Transnational hashtag protest movements and emancipatory politics in Africa: A three country study

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Abstract: This study explores three of sub-Saharan Africa's hashtag movements: Zimbabwe's #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, Eswatini's #EswatiniLivesMatter and Nigeria's #EndSARS hashtags. Theoretically, we rely on the transnational alternative digital public sphere and hashtag activism to understand how social media acted as a meeting place for mobilization and building cross boundary pollination and unitary movements. This investigation relied on a combination of virtual ethnography and purposive sampling as methodological approaches. Thematic analysis was the analytical tool employed with four themes informing this investigation: democratisation and human rights, transnational solidarity, states' response to hashtag movements and use of parody accounts as a counter hegemonic strategy. The study found that these hashtags and movements achieved a modicum of 'success' by forcing some of Africa's enduring dictatorships to make piecemeal concessions of varying degrees.

Keywords: #EndSARS, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Eswatini

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Introduction

This study explores three hashtag movements in Africa all inspired by the #BlackLivesMatter protests one way or the other. The advent and wide use of social media for activism purposes has received substantial scholarship (Mpofu 2017; Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2021). What remains understudied is the internationalisation of hashtags from sub-Saharan African countries as almost all cases studied are from the global north and the Arab world. Therefore, this study makes a unique contribution to scholarship by focusing on three African hybrid political systems that have sought to silence both offline and online resistance. What is crucial are the striking similarities that can be drawn from these cases demonstrating not just the internationalisation of protest movements but the modus operandi of dictatorships when faced with cyber resistance.

Social media have become valuable platforms for public life and the primary medium through which people consume and disseminate news and develop their political identities (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). However, social media platforms have also become tools for social control (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). Social media networks are regarded as integral to contemporary social protest movements. These popular online networks are not only utilised as platforms for organising mass protests, they are also themselves sites for performative activism and activists' performances in a new era of highly digitised activism (Toyana, 2020). Many contemporary studies of social movements are thus largely focused on social media support for a cause (Garza, 2020), activists' social media practices, the complex interactions between online and offline protests (Shirky, 2011) and broader discussions on the effectiveness, viability and implications of using social media as tools in the politics of resistance in contemporary times (Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018). The net effect of these social mediated movements remains bifurcated and polarising among the academics. For example, Shirky (2011) observed that due to social media:

> In some cases, such as in Spain in 2004, when demonstrations organized by text messaging led to the quick ouster of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who had inaccurately blamed the Madrid transit bombings on Basque separatists. The Communist Party lost power in Moldova in 2009 when massive protests coordinated in part by text message, Facebook, and Twitter broke out after an obviously fraudulent election. (p. 28)

These successes should however be juxtaposed with limited effects of social media. Shirky articulates this noting that:

> During the June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran, activists used every possible technological coordinating tool to protest the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi but were ultimately brought to heel by a violent crackdown.

This bifurcation illustrated above captures what the renowned public intellectual, Malcolm Gladwell, argued intimating that the platforms of social media are built on weak ties. Gladwell (2010) argued that, contrary to the popular belief that social

networks are effective at increasing motivation the actual contribution of social networks is "at increasing participation by lessening the level of motivation participation requires" (p. 47).

More so, a technical description of social media inspired activism is necessary in giving context to this study. Hu (2020) argues that, to kick-start a protest, social media activists mobilise elements of emotional grievance through sharing personal relatable stories which might resonate with a large number of people, thereby building a broad coalition of interest that transcends geographical and socio-economic boundaries. The social forces formed online are then mobilised and co-ordinated into actual on-ground protest events on the streets, outside of traditional media or government controlled economic institutions (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2021). Breuer and Farooq (2012) identified three main uses of social media during popular protest movements as that of coalition and network formation during the preparatory phase of the protest, information transmission during the ignition phase of the protest and for collective identity formation towards the final days of the protest movement.

Theoretically, the study makes use of hashtag activism and the transnational alternative digital public spheres. We draw this concept from Habermas' (1989) public sphere concept. While there has been some works criticising the shortcomings of Habermas's work (see most especially Calhoun 1992, Fraser 1990), the concept itself has endured and remains 'compelling, both empirically and normatively' (Dahlgren 2005, p. 147). The public sphere, simply put, was seen by Habermas as:

> A realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body… Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. (Habermas, 1989: 73–74)

The concept is extended in this article as a transnational alternative public sphere, drawing from the alterations of digital media and other democratic evolutions of society that have happened since this imagination of the public sphere. Criticisms of Habermas's public sphere include observations that "saloons and coffee houses acted as exclusive spaces meant for a certain section of the society only", the White bourgeoisie males' (Mpofu, 2014, p. 98). In the context of this research, mainstream public spheres in the countries we use as case studies are dominated by public media dominated by the political elite or private media run by businessmen. These, in most cases, mediate between those in power and the ruled. They exclude and include certain voices depending on their bias. Social media such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *WhatsApp* have become important alternative public spheres where voices and actions railing against the status quo find expression together with that pro-status quo. The unfettered ways of expression become important.

Given the above arguments on social media and protests, this paper investigates how human rights based and social media driven movements appropriated *Twitter* to fight against oppression in three countries: Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Eswatini. The study assesses the typologies of cyber activism in select African countries as to discern patterns that are or have been transferable by activists and political elites in those countries. Lastly, we further highlight the nature and character of these cyber movements, and consequently how governing regimes responded to this cyber activism.

Hashtag movements and activism

Twitter allows activists to create suitable hashtags to organize information (tweets) around a cause and boost its visibility for broader transnational engagement during protests. *Twitter* hashtags are an effective way to share information and spur action about a demographic group that seems to get little support from hegemonies (Williams, 2015). She found that social media hashtags brought attention to black women's issues when traditional mainstream media newspaper articles and television stories ignore black women's concerns as they have for decades.

Discussing the etymology of hashtags, Highfield and Leaver (2015) noted that the "use of the hash (or sometimes called the pound or number sign) character before certain terms indicated a desire to group tweets socially" (p. 9). This view was further buttressed by Halavais (2014) intimating that these are "... a way of indicating textually keywords or phrases especially worth indexing... by using the # character to mark particular keywords, *Twitter* users communicate a desire to share particular keywords folksonomically" (p. 15). A hashtag is a string of characters preceded by the symbol #; it is used to join public discussions, categorize messages or build communities around a specific topic of interest (Ferragina et al., 2015, p. 110).

Hashtags are used to categorize messages posted on *Twitter*. As Cunha et al. (2011) observes, hashtags "can be used not only to add context and metadata to the posts, but also for promotion and publicity" (p. 58). Other than driving online traffic through easier identification, as Kricfalusi (2009) intimated, hashtags allow users to create communities of people interested in the same topic by making it easier for them to find and share information related to it. Within the limited (no more than 280-character long) length, hashtags greatly draw researchers' attention, as they provide useful metadata for the topic and annotation of the tweet. Therefore, aggregated hashtags can be the indicator of a topic in many tweets.

Over the past decade, hashtags have become a feature for profiling protest action. Agreeing with this view, Bruns and Burgess (2015) argued that "the central role of the hashtag in coordinating publics has been evident in contexts ranging from

general political discussion through local, state and national elections (such as in the 2010 and 2013 Australian elections) to protests and other activist mobilisations" (p.13). *Twitter* functions as a hub for all relevant information regarding the protest outside of government-controlled news corporations and anyone, irrespective of geographical location, can through hashtags read minute-by-minute updates about a protest from any part of the world.

In Africa, social activist movements such as #BringBackOurgirls have in previous years been used to campaign against the abduction of Nigerian schoolgirls (Endong, 2019). Similarly, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall where useful as they symbolized the falling of colonial systems (see Mpofu, 2017, p. 353). In this paper we concentrate on hashtags, which have been made popular by *Twitter*, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, #EndSARS and #EswatiniLivesMatter. The use of hashtags has been appropriated as a tool to counter hegemonic discourses often privileged in the mainstream spaces.

However, some studies have recently argued that repeated exposure to political hashtags may have been thought as a positive good in fighting undemocratic culture by cyber activists, there is now literature suggesting that such exposure may deter people from wanting to know more about key social issues related to the hashtag and subsequently leading to a blanket turn off (Rho & Mazmanian, 2019). Other than surveillance and censorship, governing elites have also 'joined' the social media sphere taking their dominance from offline spaces to online spaces. This natural transfer of offline power to online power is more illustrated in how the Obama presidential campaign in 2008 managed to appropriate *Twitter* for political mobilisation and fundraising purposes and Obama's nemesis and successor, Donald Trump, having followed his predecessor in making social media the centrepiece of his campaign (Cherkaoui et al., 2020).

Methodological Approach

This study employed virtual ethnography and purposive sampling to collect and categorise data. Virtual ethnography refers to the qualitative research methodology that adapts principles of traditional ethnographic research to study cultural manifestations of online groups (Hine, 2000) and in this case protest movements. Purposive sampling is that 'type of convenience sampling in which the researcher selects the sample based on his or her judgement' (Fricker 2008, p. 200). Data gathered was categorised into four themes and these are: Democratisation, Human rights and #Hashtag movements, Transnational Solidarities, State Response to Cyber Activism and The Use of Parody Accounts which is drawn from the observed data. Data are analysed using thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set," (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57).

Hashtag Movements in context

The three hashtag movements were all led by ordinary citizens and registered, to varying degrees, both offline and online visibility. Social media, in all instances, was used as a mobilizing platform, archiving platform and to clamour for transnational and transcontinental solidarity. The governments, in all instances, as the target of the protests tried to undermine the movements through arrests, intimidation and violations of the rights of the protestors leading to global condemnation. Below, we describe and discuss the protest movements.

#EndSARS

The Nigerian #EndSARS protest movement is an archetypal example of contemporary protest that begins online with mass participation of social media users (including celebrities) and later morphs into a large on-the-ground countrywide protest (Abiodun et al., 2020). The protest has been ongoing for more than five years, advocating for an end to police brutality and the abolition of Nigeria's corrupt and notorious police unit known as *SARS - Special Anti-Robbery Squad*. On the 8th of October of 2020, the #EndSARS became a wildfire after weeks of outrage and anger with videos and pictures showing police brutality, harassment and extortion in Nigeria. *SARS* was established in 1992 to respond to waves of crime (such as armed robberies, and rampant kidnappings) in metropolitan cities such Lagos, Ibadan and Abuja (Asangausung et al., 2021). As part of their operational style, police officers in this special unit were given the authority to operate covertly, wear plainclothes, carry guns and drive unmarked vehicles. By 2009 it had become a large powerful unit which began overstepping its mandate beyond armed robbery to internet fraud and other civil matters.

There are numerous documented cases of *SARS* officers' abuse of power and incidences of rape, robbery, torture, kidnapping, extortion hanging, mock execution, beating, punching and kicking, burning with cigarettes, waterboarding, near-asphyxiation with plastic bags, forcing detainees to assume stressful bodily positions, and sexual violence and murder (Ogbette et al., 2018). *SARS* is known to especially profile young Nigerians whom they consider "flashy" or well-to-do - anything from having a nice car to a laptop or those with tattoos or dreadlocks (see Amnesty International Report, 2016). A 2016 report by the *World Internal Security and Police Index* (WISPI) placed the Nigerian Police Force last on its list of 127 countries. The index measures the ability of police institutions worldwide to render effective security services as well as measuring the public's confidence in such services; rates of fear of crime; rates of crime victims and the indicators of police operations and activities.

Although *SARS* has been notorious and wreaked havoc since its formation in 1992, the Nigerian police brutality and general public outrage against police excesses had existed long before *SARS*. Several scholars have linked the Nigerian policing

problems to its colonial origins). Historian Toyin Falola (2009) for instance, argues that the Nigerian Police Force was established primarily to enforce colonial will and interests and not to protect its subjects or the natives. The colonial state, he argues, was deemed to be above the law and thus had the monopoly of deadly arms and force which it could apply at will and the power to crush and criminalise dissent and dissenters. The postcolonial nationhood which has been characterised by strongmen politics and decades of military dictatorship thus continue to apply this operational outlook in managing its citizens (Maiangwa et al., 2018).

#EswatiniLivesMatter

In June 2021 violent pro-democracy protests erupted in Africa's last absolute monarchy, Eswatini in Southern Africa. In May 2021 a University of Eswatini student was killed in what authorities claimed was an accident but students claimed he died in the hands of the police. According to a *The New York Times* journalist, the death of the student 'led to major protests, with dissident lawmakers standing with the demonstrators and calling for the nation to move to a system with an elective prime minister' (Eligon, 2021). While protestors tried to deliver a petition, the King banned all in-person handing of petitions, leading to an eruption of violent protests. King Mswati has ruled with godlike authority, repression and corruption (Masuku & Limb, 2016) hallmarked by Delby (2014, p. 284) as 'naked greed' whereby opposition parties have been repressed and citizens denied an opportunity to select their own political leader in a multi-party and democratic parliamentary political system. Instead, the monarch created a public sphere, tinkhundla, which is a traditional parliament whose members are chosen based on individual merit. Swatis opposing the King criticize how the tinkhundla system is run and consider its sole mandate to deceive Swatis into believing that there is democracy and to entrench the King's hold onto power.

Dissent and protests had, since independence from Britain in the late 1960s, been outlawed. However, as Delby (2014) demonstrates, dissenting organisations and movements have creatively used alternative media such as songs, dance and the arts as sites of protests. The 2021 protests were precisely against King Mswati III and the monarchical system of governance. The monarchy, as a system of governance, divides opinion as some citizens are also deeply attached to a monarchy that led them to independence in 1968 and, as Møller highlights, this attachment to tradition curtails dissent and 'constrains rebellions which helps the royal family stay in power' (2019, p. 392). The country's tradition, according to Nyane (2019) "became much more powerful in Constitutional and political discourse than most countries in the Southern African subregion" (pp. 65–66) and many Swatis, at least according to Møller (2019) trusted their King more than the rest of Africans trusted their presidents. The monarchy has no capacity to deal with dissent without deploying violence. Motsamai, writing about the 2011 pro-democracy protests in Eswatini observes that, the monarchy's use of 'disproportionate force...[underlying] underlined the monarchy's flawed approach towards addressing popular dissent' (2011, p. 42).

The Eswatini protests, that had dire consequences on protestors were initiated by a decree by King Muswati III. The decree was eventually issued by Prime Minister, Themba Masuku and it stipulated the banning of all protests (Dlamini, 2021). Acting on and enforcing this decree, police shot protestors with live ammunition campaigning under "Kungahlwa Kwenile" (when the night falls) (Dlamini, 2021). The protest campaign, by aggrieved citizens mainly targeted the government and the King's properties (Dlamini, 2021). The King has long been accused of using public coffers for self-enrichment and, as social media activists from Eswatini said, to afford his family a lavish lifestyle in a country with high levels of unemployment and poverty. An unnamed 'pro-democracy leader' is quoted by *Swazilandnews* as saying

> As we launch the "Kungahlwa Kwenile" campaign we want the whole country to be on fire starting from Tuesday. People must target King Mswati's properties and businesses like Montigny forests, Game Reserves, properties of MPs who don't have corporate and Government properties among others. All roads must be blocked across the country on Tuesday night. If you are next to Montigny forest or any forest that benefits the King and his Government burn it, this is just a warning that will run for at least two weeks." (Dlamini, 2021)

The protest leader further encouraged protesters to shoot videos of themselves, without exposing each other's identities, burning the said properties and circulate them on social media. Figure 1 is a collage of some of the destructions done by protestors as reported by the government. Figure 2 shows support to the protestors and therefore shows state security services as the ones in the wrong. Social media, in this instance, is used by protestors and governing authorities to represent their view points and not necessarily the full truth.

To a certain extent, social media plays a critical role in modelling protests to others and interrelating them to join or perform the same acts of violence or disruption. Protestors looted and burnt businesses, in the capital, Mbabane and elsewhere. When the protests were fully fledged, the government imposed an 18h00-05h00 curfew and suspended schools. Rumours abound that the King had fled the country. Internet outages were reported as state security agents waged violence on citizens and protesters. During the protests, there was global outrage as some democratic countries implored Eswatini authority to handle the protests in a manner that respected human rights. Online, people used the hashtag #EswatiniLivesMatter for solidarity, organisational and archiving of news related to the protests. Celebrities and other African citizens participated in the hashtag protest movement. Later, we explore the perceived importance of globality and celebrity involvement in hashtag protest and social movements.

Figure 1: Images from the government Twitter handle showing the destruction done by the protesting citizens
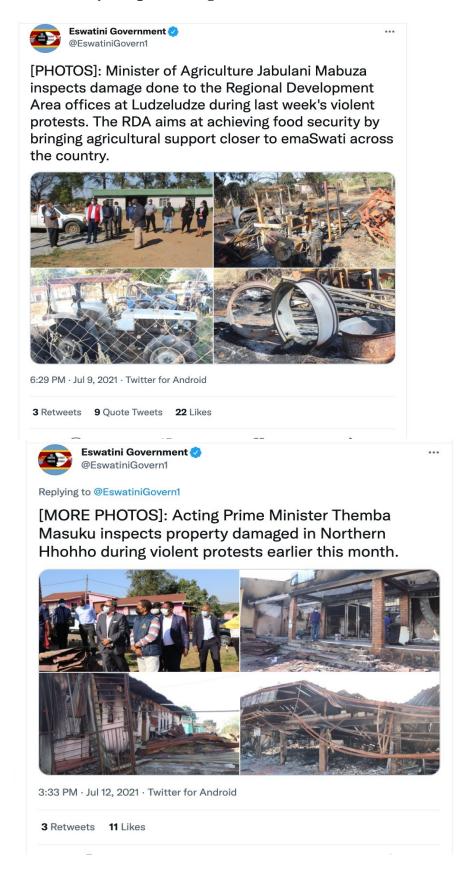
Figure 2: A 'report' in support of the protestors showing soldiers thwarting the protestors. Also indicated is that the soldiers killed some citizens. The killing of citizens is not shown.

#ZimbabweanLivesMatter

Zimbabwe has over the years gone through economic hardships, hyperinflation, and disputed elections. There have been continuities of this in the "New Dispensation" or second republic as the incumbent President, Emerson Mnangagwa, likes to call it. As pointed out by Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya (2020), "The Mnangagwa regime is a direct child of Mugabeism; indeed, Mugabeism is its recurrent theme" (p. 4). All these factors have contributed to what has predominantly been termed a multi-faceted crisis. However, in 2020, the *Covid-19* pandemic further aggravated this crisis as there were lockdown restrictions that put a hold on economic activity. Amidst the continued spiralling poverty and economic decline, there emerged pilfering of *Covid-19* personal protective equipment which turned into "Draxgate" or "Covid-gate" scandal that led to the rise of the #Zimbabwean-LivesMatter, modelled along the #BlackLivesMatter protest movement. The "Draxgate" or "Covidgate" was exposed by leading and international award-winning Zimbabwean journalist and activist Hopewell Chin'ono using his *Twitter* page @daddyhope and by Mduduzi Mathuthu, founder and editor of the online investigative news outlet *Zimlive.com*. This campaign sucked in members of the

first family. Chin'ono's arrest in July 2020 helped expose the Zimbabwean government's intolerance of scrutiny and curtailing freedoms of journalists from exposing corruption in the corridors of power. The result of the exposure was the incarceration of Hopewell Chin'ono, while Mduduzi Mathuthu went into hiding after numerous threats and intimidation from the "Ferret Team", thought to be a state security organisation, which harasses political opponents of the government. While Mathuthu went into hiding, the so-called *Ferret Team* reacted by abducting his nephew, Tawanda Muchehiwa, harassing his family members who had no "journalistic or political backbone" (Kamete, 2021). The crackdown was also extended to political activists, and civic society leaders such as novelist Tsitsi Dangarembwa, opposition politician Fadzai Mahere, opposition leader Jacob Ngarivume. In part, these factors saw #ZimbabweanLivesMatter gain momentum, as Zimbabwean, political actors and celebrities across the globe were in solidarity calling for an end to human rights abuses under the "New Dispensation".

Findings and discussions of the study

The *Arab Spring* uprisings of 2010 and 2011 have become a major marker on digital activism, especially in countries that have been under authoritarian rule. As Mora (2014) argues, "new forms of technology mediated activism have started to emerge and become commonplace alongside traditional media as vehicles to monitor, gather information and denounce atrocities or abuses in situations that encompass natural disasters, social justice protests and strikes, civil wars or election processes" (p. 1). However, the use of digital tools has not yielded uniform results as in other countries such as Zimbabwe, online campaigns have not morphed to significant offline activism and subsequently to the change of governments. Weighing on this, Chitanana (2020) intimates that "the efficacy and impact off-line of digital advocacy remains constrained by inherent limitations such as digital divide and repression" (p. 131) taking place in the offline space and at a legislative level. Beyond the issue of access and efficacy there has been growing concerns over what *Freedom House* dubbed "Digital Dictatorship" as dictatorships harness digital affordances for authoritarian purposes. In the African context, recent trends of authorities closing the online realm for political expression have stoked fears that social media and big data will be harnessed for nefarious purposes (Gopaldas, 2019). Writing on the concept of digital dictatorship, Faheem Chaudhry in an interview with Gopaldas (2019) noted that digital dictatorship was a double headed beast. Gopaldas (2019) adds that "the first intended aim (of digital dictatorship) is to squash information, to control what goes out into the world so perceptions can be managed and narrowed. The second aims to limit communication, to constrict the population's ability to air their opposing views and create mass consensus" (p. 4). However, it is critical to note that digital dictatorship is also extending to traditionally democratic countries such as South Africa. As Bitso (2014) argued, the southern African country was already formulating legislation as early as 2010 that would impact on the use of information. The hacking of South African government

websites, including that of the police on more than one occasion also warranted internet censorship in order to combat crime as well as to ensure safety and security. Thirdly, as Bitso (2014) argued, there was the increasing challenge of spam and malware that called for filtering to protect systems such as servers. Authoritarian regimes or those with semblance of dictatorship have since time immemorial monitored their populations to detect dissent, discern dissatisfaction and preempt challenges (Michaelsen 2017, p. 465). As Michaelsen adds, "the institutionalized and systematic practices of information gathering under authoritarian rule are not only a means which enables repression and regime preservation but also a distinct form of power and control" (p. 465). For this study, it is crucial to understand how rights organisation have been mobilising under hashtag movements, how activists have been forming transnational networks and how power elites have been trying to censor and curtail cyber activities that can morph into offline action. At the time of revising this work, approximately half of Africa's 54 countries had just promulgated laws meant to police social media and internet use (Sibidla, 2021).

It is this changing legislative and political landscape that prompted this study to investigate the state of hashtag movements, a decade after the 'success' of the *Arab Spring* movements.
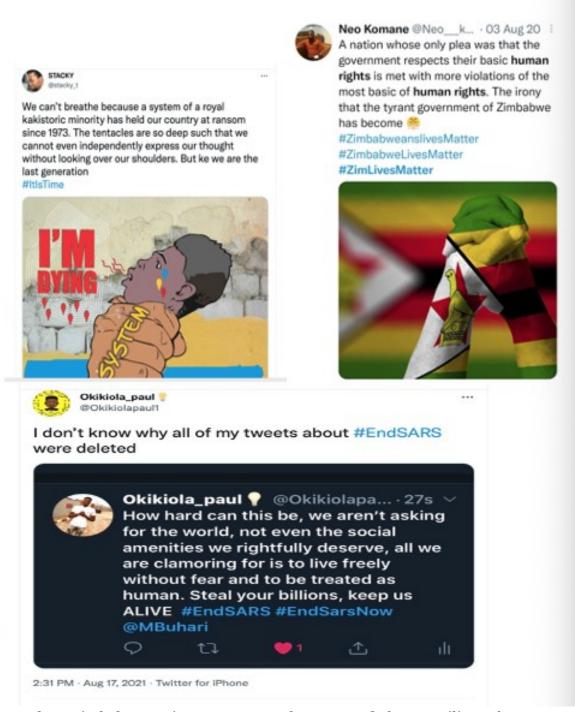
In the following section, we present and discuss the findings of the study. The findings and discussion of the study are anchored on the following themes inductively drawn from the data.

- Democratisation, Human rights and #Hashtag movements
- Transnational Solidarities
- State response to cyber activism
- The Use of Parody Accounts.

1. Democratisation, human rights and #Hashtag movements

For the Zimbabwean case, the country has been in international isolation because of social injustices and human rights abuses perpetrated by the *Zanu-PF* led government. The modus operandi of the "New Dispensation" saw journalists, activists and civil society leaders being clamped down by the jaws of the state apparatus. These injustices perpetrated on Zimbabwean citizens was reflected on the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter that showed how citizens, civil society and opposition leaders in Zimbabwe used *Twitter* to protest the socio-economic and socio-political dilemmas faced by Zimbabwe. Primarily, the hashtag rallied behind Hopewell Chin'ono after he was arrested on charges of "inciting public violence" after he exposed the *Covid-19* procurement scandal together with Mduduzi Mathuthu.

Figure 3: Examples from Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Nigeria asking for upholding Human Rights in their respective countries

However, the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter mostly protested the curtailing of press freedom and called for the release of journalist Hopewell Chin'ono. The #ZimbabweanLivesMatter called for the democratization of the state which had continued with Mugabe's legacy that clamped down on activists and civil society leaders. For instance, activists such as Tawanda Muchehiwa were abducted because of his relationship to Mduduzi Mathuthu, his association with members of the opposition political party and distributing pamphlets inscribed #ZanuPFMustGo. Thus, the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter constructed a narrative

that highlighted the heightened oppression and abuse associated with Mnangagwa's "New Dispensation" government.

As shown in Figure 3 above, Neo Komane, a citizen, decried the government's harsh treatment of citizens by highlighting that "a nation whose only plea was that the government respects their basic human rights is met with more violations of the most basic human rights. The irony that the tyrant government of Zimbabwe has become" (Komane, 2020). Hashtags in this case are subtle ways and methods of protest and expression. However, ordinary citizens with no institutional power were able to join and contribute to a national conversation around the #ZimbabweanlivesMatter. The #ZimbabweanLivesMatter, thus served as a precursor to open and defiant protests in that it conscientised and mobilised the masses on the cybersphere.

The Eswatini case was no different. The protests came long after citizens called for an end to monarchy rule (Masuku & Limb, 2016). Protesters targeted King Mswati III and the monarchical system of governance. The King responded by unleashing security forces leading to the death of protesters. One of the tweets bearing the handle @stacky_t called for an end to the "royal kakistoric minority" that has "held the country at ransom since 1973." @Fkhetsiwe offered words of encouragement, that is, cheering people on not to give up by saying: "We will conquer, we belong to Eswatini." Therefore, the hashtag provided a platform for Eswatini's citizens to form an alternative public sphere. Such a digital sphere promotes deinstitutionalized forms of communication which challenge the top-down model of public communication in favour of more horizontal models that allow citizen participation (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2021). Furthermore, the findings show that digital spaces serve as the unmediated public sphere by offering citizens the opportunity to communicate with each other in horizontal ways, outside the mediating gatekeepers. This is shown, for example by citizens using pseudo names as they lived under repressive rule and they feared reprisals. Police brutality was also key in Nigeria's #EndSARS. Key was the #EndSARS that called for an end to heightened police brutality. Citizens called for the respect of rule of law, right to life and free citizen participation in governance. The #EndSARS reflects how the adoption and use of social media has enabled online users to freely express themselves and counter state-propagated discourses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya, 2020). Citizens captured the abuse of human rights in Nigeria as shown on one of the handles with the username @Okikiola_paul who said: "How hard can this be, we aren't asking for the world, not even the social amenities we rightly deserve, all we are clamoring for is to live freely without fear and to be treated as human. Steal your billions, keep us alive. #EndSARS #EndSARSNow @Mbuhari." From the given example, we found that Nigeria's protest was under different but related hashtags bearing either #EndSARS or #EndSARSNow.

However, the role of social media in fostering democracy has been subject of debate by many scholars. One of the critics, Morozov (2011) argues against cyber-

utopianism and the Net Delusion, that is, the view that the internet can help in the democratization of authoritarian regimes. He, instead, notes that the medium can be used by authoritarian regimes as a powerful tool for political repression and the spread of extremist propaganda. While this study is mindful of such debates, the findings show that hashtags have facilitated protest participation by increasing opportunities for engagement. We argue that the hashtags provided space for better engagement, especially in places like Zimbabwe and Eswatini where there is limited democratic space.

2. Transnational solidarities

Scholarship on borders has shown in many ways that borders are not lines on a map, neither boundaries among sovereign states, nor permanent dividing lines between the included and excluded (Fernandez Bessa & Fabini, 2018). However, hashtags have shown that borders and boundaries are dynamic, mobile and performative. The selected countries under study received support from politicians, celebrities and civil society organisations across the globe. Celebrities and politicians were engaged in "hashtag politics" which denotes an increased role of *Twitter* as a political source, particularly its influence in placing issues on the agenda for national and international debate and deliberation (Jeffares, 2014). For the Nigerian hashtag, American Rapper, Ice Cube joined the hashtag movement and posted: "I stand with the people of Nigeria as they fight against police brutality. #EndSARS". Hillary Clinton, former US Secretary of State and US Presidential Candidate, also joined the protests by urging the Nigerian President to "stop killing protesters" while Mesut Özil, a footballer, encouraged people to make #EndSARS "trend everywhere". Former South Africa's *Democratic Alliance* (DA) leader, Mmusi Maimane joined the protest movements in all three countries by stating that "South Africa will not be free while there is oppression in Eswatini, while there is brutality in Nigeria, while the people of Zimbabwe are crushed by the rock of oppression. We are one." Protesters in Eswatini also received support from *DA* politician, Phumzile van Damme and labour union *NUMSA* who added that "there should be no country on this continent which is allowed to suppress democracy as the govt of Eswatini is doing."

There were similar trends in the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter by former president of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, South Africa's *EFF* leader, Julius Malema and celebrities such as AKA real name Kiernan Forbes, Zakes Banwtini, Dr Tumi, Boity Tulo, and the actor Pearl Tusi. While the Zimbabwean government is known for its control of flow of information through the state-controlled media (see Chuma et al., 2020), social media creates new challenges for such authoritarian regimes who are no longer able to control this flow of information.

As such, *Twitter* was used by celebrities to disseminate information to participants and garner support for protest activities, acting as a "choreography of assembly" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5). Davis (2013) has argued that *Twitter's* intertextuality con-

tains the potential for igniting widespread political activism by encouraging voices from all sectors of society to be heard. Of interest is the continual transformation of the public sphere which has resulted in international players joining the 'local' spheres. Given the transnational solidarities outlined above, this study argues, that the virtual public sphere has been extended to international spaces owing to social media which has created new platforms and avenues for all its users to deliberate. Thus, international players are part of the public sphere which is formed by like-minded individuals and further strengthening the horizontal form of communication between the elite and the subalterns in respective countries under study.

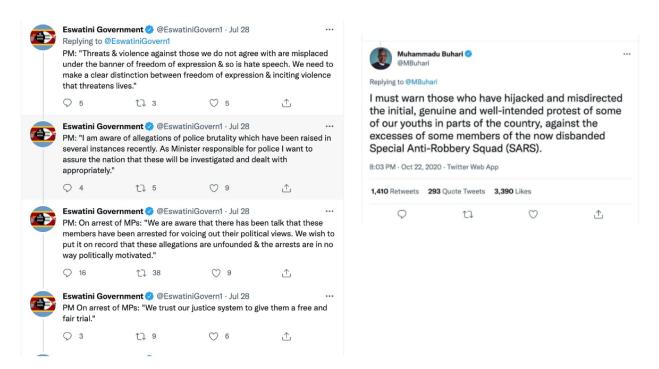**Figure 4: International support for #Hashtag movements**

3. State response to cyber activism

While the hashtags have been viewed as an emancipatory platform for marginalised communities, governments in Africa now silence opposition and dissenting voices in various ways. With protests having attracted global attention, African states under study responded by attempting to change narratives on protests. In Zimbabwe, Ministry of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services Permanent secretary Nick Mangwana said: "We have always maintained that these abductions are fake. I have just seen a disgusting video showing how that trio set out to malign their country through fakery. How many of these so-called abductions are nothing but #AtrocityPropaganda." (Mangwana, 2020). The Zimbabwean government was

quick to dismiss the agenda behind the protest movement yet there were victims who faced the wrath of state's brutality. However, such a tendency to attack protesters is evident of how the "New Dispensation" is still caught in the bind of breaking with "Mugabeism". Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ruhanya (2020) rightly argue that "by bringing the military directly into civilian political structures, Mnangagwa has not demilitarised the state; instead he has deepened militarisation" (p. 11).

A similar narrative is also seen in Nigeria where President Muhammadu Buhari before admitting to the concerns around the #EndSARS campaign and also announcing the disbandment of *SARS*, threatened people for what he calls the need to 'respect other people,' that is, people who were not part of the protest. In one of his threats, President Buhari said, "I must warn those who have hijacked and misdirected the initial, genuine and well-intended protests of some of our youths in parts of the country." In Eswatini, the Prime Minister also responded by offering some threats, he said, "Threats and violence against those we do not agree with are misplaced under the banner of freedom of expression and so is hate speech. We need to make a clear distinction between freedom of expressing and inciting violence that threatens lives." Besides such a response, the Eswatini government unleashed terror on civilians and further arrested journalists. This was also the case with Zimbabwe where activists and journalists were arrested. The use of arrests and violence as methods of silencing and dispersal of protesters is widespread in most African countries. In rare cases, as seen in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, governments made what we characterised as piecemeal if not cosmetic concessions which are often registered as successes by activists.

Figure 5: Government response to #Hashtag movements

4. Use of Parody accounts

The findings further show that social media users created parody accounts in the name of popular celebrities to disseminate protest information. In the case of the #EndSARS campaign, a parody account of Anthony Joshua, the British boxer posted stating, "my focus is the opponent that is in front of me which is #EndSARS #ArrestKillerOfficers." Other parody accounts were of American actress and activist Gabrielle Union and American actor Denzel Washington. Interestingly, the two 'had posted' similar content where they were calling for an end to police brutality in Nigeria. A similar pattern was observed during the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter campaign when accounts purporting to be those of eminent persons were created to offer solidarity and support to the protest campaign. One of the *Twitter* accounts created was of then newly elected president of Malawi, Lazarus Chakwera.

Figure 6: Tweets from 'Parody Accounts' of prominent figures in support of the protesters

Parody accounts are part of "fake news" that mushroom during times of a crisis with the aim being to produce and share misleading and false information for the purposes of gaining political and ideological mileage. Through the art of creating parody accounts, we thus agree with other scholars who have argued that the social media has allowed the birth of a complex media landscape that even makes it difficult for some audiences to separate "non-fiction and fiction" (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016, p. 4).

Conclusion

The appropriation of technology for activism purposes has taken root in many sub-Saharan African countries and this is more demonstrable by the quick response of dictatorships to resort to internet shutdowns when citizens go online to protest abuses. This reality brings to light Morozov's (2011) observations when he argues that "the forces shaping the future of Internet control come from the realms of politics, society, and business" (p. 72). While the permanent suspension of the former United States' President, Donald Trump, on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *YouTube* demonstrated the power of big tech companies in policing the cybersphere even to leaders of the so-called Free World, these three cases demonstrated, how governments and political elites make attempts to police internet communication through several legislative and extra judicial interventions. This study observed a new phenomenon of the appropriation of social media parody accounts used to endorse protests and rendering 'support' by well-known actors, what Tufekci (2013) calls microcelebrity networked activism, which is meant to assist in mobilisation (Chitanana & Mutsvairo, 2019) and giving moral support to those on the ground (Shirky, 2011). While in the past dictators tended to ignore outside pressure on issues of rights abuses, the advent of internet technologies is increasingly making it impossible to ignore external pressure with tyrants resorting to either piecemeal concessions or counter cyber propaganda.

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