

Involvement of Forever Associates Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe's 2023 elections: Crossing the red line or recalibrating the role of civic organisations in politics?

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Abstract: Our study focused on examining the legality of the involvement of Forever Associate Zimbabwe (FAZ) in the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe which opposition political party supporters considered as an unlawful interference in politics by a non-governmental organisation (NGO). In this study we sought to trace how the State related to civic organisations since the Mugabe era especially during elections. We questioned the involvement of FAZ based on the fact that FAZ crossed the red line for civil society organisations (CSOs) which are, under the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act, supposed to be apolitical. However, the active involvement of FAZ gave rise to the question of whether this was a recalibration of CSOs' involvement in politics or it was a red line crossed. To come up with the credible empirical evidence, we used a combined qualitative and doctrinal legal analysis approach where we combined both legal provisions and qualitative data to establish the legality of FAZ's involvement in the elections in July 2023. Data from 20 purposively selected participants from Harare revealed that involvement of FAZ was illegal, an interference with the political rights of opposition political party members, and a threat to the existence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Act. We use Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyse how States maintain hegemony over civil society actors just to advance their own political interests. The Zimbabwe Government's silence on FAZ contrasts with its historical prosecution of other CSOs, suggesting selective application of the PVO Act.

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1. Introduction

This research provokes a discussion on the involvement of private organisations in politics, especially collusion with political parties during national elections. We are much concerned with advancing that argument based on permissibility or prohibition as prescribed in existing laws governing the conduct of private organisations especially the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Act (Chapter 17:05) as amended in 2025. The Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013 under “Political Rights” Section 67 does not support the collusion of political parties with private organisations to advance the former’s cause (Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013). In light of this, we normatively inquire on the involvement of the Forever Associates Zimbabwe (FAZ) private organisation in the controversial 2023 elections (The Sentry 2024; The Carter Centre 2023), focusing on whether the direct involvement in politics by FAZ to assist ZANU PF to win the 2023 elections can be considered as redefining the role of civic organisations in local politics or whether a red line was crossed since the existing PVO Act does not support such involvement in directly lobbying for a political party to win elections against another political party. We look at FAZ’s involvement and how it affected the electoral ground and democratic rights of opposition members who regarded it as aggressive and unconstitutional involvement in the 2023 elections (Amnesty International 2023; The Carter Center 2023; Zimbabwe Peace Project 2023). This involvement of FAZ remains a contentious issue because of the interference in the electoral system which compromised the integrity of the elections (The Sentry 2024; The Carter Center 2023). This illegal involvement of FAZ during the July 2023 in the elections was beyond the limits of civil society organisations (CSOs) as provided for by Section 20A(1)(g) of the PVO Act (Chapter 17:05, 2025 amendment).

While the State remained silent on this issue, it is possible that FAZ had, by means of involvement in the 2023 elections, successfully championed the abrogation of Section 20A(1)(g) which cautions PVOs to avoid entering partisan politics. We seek to conclude on whether the involvement can be described as a “red line crossed” or as a “recalibration of civic organisations’ involvement in Zimbabwean politics.” Substantiating this thought is the long-standing tradition of non-interference of private organisations in politics in Zimbabwe (Kabonga and Zvokuomba 2021). This is supported by provisions of the PVO Act (Chapter 17:05) Amendment Number 1 of 2025 Section 20(A) on “Principles governing private voluntary organisations.” Section 20(A)(1g) provides that “Every private voluntary organisation shall not to conduct themselves in any politically partisan manner whether by using its resources to benefit members of a particular affiliation or making any test of the political allegiance of its beneficiaries” (PVO Act 2025). Using this legal provision as the basis of our argument, we now need to understand how FAZ redefined public perceptions on the Government’s conduct towards CSOs especially their involvement in

politics. However, in reaching the final position on this, we are bound by a few questions that align to the major objective underpinning this study. We seek to ask and provide answers to questions such as how was FAZ involved in the 2023 elections and how permissible was that involvement? How did FAZ involvement shape State-civil society relations in Zimbabwe going forward? How did the involvement impact on political rights of Zimbabweans as accorded in Section 67 of the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution?

While existing reports by The Sentry (2024), the Carter Center (2023), and the Zimbabwe Peace Project (2023) document FAZ's conduct empirically, no scholarly work has applied Gramscian hegemony theory alongside normative legal analysis to evaluate its legality. This paper fills that gap by asking did FAZ's involvement in the 2023 elections cross normative boundaries, or did it represent a recalibration of the role of civic organisations in politics? We contribute a dual theoretical-legal framework that extends existing knowledge beyond journalistic reporting.

2. The history of FAZ

Anyone who attempts to follow the history of FAZ will ultimately conclude that it is shrouded in a confusing mystery because of conflicting accounts concerning its establishment. However, one of the accounts on FAZ's website under the section "About Us" states that FAZ is an organisation which is registered as a private organisation registered under Zimbabwe law as a Trust, under Deed of Trust (FAZ 2022). Its history dates back to 2010 when a small group of visionary students and members of the faculty (there is no information or evidence of the name of the faculty on the website) at Solusi University teamed up to form the organisation (FAZ 2022). As they expected, FAZ was to help them to access business and empowerment opportunities that the Government of National Unity (GNU) was offering during that time (FAZ 2022). To show their strong commitment to realising their vision, they went on to register it as a Trust with assistance rendered by the Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs (FAZ 2022). The founders would later become frustrated with lack of support from the GNU which was, at that time, described by FAZ as retrogressive and unappealing to their cause (FAZ 2022).

This above historical account contradicts that of The Sentry (2024) that FAZ Trust was set up to help ZANU PF win the 2023 elections. The description by The Sentry (2024) showed that FAZ was set up to support ZANU PF's 2023 elections and registered as a family Trust under Central Intelligence Organisation Deputy Director Asher Walter Tapfumaneyi. This approach obliterates the previous 2010 history of the Trust even though the Carter Commission (2023) vindicated in its report that FAZ is a CSO affiliated with ZANU-PF and accredited to observe the 2023 elections (The Carter Centre, 2023). We do not aim to adjudicate which

history is “true,” but rather to show that FAZ’s public narrative shifted to align with ZANU PF’s electoral calendar. In this study, we are not seeking a vindication of FAZ as a CSO or not. Rather, we are adopting a rational scholarly approach to avoid the bias and assumptions that may overshadow our understanding of FAZ as a CSO and as political pawn. The life of FAZ as an organisation was revived in June 2022 when the few remaining enthusiasts decided to relaunch it under new trustees and with an emancipated and updated vision which was to leverage opportunities availed by the new dispensation in Zimbabwe (FAZ 2022). In August 2022, FAZ made a formal application to join the ZANU PF party following the constitutional provisions of the ZANU PF Constitution as prescribed in Section 16(2) (FAZ 2022).

FAZ identifies itself as the “affiliate party” of the ruling ZANU PF. This is proved by the clearly convincing declaration: “The 2023 election campaign message to the Party, the Candidate, FAZ and all other affiliates” (FAZ 2022). By identifying itself as an affiliate party, FAZ is simply demonstrating that it is a voluntary organisation submitting itself to the ZANU PF 2023 elections cause. Therefore, it is a politically motivated entity contravening Section 20A of the PVO Act of 2025 because of its involvement in politics instead of being apolitical as stipulated by the Section cited herein (PVO Act 2025). Even the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) Report (2023, 6) testified that it noted the fraudulent involvement of affiliate groups during the 2023 elections with FAZ being one of the mentioned affiliates. Considering the nature of the affiliates operating under ZANU PF which are also registered as non-profit making organisations, it makes FAZ a classic example of a private non-profit making organisation that is highly political and worth studying. It also further provokes questions on legal standing and recognition of FAZ as an organisation bound by the provisions of the amended 2025 PVO Act.

3. Theoretical grounding of the study

We adopted a theory by Antonio Gramsci which is commonly referenced to explain the absolute power that States establish, maintain, and control over non-State actors with CSOs being among a victim of such hegemony (Gramsci 1971). Balakrishnan (2015) noted that Gramsci in explaining hegemony, understood that it locks up a society tightly because of ways in which transmission of ideas by use of language is done. Gramsci (1971) argues that hegemony operates through language and ideology shaped by dominant groups. It is important to articulate in depth, what constitutes a CSO in order to liberate the reader from the mystery of applying concept without explaining it. Gramsci (1971) defined the civil society as an embattled space unfolding between the economy and the State. Bates (1988) stated that Gramsci conceptualised hegemony as domination of every society by a social group mainly the ruling class, domination which is achieved and perpetuated by application of coercive means including

security forces to ensure subordination of the poor. In the sections below, we explore the applicability of the theory to the study.

Our study focuses on exploring the regulation role that Zimbabwe plays in democratising society by allowing CSOs to independently operate guided by the PVO Act (2025), while desisting from actively participating in partisan politics. We acknowledge that the civil society has independent rights to engage Governments in advancing political, social, and economic developments (ZHRA 2024; Shava 2019). Despite their existence as the only dependable vehicle that complements the Zimbabwean Government in promoting political rights, CSOs are operated in a constricted space. This is attributed to the hegemony of the Mnangagwa regime in suppressing CSOs through many restrictive legislations and political indoctrination of Zimbabweans that CSOs are regime change agents for the West (Helliker 2012; Dorman 2003). Comparative evidence from other African States supports this pattern. In Uganda, the Non-Governmental Organisations Act (2016) similarly restricts CSO involvement in “political activities” (Brechenmacher 2017). Ethiopia’s 2019 Civic Organisations Proclamation replaced a highly restrictive 2009 law but still prohibits foreign-funded CSOs from engaging in “political and democratisation activities” (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2025). These cases suggest a regional pattern of democratic backsliding accompanied by tightened CSO regulation. The use of hegemony is widely considered as the only method by which the Government of Zimbabwe continues to subordinate CSOs, taking into account the historical legacy of the CSO as an extension of colonialists (Moyo 1993, 7).

The Government of Zimbabwe deploys unfounded allegations that Zimbabwean NGOs’ agenda is to ensure ZANU PF is removed from power for the opposition. Using Gramsci (1971) and how he discussed the use of powerful language and ideology to manipulate the people, the use of language of incitement against CSOs by the Government makes CSOs public enemies. Various examples substantiate the role of semantics in promoting subordination of CSOs including when Mugabe stated that on 29 July 2009: “We have now a phenomenon of NGOs, or shall I call them phenomena, for they really are a type of government in the background of a formal government. I don’t know whether this creature us for the better or for the worse, but in our country, we have seen a situation where they have exceeded their terms of reference, and perhaps we might have to reconsider the advisability of having NGOs” (The New Humanitarian 2009). Mnangagwa also inherited the culture of persecuting CSOs (Amnesty International 2025), including by promoting new repressive changes to the PVO Act which he approved in April 2025 (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2025). Scholars have raised concerns and substantial findings on how the Zimbabwean Government uses the State apparatuses to subjugate the civil society with sheer brutality. For example, Pousadela and Perera (2021) established that States dismiss the work of

CSOs as proxy agents of international puppet masters. This has an adverse impact on the operations and perceptions of CSOs as unpretentious actors in promoting accountability and transparency in Zimbabwe (Shava 2019; ZLHR 2021; Brechenmacher 2017).

Gramsci (1971) contended that this dominant group utilises language and ideologies that appeal more to the people just to discredit the civil society's existence. In Zimbabwe, there is a common consensus by the ZANU PF and its supporters to discredit all the CSOs as extended arms of the opposition political parties that are seeking to ensure Zimbabwe relapses into colonialism (ZLHR 2021; Moyo 1993). Bearing this in mind, Shava (2019) established that in Zimbabwe, the NGOs are widely questioned by the Government and accused as agents of Western imperialism who are hiding behind development aid. Gramsci (1971) critically helps to understand how ideologisation and cultural manipulation are used as weapons of subduing the conquered into giving acceding to the aggressive demands of the ruling elite in Zimbabwe since 2018. However, it is important that we consider that despite the Government's strong resentment of civic organisations in Zimbabwe, the same Government has used its dominance to allow FAZ to be a political arm of ZANU PF. In so doing, the Government is fulfilling Gramsci's (1971) observation that in the establishment and maintenance of hegemony, the process is not peaceful but rather coercive. Involvement of FAZ in the July 2023 elections was indeed a condemnable act (The Carter Center 2023; The Sentry 2024; ZPP 2023), one which was propagated and supported by the hegemony. This was done for the purpose of perpetuating the political interests of the ruling hegemonic party.

4. Government and CSOs involvement in politics from 2000–22

Under Mugabe's 37 years in power, the relationship between the State and CSOs that are involved in politics and governance was strained. Much of the friction that led to the tense relations emanated from the political crisis that was affecting Zimbabwe between 2002–08 (Dendere and Taodzera 2023; ZLHR 2021; Dorman 2003). Formation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999 resulted in the first stern test for CSOs because MDC was formed through support from the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), two leading CSOs (Masunungure 2014; Dansereau 2001). Mugabe's administration saw this as the direct crossing of the political red line since these were enablers of the opposition regime. The Government decided to respond to the crisis by passing many new legislative restrictions that curtailed the freedoms of CSOs in their expression of political discontentment against the ZANU PF Government. Some of the new changes included the first well-known attack on CSOs by the Government through the Minister of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Patrick Chinamasa in 2000 (ZLHR

2021). Secondly, the Zimbabwean Government passed its 30 July 2003 Operation of Non-Governmental Organisations in Humanitarian and Development Assistance in Zimbabwe Policy. In 2004, there was another new development, the NGO Bill that mandated all NGOs to be registered or face the punishment of suspension. Later in 2005, the State announced that it was set to suspend further registration of about 30 NGOs that were reportedly funded by international donors to advance an unwanted political regime change agenda (ZLHR 2021; Pousadela and Perera 2021; Shava 2019).

In 2008 at the height of Zimbabwe's bloodiest political violence since 2000, the persecution of CSOs to silence their voices by using the 2004 PVO Act was done through calling for suspension of all NGOs that focused on humanitarian operations through Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (Maphoto 2022; ZLHR 2021). This led to advocacy for the liberation of NGOs by the UK Border Agency and civic organisations that promoted political freedom (UK Border Agency 2009; ZPP 2008). Zinyemba and Zinyemba (2013, 5) raised concerns about this excessive political interference into the operations of civic organisations arguing that since 2008, political instability and interference by the State in the civic space has been a major challenge. Zimbabwe entered into a Government of National Unity (GNU) (Chigora and Guzura 2011), after experiencing the 2008 bloody political violence (Dodo et al. 2012; Amnesty International 2008), where some abductions of human rights defenders continued with Jestina Mukoko being one of the victims (Jonga 2013; ZPP 2013; US Department of State 2009). There were persistent exertions that the late Mugabe orchestrated to undermine CSOs operations including banning them entirely as was the case in 2011 where 29 banned CSOs operated in Masvingo (Amnesty International 2012) but *The Mail & Guardian* (2012a) noted that 30 CSOs had been banned. An analysis of this trend and pattern of violence against CSOs showed that Zimbabwe's political environment is unfavourable for their operations especially when they question the State's dictatorship.

In the run to the 2013 elections until the final ousting of Mugabe, the Government remained very intolerant to CSOs. Their crime was denouncing dictatorship in Zimbabwe; a struggle associated with the West with many targeted CSOs being labelled Western puppets (Ruhanya 2012). On 24 February 2012, *The Mail & Guardian* also raised concerns over the continued harassment of the CSOs. *The Mail & Guardian* (2012) reported with concern that President Mugabe's ZANU PF party has banned 30 NGOs operating. This validates the ZPP (2013) report that in December 2012, the 13th National People's Conference held by ZANU PF was dominated by scathing attacks against civic organisations. President Mugabe even made a resolution to instruct ZANU PF to make sure that the Government enforced the de-registration of errant NGOs that deviate from their mandate (ZPP 2013; Amnesty International

2012b). In September 2013, Human Rights Watch raised the concern that democracy in Zimbabwe would only thrive if NGOs were accorded their right to operate without undue political persecution as articulated in the 2013 Constitution preamble. Human Rights Watch (2013) wrote a letter directly to the President and bravely told Mugabe that he was supposed to allow CSOs to operate without interference and that his Government was also to stop the harassment and intimidation of CSOs.

From 2014 until his final demise, Mugabe continued to attack NGOs as Western agents designed to overthrow the ruling party from the helm of Zimbabwean politics. On 30 July 2016, an article in *The Herald* titled "President tears into NGOs" stated that Mugabe publicly said that Western-sponsored NGOs were working on open campaigns aimed at subverting African economies all in pursuit of regime change agenda (Herald 2016). Previously in October 2015, Grace Mugabe, whilst addressing ZANU PF supporters at a rally in Rushinga Mount Darwin, had openly stated that NGOs in Zimbabwe were pushing the regime change agenda (All Africa 2015). In responding to the blatant attacks, NGOs argued that their role was to ensure that ZANU PF is held accountable for human rights abuses perpetrated by its tyrannical members who enjoyed impunity from legal prosecution (Voice of America 2015). Even in post-coup Zimbabwe, Kabonga and Zvokuomba (2021) posited that the State-civil society relations in Zimbabwe remained highly confrontational and fractured. While the relations remained confrontational in nature, the study is vindicating or nullifying this Kabonga and Zvokuomba (2021) supposition based on established findings. These sentiments are buttressed by Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZHRA) and Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT) (2024) who claimed that Zimbabwe's civic space has been increasingly faced with significant challenges. The challenges included the arbitrary attack on CSOs, passing of stringent legislation, aggressive Government crackdown, and harassment of human rights defenders. What this history shows is that State repression of CSOs is not uniform; it is selectively deployed against CSOs perceived as opposition-aligned, while pro-Government CSOs like FAZ are shielded.

5. Research methodology

This study was conducted in Warren Park 1, Warren Park 2, and Warren Park D in Harare, Zimbabwe. These suburbs were purposefully selected because: (1) they had a documented history of opposition political party support, (2) FAZ was visibly active during the July 2023 elections, and (3) we had prior access to participants willing to discuss a politically sensitive topic (Propertybook 2025). We acknowledge that this geographic focus on three contiguous suburbs in a single city means the findings are not statistically generalisable to Zimbabwe as a whole. Instead, this study offers an in-depth, contextualised case study of FAZ's electoral role in

Warren Park. We focused on these suburbs because we found participants who were willing to discuss a subject which some found sensitive because of its political nature. This area was also characterised by high rates of FAZ involvement in elections, something we witnessed and also agreed upon because we had first-hand experience with FAZ volunteers. However, this first-hand experience also introduces potential bias, which we address explicitly in the reflexivity statement below. We used a qualitative case study design (Yin 2018) supplemented by legal document analysis of the PVO Act (Chapter 17:05, operative in July 2023, prior to the 2025 Amendment), the Zimbabwe Electoral Act (Chapter 2:13 2016), and the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe.

This study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm, which holds that social reality is constructed through participants' meanings, perceptions, and interpretations (Pervin and Mokhtar 2022). We do not claim to uncover an objective "truth" about FAZ; rather, we aim to understand how FAZ's involvement was experienced and understood by those who lived in Warren Park during the July 2023 elections.

A qualitative approach was appropriate because our research aimed to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of FAZ's involvement in the 2023 elections (Aspers and Corte 2019). In addition to qualitative primary data, we conducted a doctrinal legal analysis of the PVO Act, Zimbabwe Election Commission Act, and Constitution to determine whether FAZ's activities complied with existing statutory provisions. We emphasise that our legal analysis focuses on the pre-2025 PVO Act (Chapter 17:05) that was operative during the July 2023 elections. The 2025 Amendment is referenced only as subsequent codification, not as retroactive law. We employed a single instrumental case study design (George and Bennett 2005), with Warren Park as the bounded case. This design allowed us to investigate in depth how residents and FAZ volunteers perceived the organisation's electoral role. To capture multiple perspectives, we purposively sampled both FAZ members (n=10) and opposition political party supporters (n=10).

5.1. Researcher positionality and reflexivity

We acknowledge that we resided in Warren Park prior to and during data collection and had pre-existing personal relationships with some participants. As noted in our selection criteria, we had "first-hand experience with FAZ volunteers." This presents several risks to research credibility: social desirability bias (participants may have told us what they thought we wanted to hear); confirmation bias (we may have sought data confirming pre-existing views); and participant reluctance (some individuals may have been unwilling to criticise FAZ given our prior associations).

To mitigate these risks, we implemented the following reflexivity measures:

1. **Member checking** – preliminary findings were shared with five participants (three FAZ members, two Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) supporters) to verify accuracy of interpretation. All five confirmed that the findings reflected their lived experiences.
2. **Peer debriefing** – two independent researchers not involved in data collection reviewed our coding framework and challenged our interpretations.
3. **Systematic coding** – transcripts were coded using NVivo 14, with codes generated inductively from the data rather than imposed deductively.
4. **Negative case analysis** – we actively searched for and reported participant views that contradicted our emerging findings.
5. **Audit trail** – all interview transcripts, coding decisions, and analytical memos have been retained for independent verification.

Despite these measures, we acknowledge that complete objectivity is unattainable in qualitative research. Our findings should be read as an interpretive account, not a neutral mirror of reality.

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interview guide contained open-ended questions about: (1) FAZ's recruitment and activities, (2) perceived legality of FAZ's electoral role, (3) experiences of intimidation or observation during voting, and (4) knowledge of the PVO Act. Interviews lasted between 35 and 65 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Purposive sampling was used (Etikan et al. 2016). Inclusion criteria for FAZ participants included: (1) registered FAZ volunteer during the July 2023 election period, (2) actively deployed in Warren Park, (3) willingness to be interviewed. Inclusion criteria for opposition participants included: (1) self-identified supporter of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) in 2023, (2) voted in Warren Park, (3) able to describe FAZ's presence at or near polling stations. All 20 interview participants were male; however, as shown in Section 6 (Findings), seven of the ten FAZ members we interviewed were women. The gender imbalance refers specifically to opposition party supporters, where no women agreed to be interviewed. This limitation is addressed below. To ensure that we collected credible data, we utilised semi-structured questionnaires. According to Abawi (2013), a semi-structured interview includes a number of planned questions where the interviewer has the freedom to modify the wording and order of the questions. The semi-structured questions helped to explore the topic of FAZ involvement in elections without having reservations while, at the same time, we did not receive rigid responses because the questions were exploratory in nature.

We engaged a total of 20 participants, with ten from FAZ and ten from the CCC opposition political party. We analysed the data using the six-

step approach of Braun and Clarke (2012). This data analysis approach involves the following steps. First, familiarisation with the data, where it was important to know the type of data we had collected and to map out how to start analysing it. Second, we generated initial codes, which involved describing the data contents in line with participants' meanings attached to them. Third, we searched for themes from the data after grouping the data and establishing its meaning. Themes were key because they showed that we organised the data into common categories in line with the questions we sought to answer. Fourth, we reviewed potential themes, moving beyond simply searching for themes to generating them and verifying that the themes were not duplicated or weak. We collapsed similar themes and merged them to form stronger, more analytically powerful themes (Braun and Clarke 2012). Fifth, we defined and named the themes. Braun and Clarke (2012) stated that this is when the researcher rereads the data and concludes that all themes developed in the previous steps meaningfully capture the lived realities of people as shown in the entire data set. Sixth, we presented the findings (Braun and Clarke 2012), which we do in the next section.

Besides primary data from in-depth interviews, we also used unstructured observation because we had lived in this same place and witnessed, through active participation in the elections, the conduct of FAZ members. Our observation followed no fixed protocol but was opportunistic and informal, which is a limitation. To strengthen rigour, we recorded observational field notes within 24 hours of each observation event (Emerson et al. 2011). We observed FAZ members roaming in polling stations, witnessed them setting up their white-clothed tables, and engaging with fellow ZANU PF members who had just voted. However, we acknowledge that we were not fully informed about everything they discussed and agreed upon after voting, but we found that they discussed voting patterns and voter turnout (FAZ Participant). Observation was sufficient to substantiate interview data because what we observed aligned with what participants reported in interviews, even when participants were unaware that we had observed them. This cross-method corroboration strengthens the credibility of our findings. We ensured that secondary data were used, which helped to bring out the normative part of the study. Secondary data used included various legal and political publications researched and published by organisations that are formally independent of the Zimbabwean Government, including The Sentry, ZPP, ZLHR, ZHRA, and others. This also helped to reduce potential researcher bias. However, we acknowledge that no organisation is fully "impartial"; each has its own institutional perspectives and funding sources. We have treated these documents as complementary evidence, not as objective truth. Besides these, we stayed informed by the PVO Act (pre-2025 version), the ZEC Act, and the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe because they were the key legal frameworks that guided discussion of findings and the study at large.

We remained highly guided and informed by ethics for researchers, which helped us to ensure that ethical considerations were upheld and respected. According to Resnik (2018), the concept of ethics questions our conduct in carrying out research. Ethics guide researchers in choosing what is morally right or wrong. In this study we declare that we did not use artificial intelligence (AI) for data generation, analysis or writing. However, we used NVivo 14 for coding management, which is qualitative data analysis software, not an AI tool. We sought written informed consent from all participants after explaining the study's purpose, risks, and their right to withdraw at any time. We ensured that findings were a credible reflection of the people's voices and thoughts through member checking (described above). We also ensured that data were anonymised by removing all names, addresses, and specific dates of birth from transcripts. Participants are referred to only as "Participant 1–20" in the findings section. This study also adhered to privacy and confidentiality by storing all audio recordings on a password-protected drive accessible only to the research team. Triangulation of data was also important in ensuring trustworthiness.

5.2. *Limitations of the methodology*

This study has several methodological limitations that readers should consider when interpreting our findings:

1. **Geographic scope** – data were collected from only three suburbs in one city (Harare). Findings cannot be generalised to other parts of Zimbabwe without further research.
2. **Sample size** – 20 participants is a small sample, typical for qualitative case studies but insufficient for statistical generalisation.
3. **Gender bias in opposition sample** – while seven FAZ participants were women, all ten CCC opposition participants were male, as no women from the opposition agreed to be interviewed. Women's experiences of FAZ's electoral role from an opposition perspective remain unexplored.
4. **Positionality** – as Warren Park residents with prior relationships to some participants, our interpretations may be shaped by insider knowledge and potential bias, despite our reflexivity measures.
5. **Temporal limitation** – data were collected retrospectively, up to six months after the July 2023 elections. Participant recall may have been affected by memory decay or subsequent political events.

6. Findings

6.1. *Demographic profile of participants*

The demographic profile of our research participants included ten members from FAZ, seven of whom were women and three were men. Women dominated the FAZ selection process because it was widely thought that they would easily engage anyone, especially men who had

little interest in politics (FAZ Participant). Their ages ranged from 25 to 55 years, with the majority being young people because FAZ coordinators wanted people who were active in walking long distances and ready to commit themselves with maximum endurance (FAZ Female Participant). We conducted interviews with them in the Warren Park area. Concerning education, of the ten FAZ members, we found that only one had a tertiary education degree while nine had secondary level education. The secondary level education findings showed that only three had passed Ordinary Level, which was also a key stumbling block in our desire to obtain answers on their knowledge of the PVO Act. We found that their recruitment was based largely not on education but on their loyalty to ZANU PF, which was determined by their presence in ZANU PF structures from the lowest cell levels to the highest level they occupied. For participants from opposition political parties, we interviewed them in the same Warren Park area and found that out of ten, five had passed Ordinary Level, with three being degree holders. These people were active political supporters of the now-defunct CCC, which was led by Nelson Chamisa in the July 2023 elections.

6.2. *Recruitment and engagement in pre-election grassroots mobilisation*

Findings showed that the involvement of FAZ in the July 2023 elections cannot be understood in the context of the elections themselves. Rather, the recruitment of FAZ members was traced back to June 2022, when they were mobilised through nomination by selected ZANU PF loyalists in each area, with each district providing 20 members. We found that these people included educated and uneducated members who had no Ordinary Level passes but possessed political interests in ZANU PF political ideology. Our discussions with some of the selected members revealed that they were unaware of the existence of the PVO Act and the provisions of the Constitution on the involvement of CSOs in elections. All of the participants acknowledged that they voluntarily chose to join FAZ without expecting any payment because it was considered an organisation that operates on a voluntary basis. This solidified our early argument that FAZ described itself as a voluntary organisation that is not profit-making (FAZ 2023). Therefore, FAZ members considered themselves as doing service to the ZANU PF party but lacked any understanding of whether they were contravening the PVO Act. This is because they were assured that in their operation until the July 2023 elections, they would not face any interference from the security forces, especially the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP). They were instructed to remain allegiant to ZANU PF in their activities, since it was the ruling party which is the freedom that they enjoyed with impunity and without restrictions, despite the fact that they were involved in political activities. One FAZ male participant (Participant 9) reiterated the point that “FAZ was an NGO and it had one mandate: to ensure that by the July 2023 election period, ZANU PF should have gained ground in both rural and urban areas.”

Evidence from participants revealed that FAZ members were paid, although it was not considered a salary, with some reporting that they received around US\$400 before the elections to motivate them in their daily duties. However, when asked about the source of funding, FAZ members were not able to provide any information. The pre-2025 PVO Act (Chapter 17:05) required that every PVO have an established source of funding. All FAZ expenses were not made available, and neither the voluntary employees nor the FAZ leadership itself had established information on its source of funding. At the same time, funding to FAZ during elections was directed towards political activities. Under the pre-2025 exclusion clause, organisations “confined to political activities” were not permitted to register as PVOs. FAZ's political activities therefore placed it outside the legal definition of a PVO altogether. According to FAZ (2022), there was only one mission for which it was formed: to ensure that it worked for the victory of ZANU PF in the July 2023 elections, which it did.

6.3. FAZ impunity and violation of PVO Act and electoral legal provisions

We established that FAZ was a ZANU PF-associated NGO that operated with impunity simply because participants revealed that since June 2022 none of its members had been arrested for carrying out political activities in the two political districts. Members stated that they received training for the work with the support of Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) members (FAZ Female Participant 1), a narrative that resonated with the study carried out by The Sentry (2024), in which the CIO was considered a key coordinator of FAZ. Among the members was one who stated that they had been instructed to go to polling stations to provide more details to their CIO handlers about the voting patterns of their members and the opposition. One participant revealed that they were sent out in pairs and sometimes in threes, depending on the task and their ability to handle the pressure of confronting questions about their presence within voting spaces (FAZ Female Participant 10). The presence of unaccredited FAZ members at polling stations was a violation of the 2016 ZEC Act, Section 55(2)(iv), which allows only accredited polling agents to undertake polling duties to ensure transparency and accountability in the voting process. The Government's position against NGOs during the July 2023 elections was strict, and it did not allow any CSOs to undertake any role that advanced political agendas.

Members of FAZ were not chased away from polling stations, where some set up tables in polling areas and continued to operate, although participants revealed that they did not engage in violence against anyone (FAZ Male Participant). However, opposition members who were not part of FAZ revealed that they had known FAZ and its community operations, including its agenda (CCC Male Opposition Political Party Participant 4). Therefore, when they witnessed FAZ members circling polling stations,

they felt intimidated and feared surveillance and targeted persecution, which one participant described as “bringing back the memories of the 2008 violent elections” (CCC Male Political Party Participant). Findings showed that in Warren Park 1 and Warren Park D, all the polling stations were manned by FAZ members who observed all voting activities from a distance. Evidence showed that they were warned not to wear their FAZ regalia; hence they wore plain clothes and were difficult to observe, even though some people knew the FAZ agents from their mobilisation activities since July 2022 (CCC Male Opposition Political Party Participant 8). The intimidation of opposition voters through the presence of FAZ members is strongly corroborated. The US Department of State Report (2023) revealed that FAZ was an organisation linked to the CIO, set up to intimidate voters, and that its members stood outside polling stations and requested voters’ ID numbers. With 36,000 members deployed across the country, FAZ imposed a web of terror and coercion on many voters, which violated Section 67 of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe (political rights), especially Section 67(b), which vests in every Zimbabwean citizen the independent right to make political choices freely and without any undue coercion.

An opposition participant stated: “The police walked past FAZ roadblocks. If it was the MDC or any opposition group doing that, they would have been arrested immediately” (CCC Male Participant 12). Again, there were reports by some interviewees who confirmed that FAZ deployed terror to intimidate voters. However, the ZRP did not exercise its mandate as accorded by Section 89 of the 2016 ZEC Act, which is to ensure that there is no disorderly conduct at polling stations. There were few incidents where brave participants recalled that they had questioned some police officers about why FAZ members were illegally stationed close to their polling stations. They reported that police officers told them that they were unable to control the affairs of FAZ since they were not part of the organisation and were unaware of their presence. The availability of FAZ members, who had professed their allegiance to ZANU PF (FAZ 2022), was a direct contravention of Section 160A(5) of the ZEC Act 2016, which strongly prohibits politically motivated violence and intimidation during elections. While this was happening in polling areas, the police were not directly participating, which left many voters vulnerable to possible violence and intimidation. The findings resonate with a ZPP report (2023), which clearly stated that FAZ members were implicated in harassing citizens in rural and urban communities. All of this happened in the sight of many voters, and no action was taken against those implicated in electoral malpractices, with the Government maintaining complete silence on FAZ and various reports against its interference in politics. The involvement of FAZ did not come as a surprise to anyone who consulted its website, which stated that its imperative campaigning strategy was “showcasing the achievements and successes of the Party and New Dispensation under the able leadership of President ED Mnangagwa” (FAZ 2022).

One participant offered a dissenting view, suggesting that FAZ represented a recalibration rather than a violation: "Maybe this is the new normal. CSOs have to work with the ruling party or be closed down. FAZ is just surviving" (Participant 5, male, Warren Park).

Some participants revealed that FAZ members conducted parallel voter tabulation and sent the results to commanders on the ground (CCC Opposition Political Party Member 2). A participant who was part of the FAZ team acknowledged in this study that results were to be communicated to superiors, but participants revealed that the results were for ZANU PF members only, not for every voter at the polling station. We also found that in the process, FAZ members used their ZANU PF cell sheets to know the number of their registered voters at every polling station and marked the cell sheet if the member showed up to vote. The activities of FAZ members were not only illegal but also a direct interference with the provisions of Section 184 of the ZEC Act 2016, which provides that no person is required to divulge how they voted. The section's provisions also include protection of voters from divulging the person for whom they voted in the elections. Members of FAZ disregarded this provision by instructing their own supporters to vote for ZANU PF, and everyone who was not part of their own cell sheet was considered an opposition candidate, as professed by one of the participants. This made it difficult for several opposition political party voters to express themselves freely within polling stations, as they feared that they were easily targetable by not being on the FAZ cell sheets, which were used to confirm allegiance to ZANU PF if a name was present.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Summary of findings

Our aim was to understand the involvement of FAZ in the 2023 elections and to conclude on the legality and acceptability of such involvement, and whether the Mnangagwa Government attempted to control FAZ's chaotic meddling in the elections as it did with other CSOs it deemed to be anti-Government. Zimbabwe's 2023 elections were marred by controversies of rigging and undue interference by the ruling party (SEOM Report 2023; Carter Center 2023). One of the reasons raised by various independent observers was the involvement of FAZ. Critical reflections on FAZ by The Sentry (2024) revealed that the FAZ trust was set up to help ZANU PF win the 2023 elections. *The Financial Times* (2023) described FAZ as a shadowy NGO set up to support ZANU PF during the elections. In all the activities that FAZ undertook to advance ZANU PF political interests, its members remained unaccountable to the pre-2025 PVO Act, the Constitution of Zimbabwe, and the ZEC Act (Chapter 2:13 of 2016). While the PVO Amendment Act 2025 later inserted Section 20A(1g) explicitly prohibiting PVOs from engaging in political activities, the pre-2025 exclusion clause

(Section 2 of Chapter 17:05) already excluded organisations “confined to political activities” from the definition of a PVO. FAZ’s conduct in July 2023 fell squarely within that exclusion, meaning it was operating outside the legal framework for CSOs altogether. The Government continued its hostile attitude towards all CSOs that were considered anti-Government but remained silent when FAZ interfered with the July 2023 elections, in which ZANU PF emerged victorious following allegations of rigging confirmed by various independent observers, including the SEOM team led by Dr Nevers Mumba. Empirically available evidence from Warren Park shows that FAZ did not reinvent the wheel concerning the involvement of CSOs in elections, since more stringent conditions were set in the 2025 PVO Act rather than relaxed. Within the bounded context of Warren Park, Harare, the evidence suggests that FAZ crossed normative boundaries, and the Government of Zimbabwe tacitly certified this illegal interference by its inaction. This was because the Government supported FAZ and its mandate of advancing ZANU PF electoral interests, which FAZ successfully, but illegally, achieved.

7.2. *Theoretical implications: Gramscian hegemony revisited*

Returning to Gramsci’s framework introduced in our literature review, this study’s findings both confirm and complicate his theory of hegemony. Gramsci (1971) distinguished between a “war of manoeuvre” (direct, frontal assault on the State) and a “war of position” (slow, incremental struggle for ideological hegemony within civil society). FAZ does not represent a war of manoeuvre; it does not seek to overthrow the State. Rather, FAZ operates through a war of position capturing civic space, normalising ruling party presence in community organisations, and reshaping what citizens perceive as legitimate civic action. However, unlike Gramsci’s organic intellectuals, who emerge from civil society to challenge State power, FAZ appears to be an instrument of State-sponsored counter-hegemony: it uses the language of civil society to entrench, not challenge, ruling party power. We propose the concept of simulated CSOs that perform the form but not the function of independent civic action. This extends Gramsci by identifying a new mechanism of hegemonic reproduction in hybrid regimes.

This selective application of the PVO Act where punishing opposition-aligned CSOs while shielding pro-Government organisations like FAZ raises concerns under international human rights law. Zimbabwe is a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (African Charter). Article 22 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of association, which includes the right of CSOs to operate without discriminatory State interference. Similarly, Article 10 of the African Charter protects freedom of association, subject only to restrictions that are “necessary in a free society” and prescribed by law. The Zimbabwean Government’s differential treatment of CSOs based on their political alignment may

violate these provisions, as it imposes restrictions that are neither neutral nor uniformly applied. Future research should explore the justiciability of these international instruments in challenging Zimbabwe's selective enforcement of the PVO Act.

7.3. *Policy recommendations*

Based on our findings, we recommend the following for Zimbabwe and comparable States:

1. **Clear legal definitions** – the pre-2025 PVO Act's exclusion clause should be amended to define "political activities" with specificity to prevent regulatory arbitrage. The 2025 Amendment's Section 20A(1g) is a step in the right direction but must be accompanied by enforcement mechanisms.
2. **Electoral observation reform** – domestic and international observer missions should be mandated to report on GONGO (government-organised non-governmental organisation) activity, not just State security forces.
3. **CSO self-regulation** – civic organisations should adopt codes of conduct that explicitly prohibit electoral campaigning disguised as civic education.
4. **International pressure** – African Union and Southern African Development Community (SADC) mechanisms should extend electoral integrity criteria to include pre-election civil society space.

7.4. *Limitations and future research*

This study is limited by its geographic focus (three suburbs in Harare), small sample size (n=20), and the researchers' positionality. Findings are not statistically generalisable to Zimbabwe as a whole. Future research should expand sampling to multiple provinces, include quantitative methods (e.g., survey experiments on perceptions of GONGOs), and conduct comparative case studies of other FAZ-affiliated areas. Additionally, future studies should make concerted efforts to include women from opposition perspectives, as this study was unable to do so.

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