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No to Third Term! Pastoral Statement by the Church in Zimbabwe as an Indictment on President Mnangagwa's Bid to Amend the Constitution

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Abstract: The Second Republic of Zimbabwe has witnessed continued political and socio-economic crises. Despite the worsening crisis under the new dispensation, there have been calls for extending the current administration's term limit beyond 2028. The impending crisis has attracted several responses and criticisms across various sectors. The church collective in Zimbabwe has raised concerns over the crisis and issued several statements commenting on the developments in the national landscape. However, the church has been criticised for failing to speak with one voice, especially on political matters. The purpose of this article is to analyse the ecumenical statement that was released by the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) on 21 January 2025, titled 'Statement on Presidential Constitutional Term Limit'. The letter is the church leader's response to the ongoing pronouncements for extending the presidential term limits to allow the incumbent President Emmerson Mnangagwa to rule beyond his constitutionally mandated two terms, into 2030. The paper seeks to establish the role of the prophetic voice of the church in defending the constitution and the implications of such actions on the nature of the church–state relations in the Second Republic of Zimbabwe. The paper draws data from the issued ecumenical statement, the official government response to it, and general responses to it available online.

Keywords: pastoral letter; presidential term limit; ecumenical statement; second republic; church–state relations; ED2030

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1. Introduction

The article analyses a pastoral letter that was released by the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) on 21 January 2025. The ecumenical statement is titled 'Statement on Presidential Constitutional Term Limits'. This comes at a time when the Zimbabwean state is on the brink of a constitutional crisis with the incumbent President Dr Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa (also referred to by his initials, ED) clandestinely seeking for third term[1]. The statement can be viewed as a proactive response by the church to voice its concerns about the impending political crisis and provide a national moral compass to direct the nation towards upholding constitutionalism and democratic principles. The history of Zimbabwe's politics indicates that the church is not a stranger to politics as it has, in many respects, provided the moral compass for the country (Masengwe 2024). The statement, therefore, presents the church's commitment to non-violence and peaceful resolution of conflict as one of its values and principles. While this is not the first time the church has commented on political matters, it was the first time that the

church spoke strongly and openly against the third term brigade and stood up to defend the constitution. Taking into cognizance the fact that the Zimbabwean state is in crisis, the pastoral letter can be viewed as a response that was meant to intervene in the likely conflict that could unfold as a result of extending the presidential limit. The letter presents an opportunity to assess the intersection between the church and the state in the quest to deal with potential and actual political violence, as well as the promotion of peaceful resolution of conflict. This paper will first discuss the prevailing political climate in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation to the calls for the extension of the presidential term limits. Secondly, the paper will unpack the official statement by the ZHOCD on the matter and discuss the subsequent response(s) by the government and citizens in general. The paper highlights what this means for the Zimbabwean people and the future of constitutionalism. Analysts have cautioned that the campaign for a third term could potentially lead the country into political instability (Mavedzenge 2025).

2. Background

This third term syndrome in Africa has received widespread scholarly attention, see (Demarest 2016; Vandeginste 2016; Yarwood 2016; McKie 2019; Tull and Simons 2017; Heyl 2019; Mangala 2020; Reyntjens 2020; Grauvogel and Heyl 2020). There is a growing trend in Africa whereby presidents have sought to extend their terms of office by removing term limits. This fashionable trend has gained momentum since the turn of the new millennium such that terms have been changed 47+ times in 28+ African states from April 2000 to July 2018 (Wiebusch and Murray 2019). However, this growing trend of circumventing term limit rules by the incumbents should not be mistaken to mean that Africans prefer a return to the president for life era of strongmen (Dulani 2015). Evidence shows that even those who have been successful in gaining their third term have not done so in the interest of the majority of the population (Lotfy 2022) (There are many mitigating factors that account for this, but this is beyond the scope of this article). This paper will, however, argue that the drive for a term extension is a self-serving agenda by the ruling elites, which in most instances attracts strong opposition from the general populace. This opposition is generally faced with repression from the state, which resorts to silencing dissenting voices. A closer look into the Zimbabwean case study is thus crucial.

As has been shown above, this phenomenon is not unique to Zimbabwe, many other African states have 'modified constitutionally determined presidential term limits or adopted a flexible interpretation of relevant constitutional provisions to allow incumbent leaders additional terms in the highest office' (Wiebusch and Murray 2019, p. 131). What is interesting, however, about the Zimbabwean case is that President Mnangagwa came into power through a military-assisted coup in 2017 (Tendi 2020), although he claims to be a constitutionalist. The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS 2024) made interesting observations, arguing that coup leaders and military governments are allergic to term limits. The study establishes a link between coups and the evasion of term limits by highlighting that unconstitutional actions of one type (such as term limit evasions) beget unconstitutional actions of another (such as seizures of power via military coups) (ACSS 2024). This is true in the Zimbabwean case were former President Robert Mugabe's tenure characterised by constitutionality for 37 years was ended by a 'soft coup'. In the same vein, this paper argues that the opposite is the same, military coups beget term evasions. ACSS (2024) summarises the scenario as follows:

> The relationship between military government and term limit evasions operates in both directions. Ten of the fourteen leaders who have evaded term limits have come to power via military coup, civil conflict, or military support. In other words,

> leaders who gained power through extraconstitutional means, subsequently tend to violate legal constraints on their time in power. (ACSS 2024)

It is not surprising that President Mngangagwa, like his predecessor and mentor (former President Robert Mugabe), seeks to extend his stay in power. Mugabe's reign was characterised by the manipulation of the judiciary and constitutional processes to justify his continued stay in power. This resultantly rendered regional and domestic legal avenues ineffective in challenging his extended rule (Petrica 2020). President Mnangagwa was a key ally and trusted confidant in this system with a long history of ensuring President Mugabe remained in power. Since taking over in 2017, Mnangagwa positioned himself as a reformist and constitutionalist, promising that his administration (dubbed the new dispensation) would offer a complete break from the past and the beginning of a new era of democracy and prosperity in Zimbabwe. However, many scholars have argued that this 'new dispensation' led by Mnangagwa is simply a continuation of the old guard as the character and modus operandi of the regime has remained unchanged or even worsened in some aspects (Dube 2023; Moyo 2020; Tembo and Singh 2023). Others have termed it the new deception (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2019). The administration has been characterised by rampant stifling of opposition and dissenting voices and the lack of the rule of law and economic decline, which makes any extension of the president's tenure untenable.

3. A Quest for a Third Term by Hook and Crook

The proponents of the ED2030 agenda made various pronouncements which triggered a response from the ZHCOD. However, this paper argues that these pronouncements were not made in a vacuum and can be traced to President Mnangagwa's proclamation in 2019 at a political rally that '2030 ndendichiko!!!' (Shona translated: 2030 I will still be there in power) (Mavedzenge 2025). However, since his proclamation, which some may have brushed off as a bluff, there have been several worrying pronouncements made by politicians, church leaders, prominent members of society, ZANU PF activists, and, more recently, Members of Parliament (MPs) from both Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the hijacked opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party. From as early as 3 June 2024, newspaper headlines such as 'Vapositori join ED's 2030 bid bandwagon' (Nyangani 2024) show that this move was already in motion and interested parties were now joining to show their solidarity and endorse the idea. This headline highlights the church–state dynamics, politics, and discord in Zimbabwe's landscape. The apostolic sect and indigenous church leaders under the banner of Vapositori[2] and Ma Zion[3] for ED (representing the apostolic sect and indigenous church leaders) welcomed and acknowledged President Mnangagwa's term extension bid. The Vapositori have aligned themselves with President Mnangagwa's administration and have blatantly and openly showed their support for the president, hence this call to endorse the 2030 bid was not surprising.

Some have argued that the indigenous churches have been co-opted by the state and now function as an extension or subsidiary of the ruling ZANU PF party (Matikiti and Pandasvika 2023; Musoni 2021; Mpofu 2021). At the meeting on 3 June 2024, church members, leaders, and ZANU PF members in attendance were all chanting ED 2030 slogans and singing praises to his leadership and administration (Nyangani 2024). The meeting was convened to celebrate ZANU PF's victory in the 2023 disputed elections where the indigenous church (in this case, Vapostori and MaZion), through its own admission, voted resoundingly for President Mnangagwa and his party. This shows a clear marriage between this group and the ruling elite. As such, the relationship can be explained as being sustained on a quid pro quo basis. Some religious leaders have overtly or covertly assumed the role of

enablers of the current Zimbabwean political matrix, thereby threatening democracy, social justice, and accountability, by using religious narratives to buttress the status quo (Dube 2021). This presents a challenge for the Zimbabwean church collective as there are some who side with the government without questioning to an extent that those like the ZHOCD who raise concerns or seek to oppose government advances are labelled as enemies of the state, and thus not a true representation of the church voice. This article will return to untangling these complex dynamics later in the section, which discusses the responses to the ZHCOD letter by the government.

A look at the headlines for the Zimbabwean newspapers shows the extent and gravity of this drive for President Mnangagwa (ED)'s 2030 agenda. Zimbabwe has four daily newspapers namely The Herald and Chronicle (published by ZIMPAPERS) and Newsday and Daily news (published by Alpha Media House and Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, respectively) (Heseltine et al. 2024). Additionally, the two leading Sunday newspapers in Zimbabwe are The Standard (published by Alpha Media Holdings and The Sunday Mail (published by ZIMPAPERS). In this paper, we purposefully selected these six newspaper outlets to draw perspectives from the headline stories and paint a picture of the political mood and prevailing discourse as a background that prompted the church leaders to respond and invoke their prophetic voice. The choice to use these publications was based on their widespread readership. The paper also draws from publications from the state-owned publishing house (ZIMPAPERS) and the privately owned publishing houses (Alpha Media House and Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe) to avoid biases and present balanced perspectives. Table 1 captures the top stories related to the 2030 agenda as presented in the six selected publications.

Table 1. Newspaper headlines for January 2025.

Date	Headline	Newspaper
2 January 2025	No stalling ED 2030 Push . . . ZANU PF says it will effect this resolution this year	Daily News
4 January 2025	CCC MPs to visit Mnangagwa farm . . . planned field trip tomorrow part of push for talks.	Daily News
	Opposition to unite against ZANU PF: Timba	Newsday
5 January 2025	2030: CIO, Police Shake-up raises eyebrows	The Standard
6 January 2025	ZANU PF plots ED's life presidency	Newsday
7 January 2025	ED farm visit tears CCC apart	Newsday
8 January 2025	Zw must defer 2028 polls . . . CCC reiterates as it pushes for national dialogue.	Daily News
9 January 2025	Defer polls to 2030 for continued development: CCC	The Herald
12 January 2025	Deferring the 2028 elections is doable, government says.	Daily News
	Tshabangu's backing of ED2030 backfires	The Standard
13 January 2025	VPs fully back ED2030 push . . . ZANU PF big gun says, warns those opposing the bid.	Daily News
	Lawmakers endorse extended Presidential bid	The Herald
14 January 2025	ED 2030 push covers ground . . . as government readies for constitutional amendments.	Daily News
	Farm tour meant to extend ED tenure	Newsday

Table 1. *Cont.*

Date	Headline	Newspaper
15 January 2025	Government ready for constitutional amendments . . . Changes to extend Presidential term	The Herald
	MPs get 2030 bid underway . . . as they craft draft motion to defer 2028 polls by 5 years	Daily News
	ED'S third term bid impossible: Madhuku	Newsday
16 January 2025	Fringe parties oppose election postponement	Daily News
	Tshabangu backtracks on 2030 agenda	Newsday
17 January 2025	EFF Zim backs Tshabangu's ED 2030 push	Daily News
	ZANU PF ploughs on with ED2030 agenda	Newsday
19 January 2025	2030 bid increasingly looks a done deal bar the shouting	Daily News
	Legal process to extend President's term explained.	The Sunday Mail
	ZANU PF divisions over Mnangagwa exposed	The Standard
20 January 2025	ZANU PF reads riot act to officials resisting 2030 push	Daily News
	ZANU PF gears for referendum	The Herald
22 January 2025	Churches trash ED2030 Plan	Newsday
23 January 2025	OPC slams media over 2030 misinformation	The Herald
	People have a right to talk about ED2030: Minister	The Herald
24 January 2025	ZANU PF panics over anti-ED2030 Pushback	Newsday
	President not responsible for 2030 call: Ziyambi	The Herald
26 January 2025	Nothing can stop the people from editing the Constitution	Daily News
	Presidential term extension unstoppable	The Sunday Mail
	ZANU PF structures resist ED2030 agenda	The Standard
27 January 2025	War vets turn against ED	Newsday
28 January 2025	War vets savage 2030 agenda	Newsday
29 January 2025	Zim at tipping point over ED2030	Newsday

The above table depicts the prominent extent of the ED2030 agenda in Zimbabwe's main newspaper publications (in January 2025). While this paper will not delve into an analysis of each of the above newspaper articles, it is essential to note that the media has consistently reported on the call for the extension of the presidential term. However, the framing of the bid to extend the term limit beyond 2028 has been glaringly different between the state-owned publishers' narratives and independent media houses. For instance, the state media has consistently projected the call for the ED2030 agenda as a necessity for development and continuity, which must be embraced by all. The state narratives also present the extension as a grassroots outcry by the citizens and not a selfish agenda by the President and the ruling elite. This is not surprising as state-controlled media has been widely criticised and accused of blindly supporting the ruling ZANU PF party and advancing state propaganda (Moyo 2010). On the other hand, independent media voices have framed the call for the ED2030 agenda as an attempt to circumvent the constitution, undermine democracy and the rule of law to safeguard the interest of the minority ruling elites, particularly those close to the President. The independent media has presented critical perspectives on the dangers of extending term limits and exposed dissenting voices to the ED2030 agenda. Independent media has been critical of the government and seeks to

identify with the public (Mpofu et al. 2022; Sauti 2020). What is clear from both the state narratives and independent voices is that there are multiple proponents for the agenda and equal resistance to the same, which then prompted the church as a key stakeholder in the Zimbabwean national landscape to respond and weigh in on this critical matter.

However, the prophetic voice of the church is divided, as some leaders align themselves with the political figures while others attempt to maintain an independent posture (Tagwirei 2023; Dube 2020; Tarusarira 2020a). The prophetic voice is, therefore, a contested terrain as various ecumenical groups and independent church leaders continue to claim to speak on behalf of the church particularly on issues of national importance. Ecumenical groups such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (collectively constituting ZHOCD), and other non-conformist religious groups such as Zimbabwe Christian Alliance and churches in Manicaland have contributed towards the prophetic voice of the church in many respects (Tarusarira 2020b). Who speaks for the church in Zimbabwe is still a contested matter with multiple ecumenical groups and various independent leaders claiming to speak on behalf of the church and representing the Christian prophetic voice. The next section will discuss one such moment when the ZHOCD issued a critical statement as a crucial prophetic voice for the church in Zimbabwe.

3.1. No to Third Term—Sekwanele! A Pastoral Statement by the Church in Zimbabwe

The various ecumenical bodies of the church in Zimbabwe have been voicing their concerns to the state through meetings and pastoral letters (Manyonganise 2022). Pastoral letters play a fundamental role in crisis communication and are instrumental in helping the church respond to social and political crises (Hlova 2023). Historically, church leaders have issued pastoral statements as a mechanism through which they can inform, guide, and caution their members and the nation at large about major socio-political events and this has often sparked controversies and attracted state responses (Marek 2023). Zimbabwe has witnessed several instances whereby the ecumenical churches have issued guidance through pastoral letters. For instance, in 2019, the ZHOCD issued a pastoral letter suggesting the postponement of elections for seven years (ZHOCD 2019), a proposal which received criticism from the politicians, civil society, and citizens in general, leading to the church leaders withdrawing their proposal (Mujinga 2023). The ZCBC issued a pastoral letter titled, the March is not Ended, on 14 August 2020. The bishops admonished and challenged the government on corruption and misgovernance and the letter provoked a scathing response from the government (Iheanacho 2022). This shows that in times of socio-political crises, the church has pronounced its prophetic voice through pastoral letters which have been a valuable tool for providing guidance to believers and reinforcing moral positions (Hlova 2023). Therefore, with the impending political crises concerning the likelihood of a possible extension of the presidential term and increasing calls and pronouncements for the constitutional amendments by some sectors in society, the ZHOCD released an ecumenical statement on 21 January 2025, highlighting its position on the matter. This letter will be discussed in the following sections using a thematic analysis.

3.1.1. Term Extension Is Unconstitutional

The statement by the church leaders illustrates the church's bold move in defending the constitution and throwing its weight against the third term brigade. Church leaders expressed their 'concern' over ongoing pronouncements to extend the presidential limits. In their opening statement, the ZHOCD said:

> The Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) is concerned about the recent pronouncements by some Members of Parliament and Political activists

> urging His Excellence the President of Zimbabwe Dr. E. D. Mnangagwa to extend his term of office beyond 2028. (ZHOCD 2025)

Here, the church leaders were timeously invoking the church's prophetic voice in the midst of an impending political crisis. This comes at the backdrop of scrutiny from different sectors of society on the ability of the church collective (particularly Pentecostal leaders) to promote peace and democracy, as most churches have been accused of taking a passive stance or allowing themselves to be co-opted by the regime (Musoni 2021; Mudzanire and Banda 2021). In a true prophetic stance, the church leaders analysed the ongoing pronouncements by parliamentarians and political actors who were pushing for the president to extend his term of office beyond 2028. That the first point of call by the church is to flag some disturbing pronouncements by elected members of the legislature on a constitutional matter is a bold move that must be applauded. The church, in raising its prophetic voice and voicing its concerns about political statements about the future of the nation, was taking a proactive move towards avoiding political conflict that such pronouncements may ignite in a politically volatile environment like Zimbabwe.

The statement goes on to 'prayerfully urge His Excellency the President of Zimbabwe, Dr. E. D. Mnangagwa to resist the calls and the temptation by those calling for the extension of the Presidential Term Limits for the greater good of the country' (ZHOCD 2025). The church 'prayerfully' urged the president to resist the evil calls to abandon the constitution. The church's voice prayerfully and humbly requests and encourages the president to do the right thing. In confronting the Head of State on the matter, the church leaders were exercising their prophetic mandate to judge all political systems according to their adherence to God's justice and providing the moral compass for the nation (Mudzanire and Banda 2021). In doing so, the church leaders are conscious of the polarised nature of the Zimbabwean political landscape; hence, they choose to tread very carefully on this contentious matter, making it clear in their statement that this was not a demand but a humble, prayerful request for the president to consider doing the right thing for the nation. It is clear from the onset that the ZHOCD are opposed to any extensions to term limits by any means. For the church leaders, such a move would be tantamount to 'overthrowing the Constitution of the Country' (ZHOCD 2025).

The second paragraph of the statement draws solace from the remarks by the president as a testament to his commitment not to extend his term of office. In their opinion, the church leaders seem to appreciate that President Mnangagwa is the constitutionalist that he claims to be. The church leaders remind him in the statement of his commitment to upholding the constitution and preserving the gains of liberation and hard-won independence. The church leaders state the following:

> The Church takes relief from the consistent remarks made by His Excellency on several occasions where he has repeatedly affirmed his commitment to uphold the Constitution of Zimbabwe by committing not to extend his Presidency beyond the Constitutional and legal limits. The President's pronouncements have always been clear and a significant step towards reinforcing the gains of the liberation struggle, good governance, democratic norms and promoting national peace and unity. We believe His Excellency intends to remain true to his oath to uphold, defend and respect both the Constitution and the Law in letter and spirit. (ZHOCD 2025)

The real question however is whether the church leaders really believe in President Mnangagwa's rhetoric? What makes the bishops confident that President Mnangagwa's remarks will translate into a true 'commitment' to upholding the constitution? Where does the church obtain the basis for this relief on President Mnangagwa's sentiments? Has

the president not given enough proof that he speaks without sincerity? How does the church have so much faith in an individual who has been on a rampage of mutilating the constitution through excessive amendments? These are critical questions particularly in the Zimbabwean context. President Mnangagwa has been notorious for finding creative ways of extending the terms of office of various State officers, sometimes in violation of constitutional term limits for those officers (Mavedzenge 2025). For instance, the president extended Chief Justice Malaba's term of office and allowed the amendment to benefit the incumbent. While this extension of the tenure of the Chief Justice was met with legal resistance (Tembo and Singh 2023), Chief Justice Luke Malaba's extended time in office was sustained, thanks to legal gymnastics in statutory interpretation (Kika 2025). Early in January this year, he also extended the Zimbabwe Defence Forces Commander General Valerio Sibanda's term of office by another year after he had reached the mandatory age of retirement (Mabika 2025). The extension of tenures for these office bearers is not a coincidence but a calculated move by the president to weaken institutions and arms of government and allow the executive to exert its influence and/or lobby for favours when needs be. The results of the Chief Justice tenure extension means that the president is likely to extend the tenure of judges who are viewed as favourable to the system (Tembo and Singh 2023). The same can be argued for the service chiefs who, in this case, were instrumental in ED's catapulting to the highest office. Thus, if the president can go to such lengths to extend the service chief's and Chief Justice's terms of office, what will stop him from extending the tenure of the Commander in Chief? With such a record of ignoring term limits for state officials, it would take a miracle for him to honour the presidential term limit. As Kika (2025) explains, those wanting to amend the constitution are not Democrats and are willing to bend all manner of rules and procedures. Why the church chooses to deliberately ignore this record and culture of extending term limits at any costs is worrisome. One wonders whether this is a deliberate oversight by the church, or perhaps this is a diplomatic way by the church leaders to appeal to the president's conscience and persuade him to be true to his word and do the right thing. Only time will tell.

What is clear from the statement is that the church leaders are calling for respect for the constitution by all, and most importantly, the president. This culminates in the church leaders making significant pleas, first and foremost to the president urging him to lead by example as the first citizen. First and foremost, the church leaders urge:

> (i) The President to uphold the Constitution and respect the Presidential Term Limits ensuring that elections are held in 2028 and that he supports a smooth power transition in 2028. (ZHOCD 2025)

This is the key plea that the statement is communicating, and it is targeted at the president to uphold the constitution and pronounce the elections when his term ends, as stipulated by the constitution. This means that the church expects the president to pronounce elections as scheduled for 2028 and allow other candidates but himself to participate and he must then be willing to accept the outcome of the elections and cede power to the elected administration, whether from his own party or opposition. According to the church leaders, this is the only option available for the president. Any diversion from the aforesaid will be unconstitutional. The options of the president are limited to this one major request—NO to third term—Sekwanele!—is a clear and recurring theme in the statement. This is predicated on the need for regular, free, and fair elections, a key theme which will now be discussed in the following section.

3.1.2. Elections in 2028 Are Not Optional

The issue of elections has always been contentious in Zimbabwe since 1980. Elections have been characterised by gross violence and electoral subterfuge (Kwashirai 2023; Moore

2023). Turning to the issue of elections and electoral reforms, in the third and fourth paragraphs of the statement, the church leaders emphasise their collective commitment to democracy and the rule of law. The church positioned itself as a key player in entrenching constitutionalism and therefore encouraged the president to do the same by adhering to the set constitutional term limits and supporting a 'peaceful transition of power in 2028'. This is quite a bold statement by the church leaders. According to Masezerano (2022), the peaceful, credible, and consensual change in power through democratic practices is a crucial element for sustainable peace and development for African states. The church leaders are, therefore, aware of this crucial factor, hence the call upon the president to be prepared to hand over power to a different administration in 2028. This encouragement is key as it is based on the realisation that peaceful alternation of power, especially between incumbents and opposition governments, is usually infrequent and rancorous (Idowu and Mimiko 2020). The church leaders are therefore encouraging the president to be willing to accept electoral outcomes even if it means the defeat of the ruling party. Scholars have argued that the willingness to accept electoral outcomes, mainly when candidates accept defeat, reinforces the peaceful transition of power that sustains the democratic political order (Piazza 2021). At the heart of the message by the church leaders is the idea that as far as the constitution is concerned and as far as the church is concerned, 2028 is the end of the lifeline for the 'new dispensation' and a newer administration must be allowed to take over governance. This must be understood for what it is. It does not suggest that ZANU PF will be out of power, as the next administration may be from any political party which emerges victorious from the plebiscite. What is clear, is that no matter the outcome, President Mnangagwa will not be the leader, as he would have already served his constitutionally mandated two presidential claims. He, therefore, becomes a crucial actor, as his acceptance of this factor is key for the legitimacy and lifeline of the next administration.

However, this is only possible after 'free, fair and credible elections'. This, again, is an indictment on the current administration which has been accused of electioneering itself into power by whatever means necessary. Both the 2018 and 2023 elections that gave ED his two successive terms have been characterised by allegations of vote rigging and political intimidation, violence, and vote buying. As such, the church leaders emphasise the following:

> The ZHOCD wishes to reiterate commitment to promoting democratic values, entrenching constitutionalism, and the rule of law in Zimbabwe. As the church, we encourage the President to adhere to the constitutional term limits, and to support a peaceful transition of power in the year 2028 following free, fair and credible elections. The proposal to extend presidential term limits may irretrievably erode public trust in the electoral processes in Zimbabwe and would destabilise the country at a time when unity and peace are most needed for our economic and social transformation. (ZHOCD 2025)

For the church leaders, 'the proposal to extend presidential term limits may irretrievably erode public trust in the electoral processes in Zimbabwe and would destabilise the country at a time when unity and peace are most needed for our economic and social transformation' (ZHOCD 2025). The church leaders are correct in their assessment of the consequences of the political move to extend the term of office and argue that this will affect the socio-economic trajectory of the nation. The church leaders are adamant that such a move will erode the public trust in the electoral process, hence it ought not to be entertained as it will most likely drive chaos and instability in the country. According to Mavedzenge (2021), delaying elections or tampering with constitutional processes in Zimbabwe has historically led to governance crises, the erosion of democratic legitimacy, and increased political instability. It is based on these factors that the church leaders caution

the possibility of instability. Such an act in delaying elections is likely to attract public outcry and resentment by the general public as their right to vote will be taken away from them. This underscores the need for the holding of free, fair, and credible elections as scheduled, hence the church makes a stern call:

> As the Church, we emphasize the importance of implementing electoral reforms and ensuring regular free and fair elections to ensure accountability, transparency and the peaceful transfer of power. We urge the Government to adhere to the electoral timelines as stipulated in the Constitution and ensure that all elections are conducted in a transparent, credible, and peaceful manner. (ZHOCD 2025)

The church, therefore, reiterated the need for implementing electoral reforms and ensuring free and fair elections. The church further daringly urged the government to adhere to the electoral timelines as stipulated by the constitution. This is an important and interesting call by the church leaders, particularly the ZHOCD. As mentioned earlier, in 2019, the ZHOCD called for a sabbath and issued a controversial pastoral letter suggesting the postponement of general elections for seven years (ZHOCD 2019). Their views received widespread criticism, leading to the withdrawal of the proposal by the church leaders as they realised the major risks associated with postponing elections in an environment marked by political intimidation, mistrust, and allegations of vote rigging (Mujinga 2023). One may argue that in speaking against the idea, the church leaders were exhibiting great signs of learning from their mistakes and self-correcting from a once misguided position for the sake of preserving democracy. The ZHOCD recognises that if elections are not called in 2028 as stipulated, such a delay will undermine democratic governance and most likely open avenues for authoritarian entrenchment (Kibble 2013).

3.1.3. A Call for Oversight and Separation of Powers

The church further calls for oversight to ensure checks and balances on the abuse of power. This call is directed at the government, which includes all its branches, including the executive branch, legislature, and judiciary. This is based on the principle of separation of powers, which seeks to avoid the usurpation of power (Tikhanov 2024). This is a crucial principle in any democracy as it guarantees stability, security, and the advancement of democracy (Kadyrbekov 2024). By directing such a call to the government, the church leaders are cognisant of the functions of government and the existing fissures which undermine the system meant to provide checks and balances that avoid the abuse of power. In its call, the ZHOCD called upon not just the president but the entire executive branch (comprising the president and cabinet) to make sure they adhere to the stipulations of the supreme law of the land. This means that the executive is responsible for ensuring that the president is not led astray into seeking to extend his term limits but must be accountable to the dictates of the constitution. Secondly, the call is equally made to the legislature not to seek the extension of the parliamentary lifeline in a bid to allow President Mnangagwa to rule beyond 2028. Most importantly, the call for the MPs is to ensure they exercise their mandate of holding the executive accountable and not allow any infringements on the constitution. In order to effect the term limit extension, parliament will have to amend the constitution; hence, the church is calling upon the MPs to uphold their oath and vote against any such motions should they arise. Thirdly, the call is directed at the judiciary to ensure it fulfils its mandate of ensuring rule of law and supremacy of the constitution. Executive, legislature, and judiciary, the three organs of the government, need to be independent and accountable to each other as propounded by Montesquieu's Separation of Power doctrine and Checks and Balances (Shanthi et al. 2023). The church is therefore aware that while in principle, these organs are independent of each, there are constant attempts by the

executive to exert its influence over the judiciary and the legislature. In light of this, the church leaders in their fourth plea, explicitly urge:

> (iv) Members of Parliament to ensure that they contribute to the entrenchment of constitutionalism and play their oversight role for the Executive to uphold, respect and defend the constitution by adhering to the presidential term limits.

The above call to MPs to play their oversight role is a reminder to the elected officials that they must stick to their constitutional obligations and duties. Recently, MPs have been wining and dining with the executive and are hosted at the president's farm (Daily News 2025). Commenting on the current interactions between the executive and parliament, one social media post concluded the following:

> That thing is no longer Parliament. It's a crime scene. No person who understands the doctrine of separation of powers would take the entire House to the farm of the person they're meant to be holding to account. We can't have a country where there is no separation between the three arms of State. It's a charade tainted with illegitimacy. It's a mess. (Mahere 2025)

The current parliament has received widespread criticism and has been characterised as a captured parliament subserviently serving executive interests (Kika 2025). Tamborinyoka (2025) makes the following characterisation of the current state of the legislative organ of government in Zimbabwe:

> Indeed, apart from Sengezo Tshabangu's sponsored shenanigans in that House, our Parliament has in every respect become a red-light district where cheap and loose souls are openly peddling themselves for a political quickie without any value-protection! (Tamborinyoka 2025)

In summary, this paints a picture of a captured parliament, subservient to the executive and disarmed of its ability to hold the executive to account. Therefore, in its statement, the church rightfully reminded the parliamentarians to remember their mandate and not sell out. Given the recent development, whether the current constitution of this parliament is able to fulfil such a mandate is highly questionable.

3.1.4. A Call for Unity of Purpose in Defending the Constitution

The statement by the church is a clear call for unity of purpose in defending the constitution. The church makes a call to all Zimbabweans and all political parties to set differences aside and unite for the common cause of defending national interests. As such, the second major plea by the church leaders is directed towards the nation, all Zimbabweans. The citizens are urged to:

> (ii) All Zimbabweans to clearly pronounce themselves in support of the call to put Zimbabwe first and uphold the Constitution of the Country. (ZHOCD 2025)

The church calls upon Zimbabweans to rally against the third term brigade and put the country first. This broad-based and inclusive call is a call to go beyond party affiliation and religious denominations in making a sober and sound decision to defend the constitution and put the nation's interest first. Here, the church is calling upon the nation to unite for a common cause and rise above the divisions whether religious or political. Gaga et al. (2023) recommended that there is need for the ZHCOD to engage far and wide groups of Christian organisations of all persuasions if a comprehensive Christian response to the Zimbabwean crisis is to be attained. The church could have chosen to direct the plea towards its membership, over which it has some form of control, but it decided to widen its call to all Zimbabweans in a bid to bring the nation towards sustainable nation-building. The church understands that this is not only a political crisis but a national crisis which

requires everyone's united voice (or at least the majority). This direct call to the entire nation could be a result of the anticipation that the proponents for the third term limits may push for a referendum. Therefore, the church is proactively mobilising the nation to reject such calls should they arise. This will not be the first time the church has rallied the nation towards a no-vote in a referendum. In 1972, clerics such as Bishop Abel Muzorewa and Reverend Canaan Banana rose to popularity when they rallied people to oppose the Rhodesian settlement under the banner of No Independence Before Majority Rule (NIBMR) (Ndlovu 2024). The people emerged victorious, and the clerics filled the leadership vacuum in the political scene, leading to the formation of the United African National Council (UANC). Should the nation be called for a referendum, the church seeks to become the middle ground, calling upon the nation to go beyond political affiliations and put the nation first. In the same breath, the church leaders extend the call to all the political actors in the Zimbabwean landscape to uphold the constitution. In the fourth major plea, the church asks the following:

> (v) All political parties to observe and adhere to the Constitution and Law of Zimbabwe. (ZHOCD 2025)

While this is a noble call, one may argue that it is misdirected. There is only one political party that should be urged to observe and adhere to the constitution: the party in power. This is mostly directed towards ZANU PF, which must ensure that it abides by the law. It is ZANU PF that resolved through its National People's Conference in 2024 the now popular 'Resolution 1', which states that ED's tenure must be extended beyond 2028 to 2030. It is ZANU PF that has constantly made pronouncements that it intends to enforce this resolution in 2025 (Mashaya 2025). It is such a call that should be addressed directly by the church leaders rather than using an umbrella approach. The resolution is dangerous to the soul of the constitution; hence, if there is any need for a prophetic voice to speak against excesses by the ruling elite, it needs to be directed at the ruling party. Whether the bishops missed their moment or they deliberately avoided confrontation with the ruling party is a topic worth exploring. The ruling party read between the lines and personalised the plea, as seen in their scathing response to the church, which will be discussed below.

Lastly, in concluding their statement, the church leaders cited Micah 6:8 (NIV):

> 'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'.

This serves as a reminder to the president and all those in power that they are mortal beings and as such, will not reign forever. However, while they reign, there is a clarion call, supported by God, to do what is right, act according to justice, and walk humbly before the Lord. Such a reminder is key, even to the nation at large, to remember to do what is right and act in the interest of justice and not selfish political or religious gains. It waits to be seen whether the president, the government of Zimbabwe, and all Zimbabweans will be equal to the task come 2028.

4. Government Responds: 'Back-Off Pastors!'—Politics Is for the Big Boys

In response to the ecumenical statement, the government, through its Minister of Information and Publicity and Broadcasting Services, Dr Jenfan Muswere, released a statement on 24 January 2025, with an almost similar title, Statement on the Presidential Limit Extension (GoZ 2025). It is interesting to note that the title deliberately omitted the term 'constitutional', as was the case with the ZHOCD statement. This may appear trivial, but as the contents of the statement will prove, it is a deliberate omission. The statement

by the government shows that the government read the statement by the ZHOCD as a political statement which warranted a political response.

In the statement, Minister Muswere described the ZHOCD as a paltry conglomerate of civil society entrepreneurs purporting to represent the views of the church in Zimbabwe (GoZ 2025). He went on further to characterise the ZHOCD as a minority entity bent on misrepresenting the cordial relationship that the state and the church enjoys. This scathing attack on the church by the government shows how much the ruling elite is against any form of dissent and is unkind towards any negative criticism. Above all, it shows how the government minimises the church's efforts at uniting and consolidating its prophetic voice. The ZHOCD is a grouping of four apex organisations that represent 77.2% of the Zimbabwean Christian population (ZHOCD 2023). It serves as an umbrella body that aims to reunite Christian efforts of Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Indigenous traditions to collectively influence democratic processes in Zimbabwe (Gaga et al. 2024). Therefore, such a dismissal by the government is telling!

In its opening statement, the government characterised the call for the third term limit extension as a politically broad-based call. This seeks to accuse ZHOCD of misreading the political atmosphere prevailing in the country. To give the bishops a clear picture, the government makes it clear that such a call to extend limits remains a 'rightful and unquestionable obligation for parliament . . . ZANU PF and other legitimate political stakeholders . . .' (GoZ 2025). This means that the church (or at least the ZHOCD in this case) is an illegitimate political actor and, thus, unqualified to speak on this matter. This is exactly what ZANU PF does; it relegates, sidelines, and silences any dissenting voice (Mavedzenge 2021). Secondly, this means that the parliamentarians making the pronouncements are, in fact, within their own rights and should be allowed to express their preferences without being questioned. Again, the emphasis on unquestionable authority is based on the ZANU PF's modus operandi of ruling with impunity; therefore, the statement seeks to remind the church leaders of this reality.

The second paragraph justifies the fact that parliamentarians from across the political divide (that is, MPs from ZANU PF and CCC) are correct in speaking about the third term. The government statement is quick to note that these submissions by the Honourable Members reflect the aspirations of their electorate in the constituencies. This is difficult to dispute considering that in representative democracy, the authority of parliamentarians derives from electoral processes and constitutional provisions (AbdulRaheem 2020). The legislature represents the will of the people; the citizens are given the opportunity to elect their representatives and determine the future of their country (Vyshnevska 2024). In Zimbabwe, parliamentarians have a constitutional mandate from the people for a five-year term. At the end of the term, fresh elections are held to renew the mandate.

Parliamentarians can speak on behalf of the people who voted them into power. In a democracy, this is a privilege that the parliamentarians and other elected officials enjoy, but the church leaders cannot claim to have a legitimate mandate to speak authoritatively for all their constituents/members of their congregation (at least on political issues). Authors have questioned the appropriateness of church leaders to claim to speak on behalf of both God and the people, especially when such claims have no legal or democratic basis (Mudzanire and Banda 2021). The fundamental difference between the church leaders and the elected politicians is that the political representatives derive their legitimacy from the electoral processes, which give them a direct mandate based on the democratic will of the people while church leaders appeal to moral authority (Mohamad and Othman 2020). Elected politicians have a direct mandate from the people and they are duty-bound to represent those views. As such, the response by the government capitalises on this advantage over the church leaders and argues that parliament is answerable to the people, the electorate,

and not the church! So, the government drives its point that the parliamentarians are answerable to the majority of the people of Zimbabwe and not pockets of society to which the church has been categorised.

With this political grounding established, the government statement moved on to escalate its attack on the church. The government goes into its default settings and characterises the church as Western-sponsored regime change agents. This is no surprise, as 'the government has always blamed internal and external forces which are bent on enforcing regime change. It has particularly blamed Western countries for fomenting conflict and economic collapse to advance a neo-colonial agenda' (Manyonganise 2022). The government relegates the church's statement to a donor funding gimmick, a ploy to attract Western funding in order to push for a regime change agenda. The church leaders clearly stated in their statement that the government must prepare for a new regime without President Mnangagwa post 2028! This was misinterpreted as an antic for regime change and anti-government, whereas the church simply called for reforms that allowed for a peaceful transition of power.

To defend its case further, the government (in particular, the ruling party) reminded the church that 'ZANU PF is a political establishment which delivered freedom of expression and freedom of religion (constitutional elements) and that it still today 'ferociously defends freedom of worship for all' (not only for ZHOCD) (GoZ 2025). This is a scathing attack on the church to stay out of political matters and let the political establishments deal with constitutional matters. In other words, the state is reprimanding the state and is saying to the church enjoy the freedoms we gave you and do not abuse them. In some ways, it is a statement giving limits to the extent to which these freedoms must be enjoyed. The church is reminded that when it speaks up against the government, it is abusing its rights!

In its closing statement, the government says that 'the proposal to move a motion on the presidential term limit extension will follow the provisions of the law with the constitution being centrifugal throughout the process with no iota of infractions' (GoZ 2025). This means that ZANU PF is ready to engage in lawfare to defend its call for an extension to the presidential term limits. The state has weaponised the justice system to further its own agendas, as evidenced by multiple amendments to the constitution. Controversially, the Chief Justice has been a beneficiary of this constitutional manipulation as his term of office was extended to allow him to serve beyond his limit (Kika 2025). Now, it remains to be seen how he will return the favour in doctoring the law to favour the incumbent president to serve beyond 2028. The church in Zimbabwe should, therefore, be ready to challenge such government excesses and stand true to its prophetic mandate and defend justice and the constitution.

5. Materials and Methods

The article used the pastoral statement by the ZHOCD titled, Statement on the Presidential Constitutional Limit (ZHOCD 2025), and the response by the Government of Zimbabwe titled Statement on Presidential Term Limit as the primary sources of data. The statements are used to reflect on the nature of state–church relations and on the wider political and religious landscape in Zimbabwe's second republic. The paper also draws from secondary sources and responses to the statement available online. The paper uses a qualitative thematic analysis to present the findings.

6. Implications and Conclusions

The above letter from the church leaders and the subsequent response by the government have far-reaching implications for the Zimbabwean religio-political landscape. The letter by the ZHOCD emphasises the supremacy of the constitution and the will of

the people. The church's statement acts as a crucial reminder to the nation that the 2013 Constitution was adopted by a referendum that imposed strict measures on presidential term limits. The nation needs not to be reminded how it had been under the rule of a strong man since its independence, with a sitting president in power for more than three decades. To avert this prolonged stay in power, the people decided to place stringed limits on the term limits. As such, the constitution captures the voice of the people regarding this matter, a voice that must be respected at all times by all Zimbabweans. Therefore, calling on the president and government not to entertain calls to amend the constitution is a bold defence of the constitution and the church is echoing the voice of the majority of Zimbabweans who subscribe to the notion of placing term limits for elected officials.

The church's statement recognises that there is a small sector of individuals driving this agenda for their own selfish aggrandisement. The letter is therefore a critical prophetic stance by the church to defend the constitution against its usurpation and mutilation by power hungry individuals purporting to be acting in the interest of the people. The statement must therefore be read as a strong message to anyone trying to ignore or misrepresent the will of the people. The church is sending a message to say: 'Hands off our sacred constitution!'

However, while such a courageous prophetic voice is commendable, this paper argues that ecumenical statements alone are not enough. The potency of the ZHOCD statement in stopping the ED2030 agenda is limited. There is a need for the prophetic voice of the church in Zimbabwe to be translated into real action. The church should not only issue statements, but it must also be prepared to mobilise its constituency and the wider citizenry through programmes of action that advance the agenda of rejecting these proposed term extensions and the mutilation of the constitution. The church must take a cue from the church in Malawi, which participated in activities such as public demonstrations and debates, in addition to issuing media statements, highlighting the dangers of removing the constitutional provision of term limits (Dulani 2011). In other words, the church followed up its statements through practical engagements with society, and this led to the abortion of the proposal to remove term limits.

In countries where attempts to remove or extend presidential term limits were successfully thwarted, those who led these efforts were well-organised, diverse groups who came together under one common purpose. These groupings 'operated in unison by pooling the wholesome of their resources to run well coordinated campaigns that proved to be ultimately successful in preventing the removal of term limits.' For instance, in Zambia, church leaders collaborated with other civil society organisations (including lawyer associations, trade unions, NGOs, and student movements) to form the Oasis Forum, which became the main vehicle for driving the agenda against the removal of term limits as proposed by President Frederick Chiluba in 2001 (Lumina 2020; Dulani 2011). Similarly, in Malawi, the church leadership were part of the nationwide, pro-democracy groups (including trade unions, farmer organisations, lawyer associations, student representatives, and human rights organisations) who created the 'Forum for the Defence of the Constitution', (FDC) (Dulani 2011; Nowack 2020). Through the FDC, the pro-democracy movement in Malawi was able to present a successful united front against the efforts by President Bakili Muluzi to remove term limits in 2002 and 2003 (Nowack 2020). To this end, the church in Zimbabwe, particularly the ZHCOD, must therefore make realistic and practical efforts towards its major plea number 2 (discussed above). The church must extend an olive branch towards other pro-democracy groups to formulate a clear, mutual forum that will drive this agenda forward, without which, this paper argues that the efforts by the church leaders will be futile.

This paper, however, acknowledges that the contexts in Zambia and Malawi are strikingly different from the prevailing political climate in Zimbabwe. This may further present challenges for the church leadership in Zimbabwe in executing their mandate beyond the statements. The political climate in Zimbabwe is hostile, which affects the ability of the church leaders to mobilise and be effective agents of change. In a study investigating the prophetic role of church leaders in mitigating political violence in Zimbabwe, it was concluded that church leaders operate within a context characterised by real threats of violence, and they must navigate this mortal danger (with the complexity of remaining alive) while also extending their capacity to have a lasting impact (Ndlovu 2024).

Given such a context, and as further evidenced by the government's response to the ZHOCD statement, it is crystal clear that the government of Zimbabwe's posture towards dissenting voices opposed to the third term bid is unfortunately hostile. The church in Zimbabwe, finds itself in a similar predicament as was the church in Uganda whereby the government was hostile to voices against the removal of term limits. In 2005, those who attempted to formulate a united front (under the banner of the Popular Resistance Against Life Presidency) against President Museveni's bid were met with violence and detention by the state security apparatus, which resulted in uncoordinated efforts and a failure to stop the term removals (Dulani 2011). This means that the church leaders and any pro-democracy groups seeking to defend the constitution and stop the extension of presidential limits must be able to count the cost and be prepared to face resistance from the state, which may at times be damaging.

The government response suggests that such a call is foreign to the Zimbabwean people. The government suggests that any voices (whether from the church fraternity, opposition circles, or civil society space) that are opposed to extending presidential term limits are a product of imperialistic regime change advocates and are Western-sponsored. The implication of such a mischaracterisation is that it suggests that no ordinary Zimbabwean has the will to oppose any unconstitutional moves by the ruling elite. It suggests that the only recognised voice of the people is one that favours the government and supports it without question.

The response by the government further shows the nature of the church–state relations in the Second Republic. The state monopolises the freedom of worship and freedom of speech and threatens the church to be cautious when exercising such freedoms. The state repudiates church voices that oppose its operations while it consecrates the voices that do not challenge it (Dube 2023). The statement exposed the government's allergic reaction to dissenting voices. The response by the government shows its unwillingness to listen to opposing views. The response exposes how the government characterises dissenting voices as anti-revolutionary and detrimental to advancing the gains of the liberation to which it has assumed the outright monopoly. This should not intimidate the church from silencing its voice; the church in Zimbabwe must continue to stand firm and defend justice even in the face of harsh resistance by the state.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ZANU PF	Zimbabwe African National Unity Patriotic Front
ZHOCD	Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations
NIBMR	No Independence Before Majority Rule
ACSS	Africa Center for Strategic Studies
UANC	United African National Congress
CCC	Citizens Coalition for Change
FDC	Forum for the Defence of the Constitution
GoZ	Government of Zimbabwe
MP	Member of Parliament
ED	Emmerson Dambudzo (Mnangagwa)

Notes

1 Others may argue he is not really being clandestine about it. His usual mantra is the voice of God is the voice of the people. And by people he means 'his people'.

2 Vapositori are the white garment churches also known as the apostolic sect. These form part of the African Indigenous Churches and are controversial for siding with the ruling elite and accused of being regime enablers by forming the Vapostori for ED. (See Musoni 2019). Indigenous Churches and are prevalent in Southern Africa. In Zimbabwe there are two main types of Zionist churches namely: Zion yetambo (Zion of the sacred cord) and Zion yeshayatambo (Zion of the cordless tradition). These Zionist churches are vociferous about their allegiance to the ruling elite, in Zimbabwe they have formed a group called the MaZion For ED, a platform for open political support to President Mnangagwa (See, Chimininge 2024).

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