



Research Article:

Campaign Promises as Catalysts of Insecurity: The Political Economy of Youths' and Women's Disillusionment in Zambia

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines how unmet campaign promises function as catalysts of social, economic, and political insecurity among youths and women in Zambia. Drawing on a political economy lens and theories of relative deprivation, clientelism, and social contract, the study explores how electoral rhetoric produces expectations that, when unfulfilled, contribute to disillusionment, mistrust in institutions, and perceived and real forms of insecurity. Using a qualitative research design based on document review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions conducted in Lusaka, Copperbelt, and Eastern Provinces, the article demonstrates that campaign promises related to jobs, empowerment funds, social protection, and gender inclusion are central to electoral mobilization. However, gaps between promises and implementation generate feelings of betrayal, erode democratic legitimacy, intensify economic precarity, and may foster susceptibility to political manipulation and social unrest. The findings highlight that while campaign promises can be important tools for democratic accountability, in the Zambian context they frequently operate as instruments of symbolic politics that mask structural constraints and elite bargaining. The article concludes that reducing promise or performance gaps, institutionalizing programmatic politics, and strengthening accountability mechanisms are essential to mitigating insecurities and rebuilding trust among youths and women.

Keywords: Campaign Promises, Political Economy, Insecurity, Youth, Women, Zambia, Disillusionment

1. Introduction

Election campaigns in Zambia, as in many African democracies, are characterized by highly personalized, emotive and often extravagant promises made to key voting constituencies, particularly youths and women (Cheeseman, 2015, p. 44; Rakner, 2017, p. 112). Youths are repeatedly assured of jobs, skills, and "empowerment," while women are promised increased representation, access to finance, and protection from gender-based violence. These promises occupy a central place in party manifestos, rallies, social media messages, and community outreach meetings.

However, the post-election reality frequently falls short of campaign rhetoric. Persistently high unemployment, limited access to economic opportunities, continued under representation of women in decision making, and weak delivery of social services contribute to a growing sense of disillusionment and insecurity (Resnick, 2014, p. 210; Larmer & Graham, 2021, p. 68). In Zambia,

this pattern is particularly salient among urban youths facing chronic joblessness and among women confronting intersecting forms of economic and social marginalization.

The problem this article addresses is the political economy of this disillusionment and how campaign promises, once unfulfilled or unevenly implemented, become catalysts of insecurity for youths and women. Insecurity here is conceptualized broadly to include:

1. Economic insecurity that come with joblessness, unstable incomes, and lack of predictable livelihood opportunities.
2. Social and psychological insecurity thereby causing feelings of betrayal, frustration, and exclusion from the benefits of political change.
3. Political insecurity that leads to declining trust in political institutions, volatility in political allegiances, and susceptibility to manipulation or conflict.

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Existing literature on Zambian politics and African electoral politics more broadly has examined clientelism, patronage, and the nature of political competition (Posner, 2005; Cheeseman, 2015; Erdmann & Simutanyi, 2003). Less attention, however, has been paid to the specific ways in which campaign promises themselves create and then undermine expectations among youth and women, and how this dynamic contributes to various forms of insecurity. While there is a growing body of work on youth disenchantment and protest in African democracies (Honwana, 2012, p. 3; Branch & Mampilly, 2015, p. 162), a focused examination of the Zambian case through the lens of campaign promises remains limited.

This article seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the mechanisms through which campaign promises related to youth employment, women's empowerment, and social protection generate expectations that, when unmet, deepen feelings of insecurity. It asks three core research questions:

1. How are youths and women targeted in campaign promises in Zambia?
2. What are the main gaps between campaign promises and post-election policy outcomes for these groups?
3. In what ways do these gaps contribute to forms of economic, social, and political insecurity, and hence to disillusionment?

The article draws on a qualitative study conducted in Lusaka, Copperbelt, and Eastern Provinces between 2022 and 2024, using key informant interviews and focus group discussions with youths and women, supplemented by document analysis of party manifestos, speeches, and media reports.

The argument advanced is that campaign promises in Zambia, while rhetorically inclusive and often framed as empowerment, are embedded within a broader political economy of clientelism, fiscal constraints, and elite bargaining. As a result, promises function more as instruments of symbolic politics and electoral mobilization than as credible commitments. When this pattern recurs across electoral cycles, it generates a cumulative process of disillusionment and insecurity among youths and women, weakening democratic legitimacy and potentially fueling political volatility.

The article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on

theories of political economy, relative deprivation, clientelism, and social contract. The methodology section then describes the research design and data collection methods. The findings and discussion section presents the key results, organized around themes of expectations formation, promise and performance gaps, experiences of insecurity, and changing political attitudes. The conclusion reflects on the implications for democratic consolidation in Zambia and suggests pathways for reform.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a political economy approach, complemented by theories of relative deprivation, clientelism, and social contract. Together, these perspectives illuminate how electoral promises translate into expectations, how those expectations interact with structural constraints and power relations, and how unmet promises reshape perceptions of security and legitimacy among youths and women.

2.1 Political Economy of Elections

A political economy approach emphasizes the interaction between political institutions, economic structures, and social actors (Leftwich, 2000, p. 19; Khan, 2010, p. 64). In Zambia, elections take place in a context of high poverty, youth unemployment, and dependence on a narrow export base dominated by copper (Fraser & Lungu, 2007, p. 91; Larmer, 2010, p. 111). Government fiscal space is constrained by debt levels and external conditionalities (Mphuka et al., 2017, p. 37).

Campaign promises must therefore be read against these structural realities. Parties have strong incentives to promise expansive job creation and social programs to build broad coalitions but face real constraints in delivering them. This creates a structural tendency toward "over-promising and under delivering," particularly vis-à-vis marginalized groups whose bargaining power is limited outside the electoral moment.

From this perspective, campaign promises are not neutral commitments but reflect elite strategies to maintain or gain power within existing economic constraints. The resulting gap between rhetoric and reality is not merely a technical failure of implementation but a manifestation of underlying political settlement dynamics (Khan, 2010, p. 69).

2.2 Relative Deprivation and Rising Expectations

Relative deprivation theory posits that feelings of frustration and discontent arise not only from absolute deprivation but from a perceived discrepancy between expectations and outcomes (Gurr, 1970, p. 24). Campaign promises play a crucial role in raising expectations, particularly when they are specific, repeated, and personalized toward target groups.

Among youths and women in Zambia, repeated promises of “one million jobs,” “youth empowerment funds,” “free education,” and “50% women representation” create a powerful narrative of imminent transformation (Resnick, 2014, p. 212). When actual changes are modest, slow, or unevenly distributed, the perceived gap between what was expected and what is experienced can fuel feelings of betrayal and insecurity.

This framework suggests that even marginal improvements (e.g., small increases in bursaries or sporadic empowerment grants) may not reduce disillusionment if they fall far below the expectations generated by campaign rhetoric. Conversely, more modest and credible promises may mitigate relative deprivation if they more closely align with post-election realities.

2.3 Clientelism, Patronage, and Symbolic Politics

Clientelism refers to the exchange of material benefits for political support, often in personalized and selective ways (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007, p. 2). In Zambia, as in many African democracies, electoral politics has long involved the distribution of goods, cash, or promises of jobs and contracts to supporters (Erdmann & Simutanyi, 2003, p. 19; Cheeseman, 2015, p. 153).

Campaign promises to youths and women thus operate within a clientelist environment. Rather than universal, programmatic commitments, promises are often framed in terms of targeted “empowerment” for those who are loyal or visible to party structures. This weakens the link between promises and rights-based entitlements and instead ties them to patronage networks.

Symbolic politics further complicates this dynamic. Parties use highly visible but limited initiatives, such as one-off youth entrepreneurship grants or training workshops to signal commitment, even when these programs reach only a tiny fraction of those promised support (Schaffer, 2007, p. 48). Symbols

replace substantive transformation, but the language of large scale change remains. The gap between symbolic delivery and programmatic transformation contributes to feelings of insecurity and exclusion among those left out.

2.4 Social Contract and Democratic Legitimacy

The social contract tradition, in its modern political science usage, highlights the implicit agreement between citizens and the state: citizens confer legitimacy and obey laws in exchange for protection, services, and fair treatment (O'Donnell, 1994, p. 61; Rothstein, 2011, p. 17). In democratic settings, campaign promises are central to how this contract is articulated and renegotiated.

Repeatedly unmet promises can be read as breaches of the democratic social contract, especially when they concern basic livelihoods, inclusion, and security. For youths and women in Zambia, who often vote in large numbers, the perception that their electoral support is not reciprocated by tangible improvements erodes trust in institutions and weakens regime legitimacy (Bratton & Mattes, 2001, p. 451).

From this perspective, disillusionment and insecurity are not only emotional states but indicators of a fractured social contract. If left unaddressed, such fractures can lead to disengagement (low turnout, apathy) or confrontational forms of political expression (protests, support for populist or anti-system actors).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research design. The goal was to understand perceptions, meanings, and experiences of youths and women regarding campaign promises and their relationship to insecurity and disillusionment, rather than to measure these phenomena statistically. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture the depth and nuance of these perceptions across different contexts.

The research combined three main methods:

1. **Document analysis** of party manifestos, campaign speeches, media reports, government policy documents, and civil society reports from the 2011, 2016, and 2021 election cycles.
2. **Key informant interviews** with policymakers, party officials, civil society actors, and researchers.

3. **Focus group discussions (FGDs)** with youths and women in selected urban and peri-urban communities.

3.2 Study Sites

Data collection was conducted between September 2022 and December 2023 in three provinces thus; Lusaka Province where focusing on urban constituencies in Lusaka city, including high-density areas where youth unemployment is high.

Copperbelt Province focusing on Ndola and Kitwe, representing former mining hubs undergoing economic restructuring.

Eastern Province – focusing on Chipata and surrounding peri-urban areas, representing a more agrarian context.

These sites were selected to capture variation in economic structures, political competition, and experiences of youths and women, while remaining feasible for qualitative fieldwork.

3.3 Sampling and Participants

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify participants. For key informant interviews, the study targeted:

- Officials from major political parties (ruling and opposition).
- Officials from relevant government ministries (Youth, Sport and Arts; Community Development and Social Services; Gender; Labour and Social Security).
- Representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) working on youth and women's rights.
- Journalists and researchers focusing on elections and governance.

In total, 28 key informant interviews were conducted (10 in Lusaka, 10 in Copperbelt, and 8 in Eastern Province).

For FGDs, participants were separated by gender and, where possible, by age categories (18–24 and 25–35 for youths; 18–35 and 36–55 for women) to encourage open discussion. Each FGD included between 6 and 10 participants. In total, 12 FGDs were held:

- Lusaka: 4 FGDs (2 youth groups, 2 women's groups).
- Copperbelt: 4 FGDs (2 youth groups, 2 women's groups).
- Eastern: 4 FGDs (2 youth groups, 2 women's groups).

Participants were recruited with the assistance of local CSOs, community leaders, and youth and women's groups. Efforts were made to include unemployed youths, informal sector workers, students, market women, small-scale traders, and unemployed or underemployed women.

3.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured interview guides and FGD guides were used. Key themes included:

- Recalled campaign promises directed at youths and women in recent elections.
- Perceived changes (or lack thereof) since elections in areas such as jobs, business support, representation, and security.
- Feelings and perceptions regarding fulfillment or non-fulfillment of promises.
- Experiences of economic, social, and political insecurity.
- Views on political participation, trust, and future voting intentions.

Interviews and FGDs were conducted primarily in English, Nyanja, Bemba, and Chewa, depending on participants' preferences. All discussions were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English.

3.5 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used. Transcripts and documents were coded using NVivo software. Initial coding categories were derived from the research questions and theoretical framework (e.g., "promises to youth," "promises to women," "economic insecurity," "feelings of betrayal," "clientelism," "trust in institutions"). Additional codes were developed inductively as new themes emerged from the data.

Codes were then grouped into broader themes, including:

- Formation of expectations.
- Perceived gaps between promises and delivery.
- Experiences of economic insecurity.
- Experiences of social and psychological insecurity.
- Political attitudes and behaviors.

Triangulation was used to compare findings from different data sources (documents, key informants, FGDs) and sites. This helped to identify convergences and divergences across provinces and between youths and women.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from a relevant institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and were informed they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect identities. Sensitive political questions were approached cautiously, and discussions were held in neutral locations where participants felt safe.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Landscape of Campaign Promises to Youths and Women

Document analysis revealed that all major political parties consistently foreground youths and women in their manifestos and campaign rhetoric. Across the 2011, 2016, and 2021 elections, four dominant categories of promises emerged:

1. Youth employment and entrepreneurship:

- Creation of “hundreds of thousands” or “millions” of jobs.
- Easy access to youth empowerment funds and loans.
- Vocational training and skills development programs.

2. Women's economic empowerment:

- Access to low-interest loans and grants.
- Support for women-owned small and medium enterprises.
- Market space allocations for women traders.

3. Political inclusion and representation:

- Increased numbers of youths and women in Parliament, cabinet, and local councils.
- Implementation of gender quotas or “zebra” lists.

4. Social protection and security:

- Expansion of social cash transfers and bursaries.
- Commitment to address gender-based violence.
- Provision of safe markets and streets for women and youth.

A Lusaka-based civil society activist summarized this pattern:

“Every election, you will hear that youth are the future and women are the backbone of the nation. Parties promise us jobs, money, representation. But after voting, most of it disappears into thin air” (CSO representative, Lusaka, October 2022).

FGD participants in all three provinces vividly recalled campaign promises, suggesting that such rhetoric is both salient and memorable. Youth participants in Ndola, for instance, frequently referenced specific numerical targets for job creation announced at rallies and on social media (FGD, Ndola youth, March 2023). Women's groups in Lusaka and Chipata recalled being promised market stands, revolving funds, and “priority” in government contracting (FGDs, Lusaka and Chipata women, November 2022, May 2023).

These findings confirm that youths and women occupy a central place in campaign discourses and that promises are both specific and expansive, aligning with the theoretical expectation that they play a key role in shaping expectations.

4.2 Gaps between Promises and Post-Election Realities

Participants across all sites highlighted significant gaps between campaign promises and post-election realities. These gaps manifested in several ways.

4.2.1 Limited Reach and Unequal Access to Empowerment Programs

Several youth and women's empowerment programs were indeed launched or continued after elections, including funds administered through the Ministries of Youth and Community Development. However, participants reported that access was constrained by complex application procedures, lack of information, and perceived politicization.

A female youth in Lusaka noted:

“They told us, ‘We have created a big youth fund.’ But to get it, you must know someone or be in the party structures. For ordinary youth, it is just a story” (FGD, Lusaka youth, November 2022).

Similarly, market women in Kitwe described how women's funds or market allocations were allegedly channeled through ruling party branches, excluding those perceived as opposition supporters or politically inactive (FGD, Kitwe women, March 2023).

These narratives align with clientelist theories, suggesting that campaign promises of broad-based empowerment often translate into selective,

politicized distribution, thereby reinforcing rather than reducing inequality and insecurity (Erdmann & Simutanyi, 2003, p. 23).

4.2.2 Persistent Youth Unemployment and Underemployment

Despite repeated job creation promises, youth unemployment remains high. While official statistics vary, participants uniformly reported difficulties securing stable employment. University graduates spoke of “tarmacking” for years, while non-graduates often engaged in precarious informal work or small-scale trading.

A university graduate in Chipata remarked:

“In 2021, they told us, ‘We will employ teachers, nurses, and create jobs in agriculture.’ Yes, some were employed, but many of us are still at home. The promises were bigger than the reality” (FGD, Chipata youth, May 2023).

This sense of a gap between large-scale promises and limited opportunities reinforces relative deprivation. Even when some public sector recruitments or business grants occurred, the magnitude fell short of expectations, especially given the scale of youth unemployment.

4.2.3 Incomplete Progress on Women's Political Representation

Participants acknowledged modest increases in women's representation in certain institutions, but these gains were often viewed as insufficient relative to the bold promises of gender parity or 50% representation.

A women's rights advocate in Lusaka observed:

“Every election, they talk about 50-50. But still, women are a minority in Parliament and cabinet. The language is progressive, but the numbers don't match” (Key informant, Lusaka, October 2022).

Women FGD participants in all sites expressed a mix of pride in “role model” women leaders and frustration that such leaders remained exceptions rather than the norm. This duality symbolic inclusion with limited structural change echoes the notion of symbolic politics discussed in the theoretical framework (Schaffer, 2007, p. 52).

4.3 Experiences of Economic Insecurity

Economic insecurity emerged as the most frequently cited consequence of unmet campaign promises among youths and women.

4.3.1 Insecure Livelihoods and the Cost of Living

Participants linked the failure to secure promised jobs or business support directly to their inability to meet basic needs such as food, rent, and school fees. Many youths described contributing to family livelihoods through informal work, but earnings were irregular and insufficient.

In Lusaka, one young man explained:

“They told us we will have decent jobs. For now, I sell talk time on the street. Police chase us sometimes. If they had delivered on those jobs, life would be different” (FGD, Lusaka youth, November 2022).

Women in markets and informal trading reported struggling with rising prices of goods and transport, compounded by the absence of the promised low-interest business loans or grants. For them, economic insecurity was experienced as daily anxiety about meeting obligations, feeding children, and maintaining shelter (FGDs, Lusaka and Ndola women, 2022–2023).

4.3.2 Gendered Burdens of Insecurity

Women participants emphasized that economic insecurity had distinct gendered consequences. They reported shouldering responsibility for household food security, children's education, and healthcare, even when male partners were unemployed or underemployed.

As one woman in Kitwe put it:

“When there is no money, the children will look at the mother. You find a way—selling vegetables, charcoal. So when they promise women empowerment and it doesn't come, we feel it double” (FGD, Kitwe women, March 2023).

These accounts illustrate how unmet promises of women's empowerment and social protection exacerbate gendered burdens, aligning with feminist critiques that highlight how economic insecurity is

often borne disproportionately by women (Hassim, 2006, p. 171).

4.4 Social and Psychological Insecurity: Betrayal, Frustration, and Shame

Beyond material outcomes, participants consistently described feelings of betrayal, frustration, and, in some cases, shame. Many youths reported a sense of having been “used” during campaigns. Youth participants recounted attending rallies, mobilizing peers, and even acting as social media “foot soldiers,”

5.0 Conclusion

This article has argued that campaign promises in Zambia, especially those directed at youths and women, have become catalysts of insecurity when they are not grounded in realistic, rights-based, and structurally transformative policy frameworks. While political parties routinely highlight youths and women as central constituencies, the persistent gap between electoral rhetoric and policy outcomes generates cycles of relative deprivation, disillusionment, and mistrust.

From a political economy perspective, this pattern is rooted in clientelistic competition, fiscal constraints, weak institutions, and entrenched gender hierarchies. Youths and women navigate a political landscape in which promises of jobs, empowerment, and inclusion are abundant during campaigns but only partially realized in practice. The resulting insecurity is economic (precarious livelihoods), social (erosion of trust and cohesion), and political (fragile legitimacy and potential instability).

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For Zambia to harness its demographic dividend and advance inclusive development, campaign promises must shift from instruments of electoral marketing to credible components of a binding social contract. This entails:

- Institutional reforms to strengthen manifesto accountability, including mechanisms for tracking and publicly reporting on the implementation of electoral pledges.
- Policy coherence and fiscal realism, ensuring that promises are aligned with resource envelopes and implementation capacities.
- Deepening youth and women participation in policy design, implementation, and oversight, moving beyond tokenistic consultation to shared decision-making.
- Structural reforms addressing the root causes of youth unemployment and women's marginalisation, including economic diversification, labour market policies, land rights, and care infrastructure.

Ultimately, reducing insecurity and disillusionment among youths and women in Zambia requires transforming not only what is promised, but how politics is practised. A more accountable, inclusive, and programmatic political system would not eliminate all grievances, but it would help convert campaign promises from sources of frustration into foundations for shared progress.

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