



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

Democratic expectations tested in competitive process, but limits to fundamental freedoms resulted in uneven playing field.

Lusaka, 15 August 2026

This preliminary statement of the EU election observation mission (EU EOM) is delivered before the completion of the entire electoral process. Critical stages remain, including tabulation of results and adjudication of petitions. The EU EOM is now only able to comment on observation undertaken to date, and will later publish a final report, including full analysis and recommendations for electoral reform. The EU EOM may also make additional statements on election-related matters as and when it considers it appropriate.

Summary

- The 13 August 2026 general elections were a test of Zambians' democratic expectations. The elections were competitive, with numerous candidates standing at presidential, parliamentary and local levels and a high number of independent candidates. Fundamental democratic rights were, however, impacted by restrictions on the ability to campaign that affected most presidential candidates. Key incumbency advantages blurred the line between state and political campaigning creating an uneven playing field. State-owned media was heavily biased towards the ruling party and self-censorship in traditional and social media increased as a result of certain measures introduced by the new cyber laws.
- While the elections were conducted under a recently amended legal framework that provided an adequate basis to conduct democratic elections, changes to the electoral system were enacted as late as only three months before polling, contrary to international and regional best practice, and reduced awareness of aspects of them. The amendments also created new legal uncertainties, which hampered effective inclusion and impinged on the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Crucially, constitutionally mandated laws on political parties and on political finance were not enacted, undermining transparency, public accountability and a level playing field.
- Despite a compressed timeframe due to late changes in the law, the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) managed operations until voting day in line with its schedule and legal timelines. However, delays in the publication of guidelines and regulations contributed to uncertainty over procedures to be followed, especially regarding election day procedures and the use of technology. Delayed regulations, erroneous training materials, and election day information on candidate withdrawals remained unaddressed by the ECZ. There was scope, as well, for improved public information sharing. The start of accreditation only on 21 July was too late to fully accommodate long-term observation methodologies and fundamentally impacted citizen observer groups and the EU EOM.
- Voter registration was inclusive, but the process requires more robust and continuous efforts. Some interlocutors criticised the late deployment of staff and technical difficulties with the digital kits during the voter registration process, which impacted the ability of ECZ to increase registration rates. ECZ improvements included an online pre-registration portal enabling registered voters to also electronically inspect the Provisional Register of Voters.
- Candidate registration was inclusive, transparent, and timely. Fourteen candidates stood in the presidential election, only one of whom was a woman, and voters were offered a genuine and competitive choice of contestants. Many independent candidates stood at all levels, partially reflecting internal party dynamics, party rivalries and bureaucratic obstacles in registering for a party.
- The election campaign was limited but many candidates held rallies, roadshows, events, and door-to-door meetings. For the first time, the ECZ introduced a campaign calendar for presidential candidates, with the aim of reducing the risk of violence. However, the calendar did not apply to the president and vice-president and restricted other candidates' freedom of movement and ability to campaign. Campaign-related violence and cadreism (the involvement of violent groups traditionally associated with political movements) remained features of the campaign, and the police response to such incidents was not always balanced or adequate.
- The media was able to operate with relative freedom throughout the campaign, but there was a chilling effect created by insecurity related to recent revisions of cyber laws that led to reported increases in self-

censorship and one prominent journalist's arrest. The EU EOM conducted a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative monitoring of 10 outlets showing the media environment during elections to be characterised by heavily biased state-owned media coverage, in contradiction of legislation.

- On social media platforms, false claims and discreditation persists amidst growing self-censorship resulting from restrictive cyber laws. Social media extended the main candidates' reach and offered those with less resources a low-cost alternative to rallies and paid broadcast. Ethnic and violent language was limited in EU EOM monitoring. The iVerify platform was consistent and professional in debunking false claims, which included issues around ballots and the ECZ, the president, internet shutdowns, and opposition figures. Although numerous, false claims did not show signs of coordinated and structured effort.
- Positively, an Access to Information (ATI) law was enacted and the offence of criminal defamation of the president repealed, reflecting two key recommendations of the EU EOM 2021, but the impacts were muted by a lack of effective implementation and other restrictive laws and practices.
- Women's participation as candidates in these elections was minimal. They contested at only nine per cent across all levels of elections with no women candidates standing in more than half of constituencies. Interlocutors reported gender-based harassment against some candidates. Despite changes to the electoral system that created 20 reserve seats for women, interlocutors voiced concern over the low women's candidacy rates, further highlighting the need for parties to make more serious efforts to nominate women.
- Persons with disabilities (PwD) continued to face significant political and societal marginalisation, despite some progress in the creation of five Proportional Representation reserve seats. PwDs struggle with societal prejudice, independent access to polling locations, and participation in public and political life. A lack of genuine political will to combat this marginalisation persists, as demonstrated by recent law reforms, as well as that only one of five party manifestos detailed specific policy measures.
- Citizen observer organisations conducting both long- and short-term observation were active and professional. The capacity of citizen and international observer groups to apply their methodologies was, however, hampered by new administrative accreditation procedures and some last-minute and *ad hoc* requests, that constrained opportunities for long-term observation.
- The EU EOM observed the opening of 39 polling stations (PS), voting in 419 PS, counting in 38 PS and tabulation at 47 totalling centres. Election day was calm overall, with polling staff efficiently facilitating voting in polling stations observed by the EU EOM. The counting of the ballots was also transparent, in the presence of party and candidate agents. The ECZ provided limited public information during election day, with only two online posts and two press briefings in the evening. No voter turnout figures were published.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) has been present in the Zambia since 29 June 2026 following an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Zambia. The Mission is led by Chief Observer, Michael McNamara, Member of the European Parliament (from Ireland). In total, the EU EOM deployed 100 observers from 26 EU Member States, plus Norway, across the country to assess the whole electoral process against international obligations and commitments for democratic elections as well as the laws of Zambia. A delegation of the European Parliament, headed by Reinhold Lopatka, MEP from Austria, also joined the mission and fully endorses this Statement. On Election Day, observers visited 419 polling stations in 113 of the 226 constituencies of Zambia to observe voting and counting.

This preliminary statement is delivered prior to the completion of the election process. The final assessment of the elections will depend, in part, on the conduct of the remaining stages of the election process, in particular, the completion of the tabulation of results, and the handling of any post-election day complaints and appeals. The EU EOM remains in country to observe post-election developments and will publish a final report, containing detailed recommendations, within two months of the conclusion of the electoral process.

The EU EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions and adheres to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation endorsed at the United Nations in October 2005.

Preliminary Findings

Background

The 13 August 2026 general elections took place against a backdrop of a constrained democratic space, which was impacted by legislation that limited fundamental freedoms essential to a genuinely democratic process. Significant constitutional reforms, including the enlargement of the National Assembly (NA), an associated increase in constituency numbers, and the reshaping of local councils, dominated pre-election discourse, drew criticism and controversy, and led to at least one court challenge. Many stakeholders alleged the incumbent-led reform process was designed to shape the election outcome, citing a lack of adequate and timely consultation, unresolved concerns over inclusion, and an apparent revision of approach in anticipation of judicial intervention. The reforms eventually adopted followed a delayed legislative process, with the amended electoral law enacted only on 15 May, the last day of parliament.

In the elections, the incumbent President Hichilema sought a second term. Mr. Brian Mundubile, formerly of Patriotic Front (PF), was adopted as presidential candidate for the National Reconciliation Party for Unity and Prosperity (NRPUP), previously a minor party. After joining forces with Makebi Zulu of the Pamodzi Alliance, Mr Mundubile emerged as the main opposition candidate just three months before the elections, representing the Tonse-Pamodzi Alliance. With 14 presidential candidates nominated, the contest was dominated by these two forces. A record number of independent candidates contested NA seats, many of whom had failed to secure party nominations.

Legal Framework and Electoral System

An adequate legal framework was complicated by late reforms, contributing to legal instability.

The legal framework offers an adequate basis to conduct democratic elections. However, several gaps, weaknesses, and ambiguities impact transparency, effective inclusion, institutional independence, and legal stability. Zambia subscribes to the key UN, AU and SADC instruments governing democratic processes. Despite this, several commitments remain unfulfilled, notably on contestants' financial accountability and meaningful representation of women, youth and persons with disability (PwD). The Bill of Rights underpins fundamental freedoms, yet arbitrary actions and undue limits on the freedoms of expression, assembly, and movement persist, often due to out-dated, colonial era laws, and ambiguous legal provisions. This includes the widely criticised Public Order Act (POA), overreaching Penal Code sections, and recently enacted cyber laws.

Positively, the recently enacted ATI law and the repeal of the offence of criminal defamation of the president reflected two key recommendations of the EU EOM 2021. Still, their impact was muted because defamation remains a criminal offence in other statutes and the EU EOM noted credible reports of ATI requests facing undue hurdles or institutional silence.

The Constitution, the Electoral Process Act (EPA), and various regulatory instruments govern election administration by the ECZ. They enshrine the rights and duties of voters, parties, candidates, their agents, and observers, while prescribing dispute resolution mechanisms at each stage of the process. Crucially, constitutionally mandated laws on political parties and for political finance were not enacted, undermining transparency and public accountability and a level playing field.

Incumbent-led constitutional reforms in 2025 and 2026, adapted in public consultation mandated by a Constitutional Court intervention, entailed key changes to the Constitution and the EPA. The amendments, overwhelmingly endorsed by parliament, almost doubled the NA membership, introducing 70 new constituencies and reserved seats in the NA and local councils for women, PwD, and youth. A positive measure, aimed at promoting a level playing field, mandated that government ministers resign 90 days before elections. The legal enactments, however, came as late as three months before polling, challenging public awareness and going against international and regional best practice on the timing of substantive legal reforms prior to an election. The creation of 70 new constituencies in April 2026 relied on a time-constrained

delimitation exercise and lacked transparency. While the new delimitations reduced the number of voters per seat in some urban areas, the overall impact saw only marginal improvement in the equality of the vote, a significant gap still exists between the most and least populated districts. The revised laws also added new legal frailties, including discrimination and unequal treatment of appointees to reserved seats due to an unrestricted power of recall. The reserved seat mechanism gives no opportunity for voter knowledge of candidates for such seats before elections.

Pre-election court cases highlighted legal ambiguities regarding candidate withdrawals, contestant symbol changes, and gender inequality in nominations. The courts managed these issues without disrupting the process. Still, some matters remain for post-election resolution. The ECZ's mid-campaign decisions to change some candidate symbols, owing to perceived similarities, created legal uncertainty and curtailed some candidates' ability to campaign. Although the judiciary acted independently, one case showed how excessive prosecutorial power, with restricted judicial oversight, allowed for the detention of presidential candidate, Xavier Chungu, who eventually withdrew. Legal practitioners noted that tight timelines and strict evidentiary standards disadvantage petitioners in local and parliamentary election disputes, leading to high failure rates.

The presidential election requires an absolute majority, potentially leading to a second-round vote within 37 days if no candidate reaches the "50 per cent plus one" threshold. Parliamentary seats are filled through a mix of 226 first-past-the-post contests and a new party-list system for 40 reserved seats, allocated through proportional representation based on presidential candidates' results nationally in the first round. The president may nominate up to 11 additional NA members (up from eight) without clearly defined selection criteria. Contests at local level largely mirrored the national system, with reserved seats set at 18 per cent of each council size and varying between a statutory minimum of three seats, rising to seven in the largest councils.

Electoral Administration

Professional election preparations with scope for improved public and stakeholder information sharing.

Most stakeholders expressed confidence in the effectiveness of the ECZ and trust in the impartiality of the institution. A compressed timeframe due to late changes in the law put pressure on the ECZ in implementing these elections. It also led to delays in the publication of guidelines and regulations, contributing to uncertainty over procedures to be followed, especially regarding election day procedures and the use of technology. Delayed regulations, erroneous training materials, uncertainty stemming from candidate withdrawals exposed shortcomings in the ECZ's work.

The ECZ is composed of five members appointed by the president, subject to ratification by the NA. Some opposition parties publicly expressed concerns about its independence, stemming from the presidential nomination of commissioners. Although the Constitution provides for decentralised, permanent structures at the provincial and district levels, these are not in place, purportedly due to a lack of financial resources. Consequently, the ECZ relied on local administration in preparing and conducting elections at lower levels.

ECZ communication and information sharing was noticeable but not detailed. Since the start of the campaign until election day, the ECZ shared 196 posts on Facebook with general information, including 47 press statements and public notices. This was the main channel of communication, generating solid engagement. While the ECZ website provided some useful information, it was not always up-to-date, complete or in usable formats. Publication of public information about key electoral procedures and precise data would have notably enhanced the certainty and transparency of the process. Positively, the ECZ displayed openness by engaging with stakeholders in all steps of the electoral process, including at district level. Yet, it only conducted three national stakeholder meetings in the last weeks prior to the elections, despite repeated requests from different stakeholders.

Technical preparations broadly followed the electoral calendar, and ECZ preparations were generally timely but, for some processes, timelines were only made public at short notice. Stakeholders noted transparency in the ballot printing and verification process. Although there were some delays, including for the arrival of ballot papers in country and the training of polling station staff, these did not impact the election process. For these

elections, the ECZ recruited over 81,000 staff for the 13,529 polling stations. Recruitment procedures were inconsistently followed in the districts according to EU EOM observers, and notable communication gaps on polling staff selection reduced transparency and accountability of the recruitment process. Trainings for poll workers observed by the EU EOM were mostly assessed as comprehensive and professional.

ECZ's voter education campaign was generally comprehensive and inclusive, including videos, leaflets, and voter guides, distributed through digital channels, traditional media and in-person community meetings. The ECZ intensified its voter information campaign from June onwards. This was of importance given the recent changes to the electoral law. Yet, ECZ voter education material on the allocation of reserved seats at the council level did not reflect the new electoral law, an error that created uncertainty among voters. Enacting changes to the law earlier in the electoral cycle would have allowed for better time to prepare administration, voter education, and training materials with updated and correct information. Positively, the ECZ produced educational materials and targeted messages in seven local languages as well as a search tool on its website to identify polling stations. EU EOM observers noted voter information was more limited in rural communities.

Voter Registration

Inclusive voter registration process, requiring more extensive and continuous efforts.

The right to vote is available to all citizens 18 or older by 30 April 2026, the cut-off date for these elections. They must also hold a national registration card (NRC) issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Citizens who legally lack mental capacity cannot vote. The law allows convicted prisoners to vote, in line with international standards. Zambia has an active and continuous voter registration system, compiled and maintained by the ECZ. It certified and published the voter register on 4 May, with 8,786,300 voters (25 per cent increase since 2021). Women account for 53 per cent and 46 per cent are youth (18-34 years), a decline on the proportion of the voter register that youth comprised at the last election.

The ECZ had suspended its continuous registration in August 2025, as the geographical distance for citizens to registration centres coupled with limited civic education did not yield significant numbers. To increase registration rates, the ECZ conducted a nationwide mobile mass voter registration drive from October to November 2025, reaching 50 per cent of its target. EU EOM observers reported that stakeholders and citizens generally expressed confidence in the accuracy of the voter register. Yet, some interlocutors criticised logistical difficulties in the voter registration process, which impacted the ability of ECZ to increase registration rates. ECZ improvements included an online pre-registration portal that enabled registered voters to also electronically inspect the Provisional Register of Voters.

Registration of Candidates and Political Parties

A timely nomination process and competitive field of contestants marred by intra-party rivalries.

The ECZ approved 14 presidential nominees (only one woman independent candidate) in a process that was transparent and timely, with only one candidate rejected for not meeting legal requirements. UPND and NRPUP accounted for most candidates that competed from amongst 29 political parties standing. UPND fielded candidates in every NA constituency and council/mayoral race, and in 99 per cent of wards. NRPUP contested 68 per cent of NA constituencies, 72 per cent of council/mayoral chairs, and 62 per cent of wards. Eight NA seats were uncontested (all UPND, half in newly created constituencies), along with 6 council/mayoral seats (all UPND) and 179 ward seats (97 per cent UPND). The average number of candidates in contested constituencies allowed for genuinely competitive choice.

Provisions on the right to stand for election are broadly inclusive, open to citizens who are registered voters, and hold at least a grade 12 education certificate. The latter requirement may exclude otherwise competent candidates and does not align with the UN Human Right Commission's General Comment 25 to the ICCPR. The EPA prohibits a candidate from standing in more than one list in the same constituency, offering accountability. Reduced nomination fees apply for women, youth and PwD candidates. Despite this, women were largely underrepresented as candidates.

Many independent candidates stood at all levels; largely as a result of weak intra-party democracy and practical obstacles facing smaller parties. All candidates have to submit adoption certificates, newly required to be signed by both their party secretary general and president, which is harder to meet for smaller parties with limited organisational presence in regions; several told the EU EOM they had encouraged their candidates to run as independents instead. Parties and candidates described a chaotic party nomination and adoption process to the EU EOM, driven mainly by intra-party conflicts within UPND and the former PF. They cited candidates who were bribed to withdraw, faced intimidation, physical obstruction of supporters needed to endorse nominations, and that police detention was used to prevent some candidates from filing their nominations. However, there were few petitions against the process.

Candidate lists for the new PR list reserved seats only have to be submitted no later than fourteen days after the president's swearing in. Their allocation is based on the presidential results of the first round, a unique feature of this electoral system. Thus, citizens did not have the opportunity to know who will represent them under the PR system at the time of election, reducing transparency.

Campaign Environment

An active campaign offered voters a genuine choice, but on an unlevel playing fields shaped by incumbency advantages.

The campaign period was marked by an unlevel playing field, with significant disparities in resources and incumbency advantages that favoured the ruling party. The election campaign was limited, but many candidates held rallies, roadshows, events, and door-to-door meetings. Still, the campaign from the UPND and the Tonse-Pamodzi Alliance offered voters an opposing choice. The ECZ for the first time introduced campaign timetables for presidential contestants, ostensibly aimed at avoiding violence, that excluded the president and the VP, and restricted candidates' free movement and ability to campaign.

Most presidential candidates met by the EU EOM stated they were not meaningfully consulted on the timetable, which allowed each candidate to campaign for only a five-day period once per province. Given vast distances, poor road conditions and limited budgets, this seriously hampered parties' ability to campaign. Nine candidates noted that unscheduled president/VP visits caused their campaign events to be blocked/cancelled or resulted in police-ordered suspensions. This caused campaign slots in many cases to be irreparably lost.

Incidents of violence included attacks on political party supporters and property that were often linked to 'cadreism' (violent groups traditionally associated with political movements). On 29 June, a UPND cadre was stabbed and killed during a clash with NRPUP cadres in Kaputa District, prompting the ECZ to suspend the NRPUP's campaign in the constituency until 22 July, two days after NRPUP sought a court challenge. From 4 August, there was a series of allegations made by opposition figures that their personnel were being targeted. The EU EOM was also witness to a person being seized by armed personnel on morning of 10 August, which seemed to give credence to stakeholders' concerns. There was no further coverage of this event in any of the main press outlets.

Various EU EOM stakeholders, including opposition parties and CSOs, complained of police inaction and political bias. In several cases, police justified their interventions, including halting opposition events, by citing non-compliance with campaign rules. However, the EU EOM noted seemingly disproportionate action in several instances. On 5 August, the Human Rights Commission condemned political violence during the campaign and urged the Zambian Police Service to investigate all reported incidents and to act on them regardless of political affiliation.

High spending by UPND and administrative hurdles for other contestants further distorted the campaign playing field. The EU EOM observed that the ruling party dominated the campaign nationwide in campaign activities, billboards, posters, party regalia, and campaign equipment. The president held large campaign rallies in every province, labelling them as 'working visits' or community engagement. A legal prohibition on the use of state transport and facilities for campaigning does not apply to the president/VP when acting in their official

capacity. Nevertheless, the EU EOM directly observed the misuse of state resources in campaign events in eight provinces (Luapula, Southern, Central, North-Western, Muchinga, Northern, Copperbelt, Eastern).

UPND also used government platforms for campaign messaging, including the Civil Service Commission's 14 July announcement opening 2,600 health worker positions. The EU EOM subsequently noted the president promoting the recruitment of volunteer nurses at 28 rallies, going further at 15 of these by announcing that volunteer nurses and teachers present would be employed, and instructing local leaders to record their names for recruitment. The EU EOM directly observed nurses attending these rallies and providing their details on three occasions (2 in Copperbelt, 1 in Eastern). In 18 campaign speeches, the president promised continuity and expansion of the social cash transfer programme, often paired with the "cash for work" scheme. In at least two rallies (Masaiti and Lufwanyama) local leaders were instructed to record the names of unenrolled but eligible residents to be added to the programme. On 1 August, at a University of Zambia student march to State House, the president announced an immediate increase in student accommodation allowances from K3,900 to K5,850. This blurring of campaign and state functions is at odds with international and regional commitments.

Voter inducement is explicitly prohibited, but the EU EOM noted indications of it in one third of observed campaign events across nine provinces, mainly by UPND, including directly observed cash handouts. On 4 August, during a rally in Chambishi, the president ordered the national electricity company ZESCO to connect 16,000 households in Chambishi's Kwa Kabaso area to the grid, to lower their charges, and promised to personally cover the cost of the connection fees, combining voter inducement with the use of government power for campaign purposes.

Media

An open but cautious media environment characterised by biased state-owned media coverage.

The media environment is dynamic and pluralistic and while media operated freely, overall, they face financial constraints, a certain level of political pressure and intimidation, which has led to increased self-censorship. Recent legal reforms, such as the Cyber Security Act and the Cyber Crimes Act had a chilling effect on the environment, resulting in media and journalists reporting in a more cautious manner. The July detention of Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) journalist McPherson Mukuka, imprisoned for two weeks under the Cyber Crimes Act (CCA) over allegations of recording and publishing a private conversation without consent, illustrated these conditions.

The Criminal Code and the CCA, however, contain restrictive provisions not in line with fundamental freedoms in the Constitution and international standards for freedom of expression. The EPA also has no provisions for campaign expenditure limits in media, at odds with international good practice.

Electoral coverage largely focused on the two main contenders, with state-owned media giving an overwhelming advantage to the ruling party despite its legal obligations to equal coverage. The national broadcaster, ZNBC, for instance, did not allocate public airtime equally to all political parties and candidates as required. Positively, ZNBC ran special election programmes with presidential running mates, and with parliamentary and mayoral candidates. Election coverage in its news bulletins, however, was inordinately biased in favour of UPND and the president.

EU EOM media monitoring from 15 July to 12 August across 10 outlets¹ found that UPND received 96.2 and 90.5 per cent of airtime, respectively, in election-related news on ZNBC's TV 1 and Radio 1. During this period, NRPUP presidential candidate, Mr. Mundubile, was almost excluded from news coverage on ZNBC TV 1, garnering only 0.1 per cent of coverage (1.1 per cent on ZNBC Radio 1). The president had 98.3 per cent of the total direct speech within the news on ZNBC TV1 and 98.4 per cent on ZNBC Radio 1, while Mr.

¹ The EU EOM monitored 10 media outlets, including four radio stations (ZNBC Radio 1, Hot FM, Power FM, Phoenix FM), three TV stations (ZNBC TV1, Diamond TV and Prime TV) and three newspapers (*Zambia Daily Mail*, *The Nation* and *News Diggers!*).

Mundubile did not enjoy any direct speech, neither on national TV nor on national radio during the entire monitoring period. In addition, ZNBC TV 1 broadcast the president's live campaign rallies daily.

A state-owned newspaper, Zambia Daily Mail, also favoured the ruling party by allocating 90.7 per cent of their election-related news during the monitoring period to the president. Mr. Mundubile received only 5 per cent of newspaper coverage.

Monitored private media Diamond TV, Hot FM, The Nation and News Diggers! provided equitable coverage of the campaign in their news, whereas Phoenix FM, Power FM and Prime TV showed different degrees of imbalance in favour of UPND.

Woman candidates received very little coverage in the media: only 3.5 per cent of total coverage in news and election-related programmes on the three TV stations monitored, and 5.2 per cent of total coverage on the four radio stations monitored.

Social Media and Digital Rights

False claims and discreditation persist amidst cautious expression under restrictive legislation

Social media extended the main candidates' reach and offered those with less resources a low-cost alternative to rallies and paid broadcasts. It also enabled the fast circulation of false claims about the electoral process and political actors, adding to offline misinformation. Facebook was the dominant platform. It is used by over four million voting-age Zambians, mostly urban.

Freedom of expression online was unduly curtailed, limiting political debate. Elections took place amid arrests for online speech offences, mostly arising from criticism of the president and public warnings against unlawful posts, issued by the police and army. While the need to address harmful online speech was broadly acknowledged, the response was to invoke the criminal law excessively, resulting in growing self-censorship online. The 2025 Cyber Security Act and the CCA are both the subject of a pending court case challenging the constitutionality of certain provisions that appear disproportionate and misaligned with international and regional standards for freedom of expression. During the campaign, the presidentially appointed Zambia Cyber Security Agency supported police investigations into speech offences, including cases concerning criticism of the president and the ECZ.

The EPA defines campaign messages broadly enough to cover online expression, but neither the Act nor ECZ regulation address online campaigning, third party campaigning, or online paid advertising. Part of the campaign on social media was carried by non-contestant pages, the payment for which, if any, could rarely be established. UPND-supportive channels were more numerous and more positive in tone. They rested on institutional, state media, pseudo-media pages and celebrity accounts that amplified the president's messages. NRPUP-supporting channels, including former PF members and bloggers, were fewer but comparatively more active, divisive and engaging. Some pages, with owners based abroad, repeatedly shared mis/dis-information. Advertising on Facebook was limited throughout the campaign but peaked closer to the elections, at some EUR 42,000; 92 per cent of this supported UPND.

The president's following was unmatched, exceeding 2.4 million followers on Facebook. Mr. Mundubile's following of 751,000 followers grew over 56 per cent in the final 5 weeks of the campaign. Both actively posted campaign videos and wide-angle crowd images, conveying size and support. This was sometimes at odds with EU EOM observations of events. The president's messages centred on delivery of education, mining, and farming while Mr. Mundubile's focused on allegations of corruption, electoral violence and promises over missing infrastructure.

Discreditation of rival candidates and the ECZ was common on supporter pages. NRPUP supportive pages relied on accusations of election rigging, corruption, morality and religion, and personal attacks, while UPND supporters used fearmongering, sarcasm, and name-calling such as "thieves" and "idiots". Ethnic and violent language remained limited in volume across the public Facebook pages monitored by the EU EOM, but its

incidence rose as elections approached. The comment sections were harsher. Abuses directed at women were more frequent and severe than attacks on men. Both genders were criticised on competence and alleged corruption, but women additionally on marital status, motherhood, appearance, and alleged witchcraft.

The multistakeholder National Action Coalition on Information Integrity did not fully deliver on its objectives, but its operational platform, iVerify, was consistent and professional in debunking false claims. Debunked information included ballot printing/delays and the ECZ, related to the president, internet shutdowns, and opposition figures. Although numerous, false claims did not show signs of coordinated and structured effort. They were, at times, politically motivated, exploiting existing polarisation, lack of institutional communication, and limited access to information. The ECZ countered 18 false claims during the campaign. Limited engagement between Meta, TikTok and national institutions weakened oversight during the elections.

Participation of Women

Women remained largely excluded from candidacy and political leadership.

Women's participation as candidates in these elections was minimal; 9 per cent across all levels, mostly as UPND nominees or independents. Of the 13 political parties that nominated presidential candidates, all were led by men; the only female contender, Given Katuta, stood as an independent. Among the 14 running mates, only 4 were women. There were no women candidates in more than half of constituencies. According to interlocutors, this was driven primarily by high campaign costs, non-transparent party adoption processes, limited party support, and entrenched cultural norms. The Gender Equity and Equality Commission, established in 2015, remains inactive, which limits women's access to a dedicated institutional mechanism for redress. Furthermore, the 20 reserved seats for women on PR lists, determined by parties' post-election based on the presidential vote results, appear to have negatively affected women's participation, as parties reportedly withheld women from constituency nominations in favour of these lists. This was compounded by recall provision allowing parties to replace these MPs at will raising concerns for their independence .

Gender-focused civil society organisations, voiced concern over the low women's candidacy rates despite constitutional reforms. They highlighted the need for parties to make further efforts to nominate women in constituency races. They also noted reports of violence, intimidation, and coercion within some parties' nomination processes. EU EOM observers received similar reports of violence against women in 6 of the 10 provinces. Isolated but serious incidents were reported, including a woman candidate was detained while filing nomination papers, and cases of candidates' withdrawals reportedly linked to violence and sextortion (a form of blackmail based on sexual exploitation for political gain). In Western Province, an independent candidate publicly alleged she was offered a PR-list place to step down; her account gained wide traction on social media.

Women turned out in large numbers as campaign supporters but remained marginal as speakers. At EU EOM-observed events, women made up roughly half of attendees but only some 20 per cent of speakers; several events had no women speakers. While women were well represented in some election administration roles, this did not extend to electoral politics more broadly.

Participation of Persons with Disabilities (PwD)

Significant political and societal marginalisation, despite some progress with accessibility mandates.

WHO estimates some 2 million Zambians live with disabilities. This represents 11 to 15 per cent of the population, of which only several hundred thousand are registered with the statutory Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities (ZAPD). Of these, only 20,162 are registered to vote, reflecting severe systemic marginalisation. Despite the 2015 Persons with Disabilities Act, PwDs continue to struggle with societal prejudice, independent polling access, and participation in political and public life. A distinct lack of genuine political will persists, as demonstrated by that fact that only one out of five political party manifestos detailed specific policy measures for PwDs.

Public institutions were required by Cabinet in 2024 to ensure accessibility within six months (e.g., improving ramps and facilities, adapting public documents, etc.). PwD representative bodies criticised governance

reforms, citing unrepresentative appointees for reserved seats, discriminatory recall powers, and mandatory ZAPD certification grounded in an outdated medical model. EU EOM's interlocutors also highlighted that the Persons with Disabilities (Amendment) Act, 2026, reduced the ZAPD board from 17 members to 7, leaving just one seat for PwD organisation representatives.

Citizen and International Observation

Active citizen and international observer groups hampered by administrative procedures, limiting opportunities for long-term observation.

The election law provides a basis for citizen and international observation. However, ECZ administrative procedures do not foresee accreditation for long-term observation, despite such requirements in its guidelines. The opening of accreditation on 21 July was too late to adequately accommodate long-term methodologies and fundamentally impacted citizen observers and the EU EOM. For the first time, an online accreditation system was used, but due to technical difficulties, the ECZ moved to a hybrid online/paper-based format on the day of its launch. The new system was slow and limited the number and geographical reach of observers, notably for results centres, including at national level. Uncertainty on procedures and several additional *ad hoc* administrative hurdles, including in-person observer verification, further delayed the process.

Several citizen observer organisations observed different aspects of the election and regularly issued pre-election reports, contributing to transparency and awareness of the process. The main organisation, the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), deployed some 1,650 accredited observers and conducted a process and results verification for transparency (PRVT). ZAFOD monitored accessibility of polling stations and processes, while TIZ focused on code of conduct violations. Other international observation missions included the African Union, jointly with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community and its Electoral Commissions Forum, and the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region.

Polling and Counting

Transparent voting procedures throughout a calm election day.

The EU EOM observed the opening of 39 polling stations (PS), voting in 419 PS, counting in 38 PS and tabulation at 47 totalling centres. Election day was calm overall, with polling staff efficiently facilitating voting in polling stations observed by the EU EOM. The counting of the ballots was equally transparent, in the presence of party and candidate agents. The ECZ provided limited public information during election day, with only two online posts and two press briefing in the evening.

Opening

The opening of PS was calm and transparent, despite long queues. Most PS observed opened on time, with 9 experiencing substantial delays, due to organisational difficulties. In 1 PS observed, not all necessary materials were present. Still, opening procedures were followed in almost all polling stations observed.

Voting

Voting was efficiently and transparently managed and EU EOM assessments were positive in 98 per cent of PS observed, with PS staff implementing voting procedures effectively. Overcrowding was noted in 9 per cent. As well, observers noted tensions in 10 PS visited.

As a security measure, indelible ink was used to mark voters' thumbs to prevent multiple voting. Yet, checks for traces of ink prior to voting were not consistently conducted in 26 per cent of observed PS. Insufficient or missing voter information materials were reported in 52 per cent of PS observed, while essential material was missing in 25 per cent of PS.

In most PS observed (bar Central province), and despite a lack of legal provision, voter card numbers were written down on ballot paper counterfoils, potentially compromising the secrecy of the vote. Secrecy was not guaranteed in 24 per cent of PS observed, due to the positioning of voting booths and the layouts of PS. In 20 observations, voters were seen voting together in the same voting booth. In 18 per cent of PS, voters were turned away for not being on the voter register in that PS.

Just 41 per cent of the polling stations observed were accessible to people with reduced mobility and 33 per cent of PS had unsuitable layouts for these voters.

The overall transparency and integrity of the voting process was enhanced by the consistent presence of polling agents and citizen observers during voting and counting, as well as the unimpeded access of media, as observed by the EU EOM. At least one citizen observer was present in 42 per cent of observations. Party agents were present in 99 per cent of all the PS observed, with UPND, NRPUP and independent candidates fielding the biggest share. Citizen observers and party agents could monitor the process without restrictions.

Among PS staff encountered, only 38 per cent of presiding officers, some 40 per cent of assistant presiding officers, and 14 per cent of returning officers were women.

Counting

The EU EOM assessed closing and counting procedures in 38 PS observed as slow but transparent. Yet, counting procedures were only partially implemented. Only 53 per cent of observed PS closed on time. In over one-third of observations, unused ballots were not counted before the ballot boxes were opened, which is an important security feature. Polling staff have difficulty in completing the result forms in 11 PS. In most observations, PS staff determined the number of ballot papers cast before counting votes for candidates in line with procedures. However, in 10 PS, the number of ballots found in the ballot box did not correspond to the number of ballots issued. The validity of ballots in 35 of PS observed was determined in a consistent manner. Observers and party agents were able to observe without restrictions in 36 PS.

Tabulation

On election night, PS results started to be processed in totalling centres at constituency level. The ECZ suspended counting and announcement of results during six hours on 14 August. The ECZ announced that it would not announce results by PS. The EU EOM continues to observe tabulation.

An electronic version of this Preliminary Statement is available on:

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