National dialogue and social cohesion in Zambia

*Kabale Ignatius Mukunto**

Abstract

National dialogues bring all major political stakeholders, decision-makers, and interest groups together following serious conflicts. In response to political differences that emerged from the 2016 general elections, Zambia enacted a National Dialogue (Constitution, Electoral Process, Public Order and Political parties) Act, 2019, which provided for holding a national dialogue forum (NDF). However, this trajectory has been turbulent and the outcome fiercely contested. This article is an appraisal shedding light on Zambia's strides in hosting a post-2016 general elections national political dialogue process and an attempt to answer three critical questions. First, how can national political dialogue be best organised to build social cohesion? Second, what has been the Zambian experience with national dialogue, with particular reference to the 2019 NDF? Last, what lessons can be learned for future national dialogues in the country? The article offers some perspectives on how national dialogue can support the broader society to cohere. It also advances descriptive lessons for the future to vouch for an all-inclusive national dialogue process.

Keywords: National Dialogue, Social Cohesion, Conflict, Constitution-making, Zambia

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* Kabale Ignatius Mukunto completed his PhD in 2021 in Public Management with a focus on Peacebuilding at the International Centre of Nonviolence, Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa. He is a Lecturer in the Governance Department, School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Copperbelt University in Kitwe, Zambia. His research focused on 'using dialogue to transform youth involvement in political conflict'. His research interests include peacebuilding, third party intervention, ethnicity and conflicts, electoral politics and African indigenous knowledge systems.

1. Introduction

Zambia may have legislated national dialogue and held a 'national' dialogue forum (NDF)[1] in 2019; however, the process was more polarising than unifying. Not only were efforts within the Zambian polity to mount an inclusive process in 2018 turbulent, but the outcomes were also fiercely contested. Initially, conversations around the acceptability of the convener were particularly sticky and sluggishly ground to a halt. Although the credibility of a convener is crucial to avoid perceptions of bias (Siebert 2014; Siebert, Kumar and Tasala 2014; Goswami 2017), exchanges that characterised the pre-dialogue were needlessly protracted. Beyond the convener, the effectiveness of the national dialogue hinges to a greater extent, as Stigant and Murray (2015:2) observe, on providing space for all groups with divergent interests to participate. An inclusive dialogue process carries the potential to clarify and address fundamental drivers of conflict between the parties involved.

Participants refuse to accept representations of needs and aspirations by limited elites. It is a social and political imperative to ensure realisation of all stakeholders' needs and aspirations. As Hartmann (2017: 5) aptly notes, within the realms of national dialogue, political settlements that tend to be elitist run short of valuable peace dividends, such as socio-cultural relations, coexistence, political tolerance, unity, harmony, peace, and respect of human rights. There is, however, one aspect meriting particular reflection: the aspect of social cohesion.This aspect is partly an offshoot of these abovementioned benefits, and is particularly relevant in a context such as Zambia. In short, a national dialogue process not only reveals a national character by providing space for perspectives from those considered to be on the periphery but enables the broader society to cohere.

To maximise dialogue's potential to deal with the actual 'drivers of conflict, argue Stigant and Murray (2015:2), all interest groups should be invited to participate – including women, youth, and other traditionally excluded groups. Non-participation would negatively affect their appreciation of the benefits associated with the dialogue process and

1 President Edgar Lungu signed the National Dialogue Bill into law on 9 April 2019 after controversially passing its third reading in Parliament. The forum was launched on 24 April 2019 and sat for 16 days.

ultimately impede opportunities for social cohesion. This article is an appraisal of Zambia's strides in mounting a post-2016 general elections national political dialogue process. It attempts to answer three main questions. First, how can national political dialogue be best organised to build social cohesion? Second, what has been the Zambian experience with national dialogue, with particular reference to the 2019 NDF? Last, what lessons can be learned for future national dialogues in the country? While these questions focus on Zambia as a case, an appreciation of dialogue as a concept is imperative.

2. Understanding dialogue

The word dialogue is derived from a Greek word, *dialogos* which can be split into 'dia' or 'through' and 'logos' or the 'word'. Thus, dialogue suggests a deeper meaning – a movement of the word (Berghof foundation 2012; Goswami 2017:20). Bohm and Nichol (1996) advance that a dialogue can take place among any number of parties and not just two. Even an individual can have dialogue within oneself, if an appreciation of dialogue is present. Four elements keep dialogue afloat. First, dialogue is often immersed in 'deep communication' which is not a mere exchange of words. Communication is viewed by some as one of the most ethical of actions since it carries several critical attributes – valuing individual dignity and self-worth as well as involving parties in conversations, mutual understanding, and decision making (Jeong 2010:201; Taylor and Kent 2014:388).

Second, dialogue brings parties' power relationships to the fore. In his critical reflective discussion, Freire (1993), characterised dialogue as closely related to power, as well as efforts to engage, reveal and liberate. While power may be a barrier, Freire contended that this can be eliminated by 'acts of love and commitment to their cause, humility as opposed to acts of arrogance; and faith in parties themselves (Freire 1993:90). He concluded that 'faith in people' is an a *priori requirement* for dialogue – a call for participants to believe in others even before they meet face to face. That, 'without which dialogue may remain a farce with the potential to reprobate into paternalistic manipulation' (Freire 1993:91). Dialogue is also associated with what may be described as a 'safe space', both physically and psychologically, in which participants may have constructive conversations. It is an enabling space for parties, as noted by Maddison (2015:1015) notes, for parties in divided and post-

violent conflict communities to engage across differences and transform their relationships.

Last, dialogue may be conceived as a 'going concern'. In other words, given that the core or primary resource needed is parties' involvement, then human communities ought to embrace dialogue as a relationship-enhancing mechanism for many uses. Dialogue can be applied 'interpersonally as a one-time event, within a large event like a conference, in series of meetings, or a sustained process over many years' (Schirch and Campt, 2007:26). As a one-time event, dialogue may be called upon to mobilise community members to explore a specific subject or to address an imminent conflict's crisis point. On the other hand, large-scale dialogue brings together hundreds or even thousands of participants centrally arranged with small group conversations providing space for the expression of diverse perspectives. This, according to Schirch and Campt (2007:29) gives people a more palpable sense of community.

3. National dialogue overview

National dialogue can be defined in different ways, depending upon varying social, economic, and/or political contexts. For example, national dialogue is associated with political settlements that yield developmental results and peace dividends as well as serving as a means of managing crises in socio-political contexts that are considered fragile and violent (Hartman 2017). Second, it is an inclusive process argues Murray (2017:4) for 'creating national consensus about social, political or economic concerns through an open and tolerant exchange of ideas'. National dialogues are also seen as internally developed and owned tools for addressing issues of national relevance, such as political transformation (power-sharing, preparations for national elections of drafting of new constitutions). They can be seen as holistic national projects that also help national state and non-state actors transform their social and political conflicts (Siebert, Kumar and Tasala 2014; Stigant and Murray 2015; Odigie 2017).

For this paper, national dialogue is understood as an inclusive platform and process for society's stakeholders to overcome social, economic, and political hurdles to the development of a more tolerant and peaceful society. This definition supports the core principles or ideals which assist us to understand how national dialogue contributes to political

transformation and peace. Three of such fundamental ideals merit mention. First, *inclusiveness*. That is providing space for all stakeholders with divergent or common interests and perceptions to attend, and maximise dialogue's potential to deal with root causes of the conflict. Second, *transparency and public participation* hinge on the need to reach out to the public or the broader population to be kept informed even if they are not part of the conversations. Third, ensure that the *Agenda addresses the root of the conflict*. For the latter, participants' full appreciation of the historical context driving the conflict is critical as national dialogue seeks to reach an agreement on crucial issues (Siebert 2014:44; Stigant and Murray 2015:3; Goswami 2017:22).

Broad-based negotiation and efforts toward the transformation of political crises have taken place during the last two decades in processes similar to a national dialogue. Some of these cases include Somalia (2000); the Democratic Republic of the Congo – DRC (2001–2003 and 2015/2016); Togo (2006); Egypt (2011); Yemen (2013/2014); Tunisia (2014); South Sudan (2015/2016) and Zimbabwe (2019) (Paffenholz, Zachariassen and Helfer 2017:28). In terms of the underlying object, they have sought to peacefully settle political differences, heal and reconcile parties. Zambia's 2018/19 national dialogue endeavours began following the disputed 2016 general elections. It will now be a primary focus of this paper to explicate the connection between dialogue and social cohesion.

4. Social cohesion

As an emerging and international policy concept, social cohesion is associated with early historians, philosophers, political scientists, economists, and sociologists who were concerned with social order and cooperation. Emile Durkheim, one of the pioneering sociologists, considered social cohesion as an organising feature of a society, its members' connectedness, and a symbol of shared loyalty and solidarity (Berger-Schmitt 2000:2–3; Dragolov et al. 2016). From extant literature, four aspects merit particular mention. First, despite its appeal to these disciplines, there are assertions that the concept lacks definition consensus, has no generally accepted description and there is a relative dearth of studies (Bottoni 2018:837; Burns et al. 2018).

Second, social cohesion is anchored on concerns about the threats of or degeneration, in the sense of community manifest in inequalities, social cleavages, and polarisation, or strained relations (Dragolov, et al. 2016; Bottoni 2018; Taylor and Davies 2018). The restoration of this spirit, therefore, hinges on individual members' contributions to social cohesion. Friedkin (2004:412), for example, argued that the measures of social cohesion 'encompass any attitude or behaviour that could be construed as indicative of a person's attraction or attachment to a group (and other members)'. Third, while there is no defining agreement, attempts are made to pull together some operational concepts. To some, social cohesion concerns the horizontal interaction among members of a society as well as vertical (state-society) relations. These are characterised by certain attitudes, norms, and behavior, including: *'trust; willingness to participate and help; a sense of belonging; behavioural manifestation and recognition of society's rules and institutions'* [emphasis added] (Cox and Sisk 2017:15; Bottoni 2018:840).

Last, social cohesion in some contexts is associated with nation building. In the case of South Africa for instance, Palmary (2015:63) associated social cohesion with national building. Similarly, a cohesive society is seen by some as characterised by resilient social relations, positive emotional connectedness, common sense of identity, respecting fellow citizens and upholding their dignity, and acting in solidarity with those marginalised (Dragolov et al. 2016; Burns et al. 2018). In keeping with these explanations, social cohesion may be condensed as a derivative of conditions that generate positive attitudes and conduct among members of society.

So how can national dialogue be best organised to build social cohesion? National dialogue provides an opening for exchange to foster understanding and unity. To build social cohesion, national dialogue will need to be anchored on at least four aspects:

a) First, it should be inclusive: ensuring that all stakeholders with divergent or common interests and perceptions attend, and maximise dialogue's potential to deal with root causes of the conflict. While national dialogue ought to work toward restoring a sense of community, it should also be organised to engender positive attitudes among ordinary citizens. In other words, rather than encouraging debate, national dialogue would need to be voluntary, collegial, and

encouraging citizens' identification with and confidence in the country's institutions (Dragolov et. al. 2016:7). People's confidence in social and political institutions remains a crucial element within the social cohesion jurisdiction;

b) Another aspect that reinforces social cohesion is the need to structure national dialogue so that it reaches out to the public or the broader population who should be kept informed. The approach not only fosters citizens' willingness to participate but stimulates a sense of belonging. Thus, all stakeholders must be engaged in an open-minded, consultative, and civil dialogue process that should inspire political tolerance and reconciliation. Social cohesion-oriented dialogue is, in addition to being national and all-inclusive, a process that seeks 'the genuine national transformation of hearts, governance systems, and procedures to promote unity, respect for human rights and peace for all' (Phiri, 2018:1). A society would cohere when as Bottoni (2018:839) notes, individuals have a sense of belonging, see opportunities for both political participation and respect and tolerance of diversity.

c) Third, riding on inclusiveness and public awareness is joint ownership. That national dialogue should be organised in a way that ensures that all concerned parties own the process and not allow a few powerful participants to dominate. The fulfillment of joint ownership parallels individual-level indicators of social cohesion which according to Friedkin (2004: 410) include participants' desire or intention to remain in a group and their identification with or loyalty to a group. A national dialogue with willing participants is better able to attain higher levels of cohesion and accordingly contribute to peace in society.

d) Last, national dialogue can foster social cohesion through an agenda that addresses the roots of the differences between disputing parties. Akin to inclusive participation, an all-encompassing agenda not only respects diversity but also allows people (citizens) to feel strongly connected to their country and identify with it. In other words, inclusive participation and agenda support social cohesion through an open and tolerant exchange of ideas, which in turn facilitates national consensus about social, political, or economic concerns (Murray, 2017:4). And, as an internally developed and owned mechanism, national dialogues have been part of Zambia's nascent

democracy. Therefore, it is imperative to appraise the country's national dialogue strides since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1990.

5. Zambia's national dialogue experience

During Zambia's third republic[2] at least three instances of national dialogue' can be identified. First, at the summit of the return to multi-party politics in 1991, leaders from Christian churches successfully organised a dialogue session that brought leading figures, Kenneth Kaunda from then ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP) and Frederick Chiluba, from the newly formed Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) together. While the dialogue was political, it also had a national character as the MMD was a broad-based and inclusive coalition of students, businessmen, and women; trade unions, and civil society organisations. In the case of students, even before supporting the MMD dialogue engagements, they had mounted serious anti-Kaunda demonstrations to press for his resignation (Mwanakatwe 1997:173). Although Kaunda was initially unyielding, he succumbed to the massive opposition from the coalition and not only agreed to dialogue but accommodate the latter's demands (Joseph 1992:199).

The Church has a responsibility to pass moral judgment on matters affecting the social and political order of the country (Komakoma 2003:225). As such, the conveners of the July 1991 dialogue between representatives of the MMD and UNIP with their Presidents were not only credible but had the moral authority as church leaders. The churches' involvement in the dialogue process, upon which principally hinged on the transition from a one-party state to multi-party democracy, provided a neutral arbiter which was necessary to avert a possible impasse between UNIP and MMD. The responsibility to convene and chair the dialogue sessions was given by mutual agreement of both parties to the church leaders. Thanks to the church leaders' determination – anchored in their commitment to foster peace, reconciliation, and justice – an agreement was reached on the implementation of the outcomes of the dialogue.

2 The period from 1991 to date.

President Kaunda and UNIP as the incumbent, for example, fulfilled the reintroduction of multi-party politics by amending Article 4 of the country's constitution which prohibited the creation of other political parties. Further, with this amendment, Kaunda agreed to facilitate national elections on 31 October 1991, welcomed election observers, and invitations were extended to several world leaders and international organisations (Joseph 1992:200; Zvanyika 2013:30). Despite his earlier unyielding stance, President Kaunda's change of mind towards accommodating the MMD brought a sense of joint ownership to the process. This was inevitable because the MMD was a broad-based coalition, and a primary advocate for wide-ranging constitutional changes. It was important (Phiri 1999:342) that a constitution acceptable to all stakeholders be established. With the MMD threatening to boycott elections if constitutional amendment calls were not met, the country was at risk of sliding into anarchy (ibid).

The second national dialogue efforts coincided with the launch of the Zambia Centre for Inter-party Dialogue (ZCID)[3] in 2007, an initiative pioneered by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). Leading the engagement were then third republican President Levy Mwanawasa and opposition leader, Michael Sata who had competed in the 2006 presidential elections, with the former garnering 43% while the latter 29% of the national vote. As in the Kaunda-Chiluba case, the contention was around constitutional reform. The participation in the summit of the dialogue session was to a greater extent inclusive as there was then representation from all major political parties.[4] While there had been several unsuccessful meetings between President Mwanawasa and other stakeholders, the ZCID-led summit provided an enabling space to reach a consensus on various issues including the constitution-making process.

3 The centre was set up in 2006 as a platform for national dialogue. Its membership include the Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD); MMD; Patriotic Front (PF); United Party for National Development (UPND) and political parties outside parliament. Presidents of these four major political parties and their respective secretary generals theoretically form parts of ZCID with two representatives from parties outside parliament.

4 These include the MMD, PF, UNIP, United Party for National Development (UPND), Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD), United Liberal Party (ULP), National Democratic Focus (NDF) and the All Peoples Congress (APC) party.

While the agenda (broadly, the constitution-making process) was clear, some stakeholders raised procedural concerns. For example, PF leader Michael Sata wanted full recognition as a stakeholder in the national dialogue process and was allowed to speak at the launch (Phiri and Saluseki 2007). The demands by the PF leader may have been valid, but dialogue is a national process that calls for the interest of the nation to come first while political leaders' and their followers' rigid positions changed. This rigidity was in sharp contrast to the will and commitment from the incumbent who, on behalf of his party, pledged to provide leadership in the enactment of a new constitution through an inclusive process. The political commitment was augmented by ZCID's role as a lead facilitator of the national dialogue process. However, despite drawing quasi authority from its composition, ZCID's intermediary responsibility was without partiality allegations. The PF which was not represented on the Centre's oversight board at the time protested the involvement of an MMD official as chair under ZCID jurisdiction. In this case, PF's call for the replacement of the official with someone of neutral status was justified – as a convener or facilitator's credibility hinge on acceptability, respectability, and neutrality. This avoids any perceptions of bias.

Because the ZCID was closely connected with almost all the major political parties, its function as a convener of the dialogue process was a subject of suspicion. In its evaluation of the Zambian programme, for example, NIMD noted that 'reactions from the public and civil society revealed that ZCID was an extension of government or that the ZCID was now an MMD steered vehicle' (Molenaers 2007:26). Furthermore, there was considerable tension between 'ZCID as a process facilitator (giving room for inter-party dialogue) and ZCID as a political player involved in the game' (Molenaers 2007:27). Although this situation also strained ZCID's working relations with civil society organisations (which normally would be the ones holding consultations/ working with opposition political parties), the ZCID managed to steer the 2007 dialogue to some reasonable conclusion.

In sum, an agreement was reached on the implementation of the dialogue outcomes. The summit of parties' engagement for example resolved to hold a constitutional conference instead of a constituent assembly for enacting a new constitution (Sichalwe and Phiri 2007). Parties succeeded in coming up with this roadmap, partially because they put aside their

political differences and personal or party positions as subordinate to national interests. However, the road ahead still had hurdles that called for further engagement such as the enactment of a constitution conference bill into law and determination of the existence, composition, and functions of the conference. Notwithstanding the enactment of the National Constitutional Conference (NCC) Act No. 19 of 2007 and the successful convening of a forum to alter the constitution, differences within the Zambian polity were still recurrent.

During the PF administration, the first 'form of national political dialogue' was a three-mother bodies-led process in early 2016. The intervention was aimed at responding to several electoral and human rights concerns during electoral campaigns. The Churches' moral authourity over political differences was once again brought to the fore. Despite their strong theological distinctiveness, they have in Phiri's (1999:326) view 'tended to put their differences aside when it comes to church-state issues'. As such, in calling for this national dialogue, church mother bodies agreed that to deal with the escalating political violence before the 2016 elections, political leaders were key as stakeholders (CCZ 2021). Thus, eighteen political party leaders were successfully brought together and committed to ending the use of military attire, machetes and pangas used to fan violence (Ibid). The engagement culminated into a peace accord by all participating political parties.

However, parties across the political spectrum could not stand by their peace commitments, particularly to end what the church mother bodies, characterised as 'political violence, misapplication of the public order Act' and 'electoral malpractices' (Phiri 2018:2). Several arguments may be advanced for this failure. First, as a once-off day event, not all parties may have taken the dialogue session seriously and there was a lack of political will to end political violence. All the leaders made a firm commitment by signing a communique detailing their pledge to promote and advocate for a violent-free political environment (Phiri 2016). Second, the resurgence of political violence before and after the August 2016 elections was suggestive of a lack of commitment to bring to fruition agreements reached on 29 March 2016. Not even moral or ethical guidance provided through pastoral letters by the church mother bodies helped avert violence before and after the elections.[5] In 2018,

5 The ZCCB, for instance, issued a pastoral letter less than a month before elections calling for peaceful, credible and transparent elections.

fresh calls for 'national political dialogue' were driven not only by these failures of the churches' efforts, but by renewed political divisions. Then the chaotic aftermath of the 2016 presidential and general elections also motivated action. Aside from the results being disputed, there were unprecedented levels of post-election violence. However, after two years of protracted conversations and debates, the church mother bodies launched the national political dialogue and reconciliation in early 2019.

Without the ruling PF and most of its aligned 'opposition' parties and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) including the ZCID, the launch drew in representatives from 16 of the over 30 registered political parties including the UPND. Traditional leaders and some of the ambassadors accredited to Zambia as well as representatives from professional bodies such as the Law Association of Zambia (LAZ) were part of the launch. Not part of the church-led process, the PF instead presented a national dialogue bill to parliament which was later enacted into law.[6] The Act provided for the constitution of a national dialogue forum (NDF) which met for 16 days and came up with three bills.[7] Bill 10 remained contested until it failed to garner a two-thirds majority in parliament to be passed into law in 2020. The basis of all the bills were resolutions (the Siavonga resolutions) relating to constitutional, institutional, and electoral reforms adopted at a ZCID convened meeting in Siavonga in June 2018 (Lumina 2019).

As a culmination of the national dialogue process, the aims of NDF merit spelling out. Theoretically, the aim of the forum was to create space to 'alter the constitution, based on the draft amendments proposed to the constitution based on submissions from the stakeholders following the constitutional amendments of 2016 and additional submissions from the church'. Further, 'reform the law on the electoral process, public order and regulation of political parties based on submissions from various stakeholders'; 'vary, confirm, add or remove any provision of the draft amendments or repeals and replacements proposed to the Constitution, the Electoral Process Act 2016, the Public Order Act and the draft provisions of the Political Parties Bill, 2019 that the forum

6 National Dialogue (Constitution, electoral process, public order and political parties) Act. No. 1 of 2019.

7 The Constitution (Amendment) Bill # 10 of 2019; The Electoral Process (Amendment) Bill # 11 of 2019 and The Public Order Bill # 12 of 2019.

considers appropriate' (National Assembly of Zambia 2019:5–6).Further, 'that the business of the forum be conducted openly and is guided by the respect for the universal principles of human rights, gender equality and democracy'. Additionally, 'ensure that the outcome of the review process faithfully reflects the wishes of the people of Zambia' (Ibid).

While these goals do not speak to building social cohesion directly, the pre and post-election violence that characterised the 2016 general elections severely (or gravely) polarised the country. This was on account of the disputed election outcomes that the UPND and their supporters deemed not a representation of the will of the Zambian people. Therefore, some stakeholders saw the need for national dialogue as not only about constitutional amendments but an opportunity for the nation to reconcile and restore unity. The church mother bodies, for example, argued that the punitive clauses[8] included in the Act contradict the objective of a national dialogue process that fosters reconciliation. The UPND contended that the forum was created by an Act of parliament that criminalised its character and that the assembly was coercive, lacked cohesion and consensus by the people of Zambia. It was in short a PF monologue (Lusaka Times 2019a).

Some stakeholders maintained that the country needed genuine, sincere, and inclusive dialogue aimed at national reconciliation and that even if its constitution was amended, the NDF left out a large part of the country. Such a national process ought to be mandated by the people (Malung 2019). The assertions are valid insofar as they present the inconsistencies within the provisions of the National Dialogue Act. For example, the Act clearly states that the forum, in the execution of its functions, shall be accountable to the people of Zambia. And, recognise the importance of confidence-building, engendering trust, and developing a national consensus for the review process (section 4, (3), 'a', 'b'). To other stakeholders, the facilitation of NDF was questionable. One of the opposition party leaders, for example, withdrew from the forum claiming the chair was biased and described the proceedings as a sham. He alleged that PF-aligned delegates had more time to participate (Zambian Watchdog, 2019). Even if this may seem like a lone voice, perceived partiality brings the spirit of an inclusive national assembly into question.

8 For example, one clause provides that, any person who contravenes a particular subsection commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to a fine not exceeding fifty thousand penalty units or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to both.

6. National dialogue social cohesion nexus

A sense of belonging (or connectedness) and common good pursuit are two domains of social cohesion that are pertinent in considering the national dialogue and social cohesion nexus. First, connectedness 'promotes cohesion through identification with the country, a high level of confidence in its institutions and a perception that social conditions are fair' (Dragolov et al. 2016:7). However, positive association and confidence in the institutions diminish and stifle buy-in, as was the case when an opposition leader from the UPPZ withdrew from the NDF. As noted earlier, genuine national dialogue is a collective endeavour. Further, the alienation of major stakeholders such as the church mother bodies, LAZ, and the main opposition UPND parliamentarians from the NDF and its resolutions, undermined the national dialogue's cohesive efforts. The failure of Bill 10 to garner a two-thirds majority[9] in parliament revealed the detachment of the UPND parliamentarians from the NDF outcomes.

Besides minimising national dialogue's potential to restore unity, these detachments have a spiral effect on constituencies served by these actors. For example, envisaged peace dividends including social cohesion remain unattainable as the cooperation between citizens for and against the national dialogue forum and its outcomes is impeded. Ensuring social cleavages and polarisation, although unarticulated, have a negative bearing on horizontal and vertical relations, which ultimately affects society's peace and prosperity (Cox and Sisk 2017; Burns, et al. 2018). Such divisions not only impinge on society's connectedness, but it is also an affront to *Ubuntu*. As Bialostocka (2017:277) argued, with *Ubuntu*, 'one's humanity is defined in conjunction with what the other brings to the dialogue table; and appreciation and respect for an individual remain core'. No citizen is less important during national dialogues.

In essence, the call to have all concerned parties own and be part of the national dialogue process is the pursuit of the common good. In committing to the common good, one crucial dimension is 'civic participation that is people participating in society and political life and enter into public discussion' (Dragolov et al. 2016:7). Participation espoused here is social, political, and inclusive, allowing all groups

9 The Bill required 111 votes to pass but only managed to get 105 yes votes.

within society to be equally involved. It is also about enhanced state-society relations and averting any possible social and political polarisation. The dialogue-social cohesion nexus within the realm of quests for the common good invokes national efforts to achieve a just society that encourages national unity through positive social and political interactions.

However, guaranteeing positive relations within the polity during the NDF was especially difficult as the forum was seen to be dominated by representatives with undue influence from their appointing authority (Lusaka Times 2019b). This would, to a great extent, allow partisan positions to take precedence over national interests or even individual preferences. In other words, it creates a situation that drags along, or silences those that may hold divergent views, or indeed stifles buy-in – only admitting those who conform. While constitutional changes are essential, several stakeholders had initially hoped that politicians would subordinate their personal and partisan benefits to national interests (The Mast 2017; Lusaka Times 2018). For example, the common good pursuit suffered, being reduced to what might be termed 'a triviality'. In support of a legalistic approach to the national dialogue, a former justice minister and leader of an opposition political party during a television interview laughably argued that there was no need for national healing and reconciliation as 'no one was sick to be healed' and that, 'it was an exaggeration to call for national reconciliation as the NDF was not about uniting the country but only about refining the legislation' (Sunday Interview 2019). Perhaps a different nomenclature would have been appropriate if the process was ultimately not about national healing and reconciliation as claimed by the former justice minister.

By assuming a legalistic trajectory, the process deviated from fostering national harmony, not just among political actors but all stakeholders. Further, the new law and its legalistic trajectory, caused the national dialogue's processes and outcome to become more polarising than uniting. In short, cultivating a sense of belonging and fostering the common good within the social cohesion realm remained elusive. The failure of the national dialogue process to reflect the wishes of the people of Zambia remained elusive. As stakeholders previously cited in this article averred, the national dialogue process failed to reflect the wishes of the people of Zambia, failed to encourage social cohesion and predicted an uncertain future for the 2021 electoral campaign.

7. 2021 elections and implications for social cohesion

While the post-2021 election period was relatively calm following the peaceful transfer of power from the PF to the UPND, the electoral campaigns were unpredictable, especially in fostering social cohesion. A cohesive society can act together and intervene on behalf of the common good (Barolsky et al. 2016:1). Thus, if leaders across the political divide can enhance such collective efforts through genuine and civilised engagements, then election-related violence would be avoided. However, in an apparent exacerbation of the polarity within the polity arising from the NDF, as noted earlier, the approach of some leaders aligned with the PF during the 2021 electoral campaigns was a serious affront to social cohesion. At least three aspects characterised this unwarranted practice.

First, there was extensive and unjustified hate language against the Tonga ethnic group and Mr Hakainde Hichilema (current President of Zambia), who is a Tonga. These verbal attacks unquestionably induced 'social cleavages and polarisation' and increased the likelihood of political violence. Acts of violence may not only result in fatalities and intimidating voters but has the potential to disrupt the electoral process, including disenfranchising voters and other contenders. For example, two weeks before elections on 12 August 2021, President Edgar Lungu authorised the deployment of the Army in response to increasing incidences of violence as election day approached. Some argued that this deployment was not necessary as there was no public emergency or national disaster to warrant such action. Further, that the presence of soldiers and cordons on streets had the potential to negatively affect voter turn-out (Kyambalesa 2021).

While this may be true, on the contrary, it can be argued that the spread of tribal prejudices against the UPND[10] and Mr Hakainde was an inherent factor and stimulus that may have steered young voters especially to act in solidarity with the UPND. In other words, political cleavages triggered by reckless campaign messages shaped young voters' participation in the electoral process. Additionally, their voting en

10 There is a persistent and unproven assumptions that the United Party for National Development (UPND) is a party of and for Tongas.

masse[11] in the August 2021 elections also revealed increasing frustration with the adverse socio-economic conditions under the PF administration.

Second, communities' sense of belonging was increasingly fractured by continued tribal utterances during campaigns. Some PF political leaders developed a canvassing style that was often greased with negative tribal sentiments. A society will join together when individuals have a sense of belonging and see unconstrained prospects to participate in their county's social and political affairs. The hate language during 2021 elections campaigns not only sparked the 'Us versus Them' dichotomy but revived tribal lines that Zambia's first president, the late Dr Kenneth Kaunda, fought and erased. Besides perpetuating exclusion and maligning some sections of society through messages propagated by PF-aligned leaders. This also sow seeds of disunity. With some benefits accruing to the polity or the broader society, social cohesion additionally enhances citizens' willingness to individually or collectively contribute to a common vision of sustainable peace and unity.

Third, it can be argued that campaign messages that were interwoven with hate speech and tribal rhetoric against Mr Hichilema and the UPND brought to the fore, perpetrators' trivialising of the common good. In a polarised political atmosphere as witnessed after the NDF, electoral campaign messages ought to have been expressed in tones that heal, foster peace, unity and harmony. Within social cohesion parlance, committing to the common good implies taking part in keeping the country's philosophy of 'One Zambia, One Nation' afloat. Akin to the tribal lines that characterised colonial times, the 2021 electoral campaigns mutilated the maxim relentlessly through hate language. And, while inflaming relations between ethnic groups (for example the Tongas versus other groups in Zambia) is a direct assault on this motto, as noted earlier; it also undermines social cohesion by igniting polarisation and prejudiced practices.

As such, concerned with the injurious effect that prejudiced hate speech and tribal rhetoric has on a nation, some observers insisted that perpetrators should be punished severely by handing down a lengthy

11 It is estimated that over half (4 million) of the registered voters in 2021 were aged between 18 and 24 years. See also Restless Development Blog available at <https://restlessdevelopment.org/2021/08/zambia-election-a-young-peoples-vote/> (Accessed 28 October 2021).

suspension from participating in politics (The Mast Online 2021). However, such punitive measures may be counterproductive for both the incumbent and opposition political players. For example, the ruling party needs the opposition to sustain its local and international legitimacy. It is said and correctly so, that the only appropriate mode of transfer of political power currently, is elections. However, there should be guidelines for the conduct of elections and those participating (candidates, campaign managers, and sponsors) must act with honesty and integrity.

8. Lessons for the future

Dialogue remains a principal apparatus through which contending parties can connect and amicably gravitate toward transforming their differences. It is a form of communication that prevents situations from degenerating into polarisation and increased hostility. Given our current case, at least four lessons are offered that may help the national dialogue process to foster national healing, reconciliation, and encourage the broader society to cohere. First, an all-inclusive national dialogue process is still feasible. The current National Dialogue Act was enacted to allow for the 'alteration of the constitution and reform the law on the electoral process, public order and regulation of political parties.

However, a bottom-up national process can be launched to deal with social issues such as hate speech, ethnicism, and perceived inequalities, all of which fuels polarisation. This is particularly crucial because of the August 2021 general elections that saw heightened hate speech and negative tribal sentiments in turn sustaining political polarisation. As noted earlier, an all-inclusive national dialogue process has a good chance of encouraging constructive exchange, a precursor not only to social cohesion but entrenching the country's nascent democracy. As the case was in 2016 with district and provincial consultations preceding constitution amendments, a bottom-up approach would be actualised through a similar framework.

Second, all stakeholders should strive to avert any elitist leanings in the organisation of a conference of such national significance. CSOs and the church mother bodies that have consistently spoken out against election-related violence and other social, economic, and political ills are stakeholders whose input deserves unrestricted inclusion. Fostering such

a culture of dialogue remains Zambia's social and political imperative, given its fragmented national dialogue efforts since 2018. The participation of these stakeholders may also predispose their respective constituencies to cohere as members of the broader society. However, the success of such unity rests on the political will and commitment from all stakeholders to stimulate interest and a sense of belonging among ordinary citizens.

Third, the national dialogue architecture, from inception to the final phase, ought to remain inclined to cultivate a cohesive society. There needs to be a consistent focus on the common good and the participation of common citizens. The Siavonga meeting unanimously resolved to have the national dialogue process facilitated by ZCID, and chaired by the church mother bodies. And most importantly, the constitution must be adopted by a people's assembly (Lumina 2019). A departure from this trajectory to a more legalistic process suppressed the essence and ownership of a national dialogue that fosters healing and reconciliation. The pursuit of dialogue processes with firm national and local tiers is an opportunity for an inclusive, broad, and participatory formal negotiation framework which can assist and transform social cohesion challenges, including stifled civic participation. Rather than community-level consultations to build a grassroots informed national dialogue framework, members of the public were invited to make submissions to three proposed bills that constituted agenda items for the NDF.

Ensuring that national dialogue has an agenda that speaks to the root of differences between parties within the polity is another lesson worth reiterating. Taking into account post-2016 election issues, the national dialogue efforts in 2019 ought to have gone beyond constitutional refinement. It is said, the value of Zambia's dialogue engagement lies in addressing the cause of tensions, discord, and polarisation to promote 'reconciliation, national consensus, and social cohesion' (The Mast Online 2018). The design of an agenda envisaged here is that it should be participatory and concerted.

Last, reinforcing the feasibility of an all-inclusive national dialogue and thwarting elitist learning, there is also a need to call for fresh 'buy-in' from stakeholders within the polity. Bottom-up, district, and provincial level engagements, as noted earlier, would support a grassroots informed national dialogue framework. While the earlier lesson emphasises

contributions toward the agenda, the current highlight is on broad-based participation and not just a few individuals taking the lead. The enactment of the National Dialogue Act restricted participation given its prescription of attendees. Thus, invitations for submissions through the justice ministry and subsequent participation in the NDF in 2019 notwithstanding, membership was not all-inclusive. The need to reach out to the public or the broader population remains essential.

9. Conclusion

Consolidating social cohesion is now an imperative of the 21st century. Sisk et al. (2020:10) argue that 'as we move into the 2020s, widespread concern exists about worsening conditions of conflict that threaten respect for diversity, inclusivity and fundamental human rights'. In the design of national dialogues' support structures, attention ought to be paid to these aspects. While national dialogue processes' initial focus may be the upper and middle levels of society, the rationale for dialogue and social cohesion nexus is 'guaranteeing the well-being that allows the power of the people to exist' (Cuellar 2009:5). In short, the design and holding of a national dialogue should place the well-being of the people at the center, in terms of the content and the process. A people-centred approach will motivate citizens of all backgrounds, gender, professionals and even ethnicities to buy into dialogical interventions without coercion.

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