 police officers disrupted a UPND meeting for breaching the ECZ ban on campaigns. However, the officer-in-charge expressed regret: ‘[w]e don’t like doing this, but if we don’t do it, we risk being fired. We do this to create the impression that we are in support of the president.’ He said, ‘[o]ften, I give a blind ear when the opposition are holding meetings.’ Several police officers said they were not voting for the PF.

Discreet supporters also included senior PF officials. One minister told me, ‘I know we are losing these elections but I cannot defect to the opposition right now. I am just giving them [the UPND] financial support and information.’

At the household level, this form of support took an interesting turn. Maria was married to a PF candidate. However, she did not disclose to her husband her support for the UPND. ‘During voting’, Maria said, ‘I did not vote for my husband because I knew he was losing.’ Not only that, she celebrated her husband’s loss, alleging that ‘[h]e was not paying his children’s school fees, yet he spent a lot of money on campaigns.’

Discreet supporters also facilitated politicians’ access to vital information from their competitors. Kapembwa, who lost his parliamentary seat under the PF, complained that the

opposition candidate knew every move he made: '[m]y opponent knew that at such a time I will be addressing a meeting and went there immediately afterwards to discredit me. He would arrive there with the full details of what I had said and rubbished everything.'

Situational identity switching

The violent activities of political cadres during Zambian political campaigns, and their efforts to make strategic political spaces no-go areas for the opposition, have been discussed in terms of the ability to police the wearing of certain colours and using particular vernacular languages in those spaces (for example markets and transport systems). This creates a clear incentive for individual opposition supporters to switch the identities they publicly present according to the situation. In September 2021 Ackim, a known UPND supporter, commonly wore the full PF regalia – a T-shirt, and overalls in green with Lungu's portrait. When I asked what he was doing in PF clothes he said '*donchikubeba*'. Ackim's behaviour, like that of many voters, was not just a reaction to the immediate context of the election campaign but was an extension of a way of navigating under the hyper-politicisation of everyday life under the PF.

This behaviour became more communal and an aspect of mobilisation during the 2021 elections. When police stopped Hichilema's supporters from accompanying him from Ndola to Kitwe, Patrick, a UPND organiser, said 'we just got all our members the PF regalia and put them in buses and told them to sing PF songs before the police allowed them entry to Kitwe, and then replaced the PF regalia with the UPND upon reaching Kitwe. Chikoti, a Chililabombwe resident, for instance, said 'I have several *chitenges* and t-shirts from different political parties. I join any meeting organised by the party to eat and receive their gifts.' Bwembya, a teacher unemployed since her graduation in 2014, said 'I just went to the district education officer to hand him my application in PF *chitenge* and T-shirt, and said, I am a member of the party. Within a month, I was offered a job.' However, during voting, I voted for Hichilema.' Similarly, when the Kitwe City Council advertised house plots for sale, Ndolo, a retired miner, tried without success to obtain one. Then he went through the PF district secretary who spoke to the city officials on his behalf: 'I was just told to see one council official and the following day I got the plot.' Moreover, situational identity switching provided protection from the police. For example, 'at the roadblocks', Mwanza, a bus driver, told me, 'I just told the police, I am going to a PF rally, and they let me go even when the car is not roadworthy.' Thus many taxi drivers with defective vehicles displayed the PF *chitenges* on their vehicles to escape police arrests. As recent surveys found, there was less visible support for the UPND than was evident in the actual election results and showed that half of all survey respondents refused to declare which party they would vote for in the 2021 election (Seekings and Siachiwena 2021). According to Seekings, this could be 'because respondents were nervous about voicing support for the opposition in an increasingly repressive climate' (Seekings 2020, 14).

From 2016 on, PF cadres became increasingly violent towards against the UPND or anybody who wore the UPND red regalia, only tolerating the PF's green. In response, the UPND developed the concept of 'the watermelon formula', encouraging its members to pretend to be green outside - but 'inside their hearts to remain red', thus helping UPND supporters to avoid attacks from the PF cadres. This research shows, therefore, that the watermelon formula is more than a defensive practice against the

violent PF cadres, as it has also been a means of maximising benefits and personal advancement at the hands of politicians.

Conclusion

Research in Africa often emphasises the importance of clientelist approaches in determining electoral outcomes often in favour of the incumbent political party, or in prolonging its stay in power including by using force. However, the top-down approach of these studies often exaggerates the political power of the ruling elite at the expense of voters' agency. Building upon recent studies focusing on the 2011 and 2021 elections in Zambia, this article shows that when the electorates can see failure in the ruling party, clientelist gifts offered by those in power have no impact on voters' decisions at the ballot box. This is because the knowledge of their lived reality empowers voters to accept the gifts in the belief that they are plundered public resources, and to vote otherwise on election day. The ruling elites can laugh at the supposed naivety of the voters when receiving the gifts, and take them for granted. However, in the end it is the voters, and not the ruling party, who laugh the loudest.

The article builds upon Scott's (1985) concept of the 'weapons of the weak', rooted in the avoidance of open conflict. Yet the article shows that while 'weapons of the weak' in Scott's conceptualisation sustain the status quo in terms of power dynamics, *donchi-kubeba* enables subordinate groups to make claims, hold leaders accountable and alter the power balance. As we have seen, the idea behind situational identity switching – showing up, playing along and making claims – is to suppress open resistance for fear of the consequences. But the fulfilment of their claims does not deny them the opportunity for open resistance on election day to teach the powerful a lesson and to celebrate their downfall.

The article also contributes to debates about trade union weakening in the context of trade liberalisation, privatisation, global restructuring and democracy, moving beyond the structural weaknesses to focus on the ability of workers and trade unions to use the *donchi-kubeba* political system to successfully press their demands on the state. Moreover, this article extends the existing understanding of the term '*donchi-kubeba*' as merely a political slogan whose consequences for election results are unclear, to consider the term as a wider political morality/culture that extends to those in power: police, ministers and candidates within their homes. In so doing, the article enriches the existing neo-patrimonial literature, which presents Africans essentially as scared of authority within the state, within the village and within the home. *Donchi-kubeba* tells a very different story as it emphasises how voters can manipulate and hold to account the most powerful actors in society. The article argues that *donchi-kubeba* is part of a wider political morality shaping voters' behaviour during campaigns (showing up and playing along) and their political identities (situational identity switching), whereby voters feel empowered to make claims one way but to vote otherwise.

Notes

1. Interviewees' names have been changed throughout this article.
2. Sata served in the governments of Zambia's first president, Kenneth Kaunda, and its second president, Frederick Chiluba.

3. Zambian newspapers have been operating a propagandistic style for some years. As such, they should be read sceptically.
4. One of the videos shows a PF cadre warning opposition candidates from standing against PF minister Dora Siliya while displaying stacks of cash he allegedly got from her.
5. JCTR is a non-governmental organisation run by the Catholic Church that measures the cost of living in Zambia reports for 2011 and 2021.

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Note on contributor

James Musonda's recent publications focus on debt, gender, family, elections, safety and unions. He recently organised a conference advocating for maximising benefits for Zambians. He has participated in several miners' protests organised against big mining companies' unfair labour practices. His PhD thesis draws upon 18 months' intensive fieldwork in the Zambian underground mines where he worked as a helper and in two mining communities where he lived among his informants.

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