

CONFERENCE PAPER | CASE STUDY

# AVOIDING <sup>THE</sup> COUP TRAP

Zambia's Constitutional Design,  
Civil–Military Neutrality,  
and the Peaceful Transition  
of Seven Presidents

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# **Avoiding the coup trap: Zambia’s constitutional design, civil–military neutrality, and the peaceful transition of seven presidents**

**By Mundia Paul Hakoola**

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## **1. Abstract**

Since gaining independence in 1964, Zambia has undergone significant political transformations, evolving from Kenneth Kaunda’s one-party The United National Independence Party (UNIP) system to a multi-party democracy in 1991. Despite five recorded coup attempts most notably in 1980 and 1997 the country has avoided a successful military takeover, positioning it as a notable outlier in a region frequently destabilised by armed interventions. This paper examines the constitutional, political, and electoral mechanisms that underpin Zambia’s resilience, while also identifying enduring vulnerabilities, including executive over-centralisation and weak intra-party democracy.

The analysis traces the evolution of Zambia’s constitutional architecture, highlighting the 2016 amendments that introduced automatic vice-presidential succession, enforceable presidential term limits, majoritarian presidential elections (50+1), and time-bound resolution of electoral disputes. These provisions reduce uncertainty during political transitions, reinforce civilian supremacy, and limit opportunities for extra-constitutional interventions. Civil–military relations are assessed through the Defence Act, the Defence Council, and a professional ethos cultivated to insulate the military from partisan politics, although challenges persist in the form of police politicisation and risks associated with security sector management.

Electoral systems are explored as a hybrid model: First-Past-the-Post for Members of Parliament and majoritarian rules for the presidency, which affect legitimacy, succession, and political stability. The paper further investigates how intra-party succession failures historically amplified risks of destabilisation, as illustrated by disputes within United National Independence Party (UNIP), The Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD), and Patriotic Front (PF). Comparative case studies from Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso demonstrate how weak succession frameworks, manipulated term limits, and politicised militaries have precipitated successful coups, underscoring the critical role of legal clarity and institutional design.

By contrast, Zambia’s trajectory illustrates the interplay between codified constitutional rules, judicial enforcement, and professionalised security forces in sustaining democratic resilience. The study concludes that Zambia provides instructive lessons for African constitutionalism, offering insights for regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on strengthening civilian oversight, curbing executive dominance, and institutionalising peaceful political transitions.

## **2. Introduction**

Across Africa, the recurrence of military coups has cast a long shadow over democratic consolidation and constitutional stability. From Mali to Guinea and Burkina Faso, fragile

institutions, politicised security sectors, and manipulated constitutions have combined to produce cycles of crisis and regime change. In this context, Zambia stands out as a compelling outlier. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1964, Zambia has experienced two attempted coups in 1980 and 1997 but has never witnessed a successful military takeover. Instead, it has managed seven presidential transitions across four political parties, often in the face of contentious elections and shifting political landscapes.

The resilience of Zambia's political system cannot be understood through constitutional text alone; rather, it reflects an evolving interplay between legal design, political practice, and civil–military relations. Zambia's constitutional order has been repeatedly revised, with amendments occurring roughly every decade and often on the eve of critical elections. While this pattern reflects institutional fragility, it has also produced innovations in governance. The 2016 constitutional amendment, for example, introduced a running-mate- Vice President with automatic succession, majoritarian (50+1) presidential elections, strict term limits, and time-bound mechanisms for resolving electoral disputes. These reforms collectively narrowed the uncertainty that typically fuels political instability in moments of transition.

At the same time, Zambia's civil–military framework rooted in colonial legacies of a defence force designed for regime protection has gradually been professionalised and depoliticised. Unlike in many West African states, the Zambian military has not evolved into a parallel political actor, with constitutional provisions mandating its non-partisanship and subordination to civilian authority. Nonetheless, vulnerabilities remain, including the over-centralisation of power in the presidency, weak parliamentary oversight, and failures of intra-party democracy within political parties.

This paper situates Zambia's experience within a comparative African perspective. By contrasting Zambia's trajectory with the coup-prone cases of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, it identifies the institutional and political factors that explain divergent outcomes. Ultimately, the paper argues that Zambia's constitutional design when combined with political culture and judicial enforcement offers valuable lessons for regional frameworks under the African Union and the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) in advancing democratic resilience and preventing unconstitutional changes of government.

### **3. Political Theories on Civil-Military Relations**

The literature on coups and civil–military relations suggests that military intervention is most likely under three interlocking conditions. First, where the armed forces are politicized either through overt partisanship, ethnic balancing, or patronage networks they are more prone to see themselves as legitimate political actors. Secondly, where the executive is personalized and centralized in a single leader, institutions weaken and succession becomes uncertain, raising the stakes of leadership change. Thirdly, where constitutions are ambiguous about succession or provide inadequate mechanisms for resolving disputes, moments of political contestation create

openings for actors to seek extra-legal remedies, often with the support or acquiescence of the military.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background, two broad approaches to civilian control are prominent in the literature. Samuel Huntington's classic model of objective control argues that coup risks are minimized when the military is granted professional autonomy in its own sphere especially defense policy and operational matters while remaining firmly subordinate to civilian political authority. By contrast, what Huntington terms subjective control where rulers politicize the armed forces by co-opting them into partisan struggles tends to erode professionalism and increase the likelihood of intervention. Building on this, Peter Feaver's agency framework conceptualises civil–military relations as a principal–agent problem: civilians are the principals, the military the agents.<sup>2</sup> The central challenge is to ensure that the military “works” (obeys directives within constitutional bounds) rather than “shirks” (pursues its own corporate or political interests). Whether officers comply depends on their calculation of monitoring, sanction and legitimacy costs.

Coup-proofing strategies, widely used in Africa, represent an attempt to raise these costs through stacking officer corps, proliferating intelligence agencies, creating parallel paramilitary units, or fragmenting command structures. While sometimes effective in the short term, such measures undermine professionalism, weaken institutional cohesion and may generate long-term instability.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, a constitutionalist model of civilian control rests not on suspicion and fragmentation but on embedding the military within a legal–normative framework that upholds both civilian supremacy and professional autonomy. Where constitutions clearly delineate command authority, succession rules, and the limits of military engagement in politics, they reduce both the opportunity and incentive for officers to intervene.

#### 4. Political System in Zambia: 1964–2025

Zambia's political system since independence in 1964 reflects a complex trajectory of presidentialism, party dominance, institutional adaptation, and recurrent constitutional reform. The state emerged from British colonial rule with a Westminster-style constitution, but its institutional legacies particularly in the security and administrative sectors were products of colonial imperatives rather than democratic design. The Northern Rhodesia Regiment and colonial policing forces were oriented primarily toward protecting the colonial administration and securing metropolitan economic interests, not defending democratic governance.<sup>4</sup> Upon independence, First President of Zambia Kenneth Kaunda inherited these security structures almost intact. Rather than being recalibrated for democratic civilian oversight, they were

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (HarperCollins 2009) 72–75. Joseph S Nye Jr, *Civil–Military Relations and the Stability of Democracies* (Harvard University Press 2011) 44–49.

<sup>2</sup> Peter D Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil–Military Relations* (Harvard University Press 2003) 32–36.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca E Richards, ‘Military Coup-Proofing in Africa: Patterns and Consequences’ (2013) 28 *African Security Review* 4, 15–20.

<sup>4</sup> J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), ch. on colonial military formations.

repurposed to serve state-building and regime-security objectives within a centralised presidential order.<sup>5</sup>

**The first Republic (1964–1973) formally embraced multiparty politics, but the dominance of Kaunda’s United National Independence Party (UNIP) quickly displaced effective pluralism. Political opposition was progressively constrained until the 1973 Constitution inaugurated a “second republic” under a one-party state.<sup>6</sup> The institutional design entrenched presidential centrality: the Head of State was simultaneously party leader and commander-in-chief, with few effective checks. This reinforced a pattern in which the presidency became the fulcrum of both state and party authority. The military remained under firm civilian control but functioned as an adjunct to regime security, sustaining executive primacy rather than developing autonomous political capacity.<sup>7</sup>**

Zambia’s first attempted coup d’état took place on 27 October 1980, during President Kenneth Kaunda’s rule.

This order discouraged overt military intervention, but it did little to develop resilient succession mechanisms. Intra-party leadership turnover was managed through elite bargaining within UNIP, typically under Kaunda’s dominance.<sup>8</sup> Party conventions were controlled, opposition was limited, and the security services were tasked primarily with containing dissent. The concentration of power in the presidency, coupled with the absence of institutionalised intra-party democracy, created systemic fragilities succession questions could become national crises rather than routine party transitions.

The early 1990s saw mounting pressure for reform. Economic decline, social mobilisation, and the Third Wave of democratisation forced a return to multipartyism in 1991.<sup>9</sup> The 1991 Constitution dismantled the one-party framework and reinstated competitive elections. Second Republican President Frederick Chiluba’s Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) swept to power in the first genuinely competitive poll since independence.

Yet institutional weaknesses persisted. While Zambia transitioned formally to a multiparty order, the presidency remained the axis of authority. Party structures lacked transparent mechanisms for leadership renewal, and succession crises arose within the MMD itself. Efforts by Chiluba to seek a third term underscored how fragile constitutional and intra-party checks remained; it was

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<sup>5</sup> D. Fass, “From Colonial Policing to National Defence: The Evolution of Security Forces in Post-Colonial Africa,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 34, no. 2 (2018): 123–145.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of Zambia (1973) (establishing one-party rule).

<sup>7</sup> M. Rwegasira, “Presidentialism in Zambia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 22 (2000): 211–234.

<sup>8</sup> T. Hanlon, “Party Machines and Succession in Zambia,” *African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (2015): 45–68.

<sup>9</sup>N. van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979–1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. on Zambia.

mass mobilisation rather than institutional guardrails that eventually halted the extension attempt.<sup>10</sup>

During this period, Zambia also experienced attempted but failed military interventions including the 1990 coup attempt against Kaunda and the 1997 attempt under Captain Stephen Lungu (“Captain Solo”). These episodes, though abortive, highlight the enduring reality that opaque succession politics and presidential dominance could generate moments of uncertainty that tempted actors to seek extra-constitutional remedies. Crucially, the security apparatus did not fracture decisively, and successive governments retained broad civilian supremacy over the military.<sup>11</sup>

After Chiluba, the MMD struggled to manage succession in an orderly manner. The transition to Third Republic President Levy Mwanawasa revealed the absence of predictable intra-party processes, with leadership emerging more through elite coalition-building than institutionalised procedures.<sup>12</sup> Mwanawasa’s untimely death in 2008 again exposed succession weaknesses, though constitutional by-elections provided continuity. His successor Fourth Republican President Rupiah Banda faced internal fragmentation within the MMD, further illustrating the frailty of party mechanisms for leadership transfer.

At the systemic level, the presidency’s predominance meant that governance remained personalised. Zambian politics continued to revolve around incumbency, with weak parliamentary autonomy and limited checks on presidential discretion. This centralisation made leadership transitions heavily dependent on electoral outcomes, which, given the absence of robust intra-party systems, raised stakes and inflamed factionalism.<sup>13</sup>

Zambia’s political system has seen significant leadership transitions—from Rupiah Banda to Michael Sata, and subsequently to Edgar Lungu highlighting both constitutional continuity and persistent party-level vulnerabilities. Despite advances in succession mechanisms, party structures like the PF after Sata’s death and the UPND under Hakainde Hichilema have struggled with factionalism and elite dominance, reinforcing presidential over-concentration and leaving the system exposed to personalistic competition.

The peaceful alternation of power in 2021, when Seventh President Hakainde Hichilema defeated the then incumbent President Sixth President Edgar Lungu, confirmed Zambia’s reputation for orderly transfers of authority. The Constitutional Court’s consistent enforcement of term limits, most notably in disallowing Lungu from contesting again in 2026 on the basis of serving two full terms, underscored the judiciary’s role in closing avenues for constitutional manipulation.<sup>14</sup> In a regional context of recurrent coups, Zambia’s institutional safeguards majoritarian elections,

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<sup>10</sup> C. Burnell, “Zambia’s 2001 Elections: The Tyranny of Small Decisions, ‘Non-Decisions’ and ‘Not Decisions,’” *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 6 (2002): 1103–1120.

<sup>11</sup> BBC News, “Zambia Foils Coup Attempt,” 28 Oct. 1997.

<sup>12</sup> J. Larmer and A. Fraser, *Of States and Mines: An Ethnography of Zambia’s Political Economy* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017), ch. 7.

<sup>13</sup> L. Rakner, “Political and Economic Liberalization in Zambia, 1991–2001” (Nordic Africa Institute, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> *Michelo Chizombe v. Edgar Chagwa Lungu* (2024), Constitutional Court of Zambia (holding that Lungu had twice held office and was ineligible for 2026).

automatic succession, judicial enforcement of term limits, and non-partisan security norms highlight the preventive value of clear constitutional design.

Yet these achievements must be weighed against enduring systemic weaknesses: the fragility of intra-party democracy, the presidency's overwhelming dominance, and the opportunistic cycle of constitutional reform. While Zambia has avoided successful military coups, its long-term resilience will depend on consolidating party institutions, insulating constitutional amendment from electoral contingencies, and deepening parliamentary oversight of the executive.

## **5. Political Party Governance and Internal Wrangles in Zambia — Lessons from Global and Regional Benchmarks**

Globally, effective political parties are defined by institutionalisation, internal democracy, transparency, and accountability. According to international standards set by organisations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), International IDEA, and the United Nations, credible political parties should:

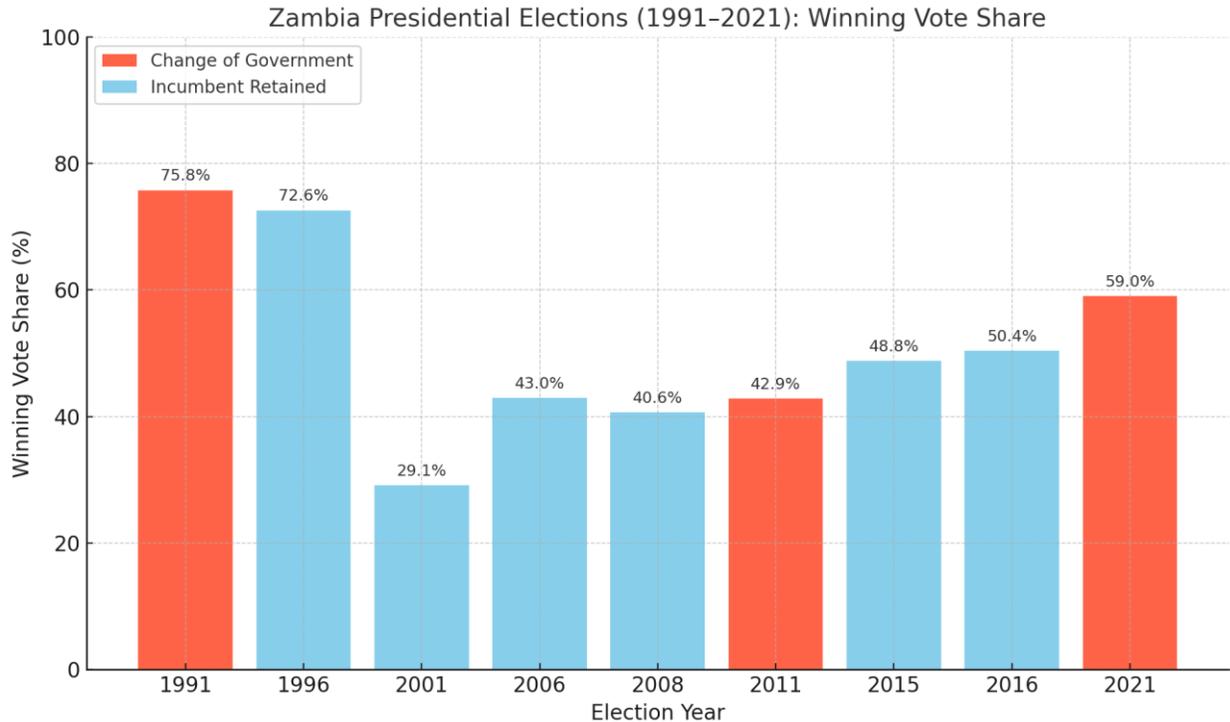
1. Operate under clear constitutions and democratic internal procedures;
2. Hold regular, competitive leadership elections;
3. Maintain financial transparency and accountability;
4. Reflect inclusivity across gender, age, and regional lines; and
5. Contribute to policy development rather than personal power accumulation.

In Zambia, however, the practice diverges sharply from these global benchmarks. According to the Registrar of Societies, more than 90 political parties are officially registered, yet only five to six are politically active or maintain consistent organisational presence. This proliferation without functionality reflects a crisis of institutionalisation — where most parties exist on paper, often mobilised around election cycles or individual ambitions rather than ideological conviction or public service.

The dominance of personality-driven politics has weakened internal democracy, fostering factionalism and succession disputes. Many parties lack functional structures below the national level, relying instead on ethnic or regional mobilisation. Leadership transitions are rarely governed by transparent rules, making parties vulnerable to splits when founders or presidents exit.

**By contrast, global benchmarks emphasise parties as sustainable institutions of democratic governance, not temporary vehicles for capturing power. Lessons from stable democracies such as Botswana and South Africa show that institutionalised internal procedures, rule-based leadership succession, and respect for party constitutions can sustain both party unity and national stability.**

For Zambia to strengthen its democratic culture, reforms must focus on enforcing party constitutions, mandating regular leadership elections, regulating party financing, and building issue-based politics. Without institutional renewal, the proliferation of weak and inactive parties will continue to undermine democratic competition and effective representation.



■ **Regime Change in Zambia**

■ **Elections and the incumbent or ruling party retained power.**

## 6. Why Five Coup attempts Failed

Zambia’s post-independence political landscape has been punctuated by five recorded coup attempts 1976, 1980, 1986, 1990, and 1997 yet none resulted in the successful overthrow of government, reflecting both enduring pressures within the armed forces and the robustness of institutional and political safeguards. During the 1970s, under Kenneth Kaunda’s one-party UNIP regime, Zambia faced economic decline, reductions in copper revenues, and growing dissatisfaction among military personnel. Small-scale conspiracies emerged around 1976, involving junior officers and disaffected civilians frustrated by the perceived erosion of patronage networks and limited promotion opportunities within the armed forces. These plots were quickly suppressed, largely because senior military leadership remained loyal to Kaunda and state intelligence networks provided early warnings.<sup>15</sup>

The most serious challenge under Kaunda occurred on 28 October 1980, when the government publicly announced it had foiled a coup attempt. Contemporary reporting indicated the involvement of domestic conspirators as well as alleged external actors, highlighting the continued salience of regional intelligence networks and Kaunda’s personal diplomatic contacts in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, which provided critical information to avert the seizure of power.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> ISS Africa, *Civil Control of the Zambian Military since Independence* (2020), 12–15.

<sup>16</sup> Lusaka Times, “Today in Zambian History: The 1980 Coup Attempt,” 28 October 2023, accessed 26 August 2025, <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2023/10/28/today-in-zambian-history-the-1980-coup-attempt/>.

The suppression of the 1980 attempt reinforced the professionalisation of the military and underscored the importance of maintaining elite cohesion, as the conspiracies were largely driven by isolated junior officers rather than a unified institutional push.

In 1986, another wave of unrest was noted among the armed forces, driven by delayed pay, politicisation, and the economic malaise of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These disturbances were not fully coordinated and again involved mid-level officers rather than the broader military hierarchy, demonstrating that coup attempts in Zambia historically arose from pockets of discontent rather than institutional collusion.<sup>17</sup>

The 1990 attempt by Lieutenant Christopher Mwamba Luchembe, occurring on 1 July, marked a turning point in Zambia's civil-military relations. Luchembe briefly seized control of the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) to announce a military takeover in response to nationwide protests over economic conditions, food shortages, and political grievances. The coup lasted only a few hours before government forces restored control. Scholars widely regard this episode as accelerating the transition toward multi-party democracy, as it exposed the fragility of Kaunda's one-party system and the lack of formalised intra-party succession mechanisms.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, on 28 October 1997, Captain Steven "Solo" Lungu attempted a similarly short-lived seizure of the ZNBC during Frederick Chiluba's presidency. The plot lasted only hours and involved a small cadre of soldiers occupying the national broadcaster and assaulting some officers. Despite its brevity, the attempt prompted a robust government crackdown, including arrests and temporary suspension of civil liberties, illustrating both the persistent vulnerability of junior military officers to mobilise and the state's capacity for rapid containment.<sup>19</sup>

Across all five episodes, several patterns emerge. First, the Zambian military historically exhibited professional restraint, rarely mobilising en masse against civilian authority. Second, successful suppression was facilitated by intelligence networks, senior officer loyalty, and Kaunda's and later Chiluba's regional diplomatic relationships. Third, coup attempts were episodic, driven by economic grievances, political marginalisation, and intra-party succession disputes, rather than systemic militarisation of politics. These factors, combined with subsequent constitutional reforms—automatic vice-presidential succession, judicial enforcement of term limits, and majoritarian electoral rules—have contributed to Zambia's avoidance of successful military coups.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> B. J. Phiri, *Civil-Military Relations and Political Stability in Zambia* (ISS Africa, 2018), 23–27.

<sup>18</sup> Wikipedia, "1990 Zambian Coup Attempt," accessed 26 August 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990\\_Zambian\\_coup\\_attempt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990_Zambian_coup_attempt).

<sup>19</sup> State Department Archives, "1997 Zambian Coup Attempt: Report on Security and Human Rights Implications," 1998.

<sup>20</sup> M. Rwegasira, "Presidentialism in Zambia," *Comparative Political Studies* 22, no. 2 (2000): 211–234; Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Articles 47–106

## 7. Electoral Systems and Political Stability in Zambia

Zambia's constitutional framework embodies a mixed electoral design. At its core, the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system governs the election of Members of Parliament (MPs), local councillors, and Mayors; while the presidency is chosen through a majoritarian (50%+1) threshold with provision for a run-off. This dual structure has shaped the dynamics of representation, political competition, and legitimacy since the restoration of multiparty politics in 1991.

Article 47(2) of the Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016 provides that elections to the National Assembly, councils, and mayoral offices shall be conducted under a First-Past-the-Post system.<sup>21</sup> Under this rule, the candidate with the most votes in a constituency or ward wins, irrespective of whether they secure an absolute majority. This tends to produce clear, localised winners, but also contributes to disproportionality between votes cast and seats gained, particularly in regions where support is fragmented.

At parliamentary and council levels, FPTP has frequently exaggerated the dominance of the ruling party, producing large legislative majorities on the basis of slim pluralities in individual races.<sup>22</sup> While this can promote decisive governance, it also risks marginalising opposition voices and fostering winner-takes-all political culture, a dynamic that in the Zambian context has historically elevated the presidency as the sole centre of power.

In contrast, presidential elections since the 2016 amendments require the winning candidate to obtain “more than fifty per cent of the valid votes cast” (Article 101(1)).<sup>23</sup> Where no candidate attains this threshold, a second ballot is held between the top two contenders (Article 101(3)). This majoritarian model, in principle, forces candidates to broaden their appeal beyond narrow regional or partisan bases, enhancing legitimacy and reducing the likelihood that the presidency is claimed on the basis of a divided plurality.

## 8. Electoral Design, Intra-party Democracy, and risks of the Military Coup

The interaction of these rules reveals important implications for stability. FPTP at sub-national and legislative levels tends to reinforce the ruling party's grip, which, when combined with weak intra-party democratic practices—as seen in UNIP's centralised succession under Kaunda, MMD's factional collapse after Mwanawasa, and PF's violent splits after Sata—concentrates power around the presidency. By contrast, the majoritarian presidency provides a counterbalance by guaranteeing a clear national mandate, thereby reducing the risks of disputed outcomes and contested legitimacy that often create openings for military arbiters in other African contexts.

In short, Zambia's mixed system FPTP locally, majoritarian nationally both reflects and reinforces the centrality of the presidency. While the 50%+1 rule has mitigated risks of presidential illegitimacy, the persistence of winner-takes-all logics at parliamentary and party levels continues to exacerbate succession struggles, thereby remaining a latent point of vulnerability in the country's democratic architecture

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<sup>21</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Article 47(2).

<sup>22</sup> M. Bratton, “Voting and Democratic Citizenship in Africa,” *Cambridge University Press*, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Article 101(1), (3).

## 9. The Legal Architecture of Civilian Supremacy and Military Coup Prevention

This section identifies concrete mechanisms within the Zambian law that collectively reduces incentives for military intervention and increase the costs of unconstitutional action. Central to this framework is the clear constitutional subordination of the Defence Force to civilian authority, codified procedures for presidential succession, and defined limits on executive discretion over security institutions. These legal rules are reinforced by statutory instruments such as the Defense Act, which regulates the conduct of the armed forces, and the Police Act. In line with the broader legal architecture of civilian supremacy, the Constitution establishes robust oversight for the Police Service. Article 193(3) mandates that the police must be “non-partisan, national in character, patriotic, professional, disciplined, competent and productive,” explicitly prohibiting involvement in party politics. Article 193(4) further ensures civilian accountability by stipulating that the Inspector-General of Police is appointed by the President subject to ratification by the National Assembly. These provisions enshrine the apolitical and professionally accountable nature of the security apparatus in Zambia’s highest legal instrument a critical safeguard against militarisation of governance, a promoter of orderly power transitions, and a pillar of predictable, democratic rule.<sup>24</sup>

**A central driver of military coup is contested political legitimacy. When electoral outcomes are ambiguous or perceived as unfair, military elites may be tempted to intervene as arbiters, seeing themselves as stabilisers in moments of political uncertainty.<sup>25</sup> Political science literature emphasises that clear and broadly supported mandates reduce the incentives for extra-legal action, whereas weak legitimacy increases the appeal of military arbitration.<sup>26</sup> In Zambia, the 2016 constitutional amendments introduced a majoritarian threshold requiring a candidate to obtain over 50 per cent of the valid votes and, if necessary, a second-round run-off. By producing unequivocal winners, these reforms channel electoral competition into institutional rather than extra-legal pathways, thereby operationalising lessons from legitimacy-driven coup theory and reinforcing civilian supremacy.**

The 2016 constitutional amendments codify a clear and automatic mechanism for presidential succession. Article 106(5)(a) stipulates that “where the office of President becomes vacant, except under Article 81, the Vice-President shall immediately assume the office of President for the unexpired term of office.”<sup>27</sup> Where the Vice-President is unable to assume office, Article 106(5)(b) provides that “the Vice-President shall not assume the office of President if the Vice-President was a running mate to the President who is no longer eligible; in that case, the Speaker shall perform the executive functions until a presidential election is held within sixty days.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016*, Articles 193(3)–(4)

<sup>25</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 162–170.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 85–87; Jonathan Powell & Clayton Thyne, ‘Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset’, *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 2 (2011): 249–259.

<sup>27</sup> *Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016*, Article 106(5)(a)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, Article 106(5)(b)

By constitutionalising this ‘no vacuum’ rule, the amendments remove the uncertainty that previously accompanied presidential vacancies and close off a political power vacuum that might otherwise be exploited by extra-constitutional actors. In practice, these provisions reinforce institutional continuity and significantly constrain opportunities for military or factional intervention during moments of political fragility.

The 2016 constitutional amendments introduced strict timelines and institutional safeguards for presidential election petitions. Article 103(2) provides that “*a petition shall be filed within seven days of the declaration of the election results,*” while Article 103(5) requires the Constitutional Court to “hear the petition within fourteen days of the filing and deliver its decision within thirty days.”<sup>29</sup> Where an incumbent President is the subject of a petition, Article 104(2) stipulates that “*the President shall not perform the executive functions*” and, under Article 104(3), these functions are instead performed by the Speaker of the National Assembly, albeit with significant restrictions: the Speaker may not dissolve Parliament or make key appointments.<sup>29</sup>

By design, this arrangement prevents incumbents from leveraging the instruments of executive power to influence judicial outcomes during electoral disputes, while at the same time avoiding a governance vacuum. The constitutionally mandated short horizon for dispute resolution both lowers political tensions and diminishes the incentives for political actors to resort to extra-constitutional avenues, thereby reinforcing Zambia’s civilian constitutional order.

## **10. Normative depoliticisation and subordination of the Defence Force and Security Services**

The Constitution entrenches the principle of civilian supremacy over the security sector by prescribing both its professional ethos and its limits. Article 192(1) provides that “the Defence Force shall be non-partisan, professional, loyal, patriotic and subordinate to the civilian authority as established under this Constitution.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Article 195(1) requires that the national security services “shall be professional, non-partisan and subordinate to civilian authority.”<sup>31</sup> Further, Article 193(2) expressly prohibits members of the Defence Force from engaging in partisan politics, while Article 196(2) assigns to the security services the duty to “protect and safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic, and to prevent any person from illegally abrogating this Constitution.”<sup>32</sup>

By constitutional design, Zambia’s military and security institutions are normatively oriented away from political competition and toward the protection of constitutional order. When internalised through professional training, promotion criteria, and organisational doctrine, these provisions cultivate an institutional identity resistant to political mobilisation, thereby narrowing the space for military intervention in governance.

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<sup>29</sup> I bid, Articles 103(2), 103(5), 104(2)–(3).

<sup>30</sup> I bid, Article 192(1).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Article 195(1).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., Articles 193(2), 196(2).

The statutory framework complements constitutional provisions by embedding collegial oversight in defence governance. The *Defence Act* establishes a Defence Council to advise the President in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief.<sup>33</sup> Although the President chairs the Council, its statutory mandate to deliberate on matters such as the employment of the Defence Force, authorisation of deployments abroad, and senior military appointments ensures that critical decisions are subject to collective counsel rather than unilateral discretion.<sup>34</sup>

In practice, this institutional design when combined with parliamentary appropriation powers and the capacity of legislators to raise questions on defence matters constitutes a modest but meaningful check on executive dominance in the security sphere. While not a full system of legislative control, these mechanisms nevertheless constrain the personalisation of defence policy and reinforce the broader constitutional architecture of civilian oversight.

The statutory framework reinforces constitutional principles by regulating the circumstances under which the Defence Force may be deployed. The *Defence Act* distinguishes between internal security operations, external defence, and international deployments.<sup>35</sup> Crucially, it requires that where Zambian forces are deployed abroad, the Executive must provide a report to the National Assembly.<sup>36</sup> This obligation institutionalises parliamentary visibility over extraordinary military engagements and affirms that the Defence Force is not a routine instrument of domestic political management.

By codifying clear reporting rules and categories of deployment, the framework creates a presumption of restraint: force is to be used in narrowly defined circumstances and subject to oversight. In practice, such provisions diminish the opacity that often surrounds military operations in fragile democracies and reduce opportunities for politicisation or extra-constitutional involvement of the armed forces.

Zambia’s Constitution imposes a two-term limit on the presidency, providing that “a person who has twice held office as President shall not be eligible for election to that office.”<sup>37</sup> This structural restriction reduces the stakes of any individual tenure and embeds a culture of regular alternation, thereby curbing ambitions for indefinite incumbency.

Importantly, the Constitutional Court has affirmed its authority to enforce this provision. In a landmark December 2024 judgment *Michelo Chizombe v Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Others*, the Court ruled that former President Edgar Lungu was ineligible to contest the 2026 presidential election because his initial term (2015–2016), following President Sata’s death, counted as a full term alongside his elected term (2016–2021).<sup>38</sup> This decision clarified that eligibility disputes are resolutely adjudicated through constitutional litigation rather than political or extra-legal means

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<sup>33</sup> Defence Act, Chapter 106 of the Laws of Zambia, Section 5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Section 31

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> *Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016*, Art. 106(3).

<sup>38</sup> *Michelo Chizombe v Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Others* [2024] ZMCC 27 (Const. Ct. of Zambia, 10 Dec 2024); see also *AP News*, “Zambia’s Constitutional Court bars Lungu from seeking another term,” 10 Dec 2024.

significantly raising the cost of tenure extension and reinforcing the rule of law. This case will be discussed later in greater detail.

## 11. Institutional Weaknesses and Risks in Zambia

Despite Zambia's reputation for orderly presidential transitions and its resilience against military coups, the constitutional and institutional framework remains vulnerable in ways that could undermine long-term democratic stability. Four weaknesses are particularly significant.

Since independence, Zambia has experienced successive constitutional rewrites: the 1973 Constitution (introducing a one-party state), the 1991 Constitution (restoring multiparty democracy), the 1996 amendments (tightening eligibility rules to exclude opponents), and the 2016 amendments (introducing the 50+1 rule, running mate succession, and electoral petition timelines).<sup>39</sup> Because many of these reforms have occurred close to elections, they are often perceived less as principled institutional upgrades and more as partisan manoeuvres. This cycle of ad hoc constitutional engineering reduces the perception of the Constitution as a stable, binding framework, and risks normalising constitutional manipulation.

Zambia's presidential system remains heavily weighted toward executive authority. The President serves as both Head of State and Government, Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Force, and appointing authority for senior officials across the civil service, judiciary, and security sector.<sup>40</sup> While such centralisation has facilitated decisive governance, it also places the integrity of the entire constitutional order on the stability of one office. In contexts where presidential incumbents attempt to extend their stay in office—as seen elsewhere in Africa—this concentration of power heightens the stakes of presidential politics and increases the risk of extra-constitutional contestation.

Although the Constitution and Defence Act formally empower Parliament to scrutinise defence spending and deployments abroad,<sup>41</sup> in practice, legislative oversight is limited. Parliamentary committees often lack technical expertise, access to information, or the political independence to challenge executive decisions in the security sector. This imbalance reinforces the President's dominance as Commander-in-Chief and leaves few institutional guardrails against unilateral executive–military decision-making.

Perhaps the most immediate risk to Zambia's democratic stability lies in the politicisation of policing. The enforcement of the Public Order Act has often been skewed in favour of ruling parties, restricting opposition rallies while permitting government events.<sup>42</sup> During tightly contested elections, allegations of selective policing and intimidation have contributed to heightened tensions, undermining public trust in electoral fairness. While the military has remained largely professional and non-partisan, the persistent use of police for partisan ends

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<sup>39</sup> Muna Ndulo, *Constitutionalism in Zambia: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Articles 90–94.

<sup>41</sup> Defence Act, Cap. 106 of the Laws of Zambia.

<sup>42</sup> Human Rights Watch, “*Shut Out for Speaking Out: Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Zambia*” (New York: HRW, 2017).

risks eroding confidence in civilian institutions and, by extension, the legitimacy of democratic outcomes.

Taken together, these institutional weaknesses do not amount to imminent coup risks, but they represent structural vulnerabilities. If left unaddressed, they could generate crises of legitimacy or governance that might, in turn, invite military actors or other unconstitutional forces into the political arena. Strengthening Zambia's democratic architecture therefore requires not only maintaining existing safeguards but also addressing these institutional deficits through durable reforms.

## 12. Judicial Independence and Executive Influence in Zambia

The Zambian Constitutional Court's jurisprudence in *Daniel Pule and Others v Attorney General* (2018) and *Michelo Chizombe v Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Others* [2024] ZMCC 27 illustrates both the possibilities and constraints of judicial independence within a highly presidential system. A credible assessment must consider how executive control over judicial appointments and removals shapes the Court's autonomy. Under Zambia's constitutional framework, the President appoints judges of the superior courts, including the Constitutional Court, acting on the advice of the Judicial Service Commission, but retains significant discretion over timing and replacements.<sup>43</sup>

In *Pule*, the Court determined that President Edgar Lungu's initial term (2015–2016) did not constitute a full mandate because it was served under the transitional provisions between the 1991 and 2016 Constitutions.<sup>44</sup> The effect was to allow Lungu's eligibility to stand again in 2021. Critics argued that the Court's reasoning leaned heavily on "transitional logic" that privileged political pragmatism over constitutional purpose, reflecting a degree of judicial deference at a time when the executive held substantial influence over state institutions.<sup>45</sup>

By contrast, in *Michelo Chizombe v Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Others* [2024] ZMCC 27, the Constitutional Court took a more assertive stance, ruling that Lungu had already served two terms and was therefore ineligible to contest in 2026 under Article 106(3)–(6) of the 2016 Constitution.<sup>46</sup> The Court adopted a purposive interpretation, holding that the spirit of the Constitution required strict enforcement of term limits to safeguard democratic rotation of power.<sup>47</sup> This judgment represented a clear departure from the *Pule* precedent and signalled the Court's willingness to defend constitutional principles even against a powerful political actor.

However, the *Chizombe* decision was delivered in a new institutional context. Just weeks before the case was heard, President Hakainde Hichilema dismissed three Constitutional Court judges Anne Sitali, Mungeni Mulenga, and Palan Mulonda on the recommendation of the Judicial Complaints Commission.<sup>48</sup> This reshuffling altered the Court's composition, replacing judges who had previously ruled in Lungu's favour with newly appointed members. Critics contended

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<sup>43</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016, Arts 143–144.

<sup>44</sup> *Daniel Pule and Others v Attorney General and Others* (4 of 2017) [2018] ZMCC 10 (6 April 2018).

<sup>45</sup> M. Ndulo, *Constitutionalism in Zambia: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> *Michelo Chizombe v Edgar Chagwa Lungu and Others* [2024] ZMCC 27 (Const. Ct. of Zambia, 10 Dec 2024).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*; Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act No. 2 of 2016, Art. 106(3)–(6).

<sup>48</sup> Cabinet Office, "President Hichilema Removes Constitutional Court Judges," 20 October 2024.

that the timing of the dismissals, occurring only days before the eligibility hearing, raised legitimate questions about executive influence over judicial composition.<sup>49</sup>

Taken together, the *Pule* and *Chizombe* decisions demonstrate that judicial independence in Zambia is dynamic rather than absolute. The Constitutional Court operates within a political structure where appointment powers and removal mechanisms create structural vulnerabilities. Yet, within these constraints, the Court has occasionally asserted constitutional authority when broader political and regional conditions—such as elite division, public demand for accountability, and regional pressure for term-limit adherence create an enabling environment.<sup>50</sup> The result is a judiciary that, while not immune to political influence, retains the potential to act as a genuine guardian of constitutionalism when legal and political conditions align.

### 13. Constitutional Design, Civil-Military Relations, and Coup Prevention: Zambia vs. Mali

The contrast between Zambia and recent coup-prone countries such as Mali highlights the importance of constitutional design, institutional practice, and civil-military relations in safeguarding democratic governance. Zambia’s 2016 constitutional amendments provide a robust framework for stability. Major provisions include a running-mate, Vice-Presidency with automatic, immediate succession, a two-round majoritarian electoral system, and strict timelines for resolving presidential election petitions (Articles 103–105).<sup>51</sup> These measures collectively institutionalize orderly succession, prevent executive manipulation during disputes, and constrain opportunities for extra-constitutional interventions.

The Constitution further embeds civilian supremacy over the Defence Force and security services by mandating professionalism, non-partisanship, and subordination to civilian office-holders (Articles 216–218).<sup>52</sup> Complementary mechanisms include the Defence Council, which provides collective advice on deployments, appointments, and operations, while parliamentary reporting obligations ensure visibility of extraordinary military actions. Term limits enforced by the Constitutional Court—illustrated in the 2024 case *Michelo Chizombe v Edgar Chagwa Lungu*—signal that eligibility and tenure disputes must be resolved judicially rather than through force, thereby raising the cost of constitutional adventurism.

These mechanisms operate synergistically: majoritarian elections clarify mandates; automatic succession prevents power vacuums; time-bound petitions and caretaker limits reduce crisis incentives; military neutrality norms limit potential allies for would-be usurpers; advisory councils and parliamentary oversight anchor executive decisions in institutional channels; and enforceable term limits restrain presidential ambitions. Collectively, Zambia’s constitutional and

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<sup>49</sup> *News Diggers*, “The Edgar Lungu Eligibility Court Ruling: A Blow to Zambia’s Judicial Standing or a Constitutional Victory,” 23 January 2025

<sup>50</sup> Africanlii, “Zambia’s Constitutional Court and the Evolution of Judicial Independence,” 15 September 2023

<sup>51</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment), 2016, Articles 103–105

<sup>52</sup> Wikipedia contributors. (2022, December 19). *2012 Malian coup d'état*. Wikipedia. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Malian\\_coup\\_d%27%C3%A9tat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Malian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat)

institutional architecture narrows the pathways through which a coup could be rational for political or military actors.

By contrast, Mali's constitutional framework reveals critical vulnerabilities. The 1992 Constitution and subsequent amendments provide unclear succession rules, leaving vacuums during leadership crises, as seen in the 2012 and 2020 coups.<sup>53</sup> Electoral dispute mechanisms are vague, and the judiciary has historically lacked independence to enforce outcomes promptly, incentivizing extra-constitutional interventions. Term limits exist but have been inconsistently enforced, undermining credibility and public trust. Moreover, civil-military relations are weakly structured, with limited professionalization and oversight, while broad and ambiguous emergency powers allow leaders to consolidate authority, creating conditions conducive to military intervention.

Mali's coups—most notably in 2012 following contested elections amid insurgency and institutional fragmentation, and in 2020 when President Keïta was ousted amidst governance crises—underscore the risks posed by weak constitutional enforcement and politicized security institutions. By comparison, Zambia demonstrates how clear legal norms, institutionalized civilian oversight, enforceable electoral rules, and professional, non-partisan security forces collectively reinforce democratic continuity.

#### **14. Constitutional Design, Civil-Military Relations, and Coup Prevention: Zambia vs. Guinea**

Guinea's constitutional architecture illustrates how poorly enforced or manipulable provisions can invite extra-constitutional interventions. The 2020–2021 political crisis followed President Alpha Condé's controversial third-term project, enabled by constitutional amendments that reset term limits and allowed the executive to extend tenure without a credible check from an independent judiciary.<sup>54</sup> The lack of enforceable majoritarian rules, clear succession protocols, and deadlines for resolving electoral disputes created ambiguity that militaries exploited as arbiters of political order. In contrast, Zambia's 2016 constitutional amendments provide a majoritarian presidential election system, automatic succession through the Vice-President, and strict timelines for adjudicating election petitions. These measures collectively reduce political uncertainty and remove the opportunity for militarized intervention

In Guinea, the military was able to intervene in January 2021 due to its dual role as an arbiter and enforcer amid contested legitimacy and politicized security institutions. Weak legal safeguards and politicized promotions enabled factions within the armed forces to operate as political actors. Zambia's constitutional framework codifies the non-partisanship of the Defence Force and security services, mandates civilian authority over deployments, and ensures parliamentary

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<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, *Mali: Security Sector Reform and the Challenge of Civil-Military Relations*, Africa Report No. 236, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> AP News, "Soldiers Detain Guinea's President, Dissolve Government," *AP News*, 5 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-guinea-army-government-dissolved-214f607402a533c581bbd7ef91d5bb0f>, accessed 17 August 2025.

oversight of external missions (Articles 143–144). Combined with professionalized training and operational doctrine, these provisions foster a security sector resistant to political mobilization.<sup>55</sup>

Guinea’s military coups were triggered by Executive overreach via term-limit manipulation, ambiguous succession rules, and weak dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Mali exhibited similar vulnerabilities during the 2012 coup, where a failure to enforce presidential succession and manage election petitions combined with a fragmented military to create a permissive environment for intervention.<sup>56</sup>In both cases, the constitutional frameworks provided limited predictability or legal recourse for aggrieved actors, thereby lowering the cost of unconstitutional action

## 15. Constitutional Weaknesses in Burkina Faso and Zambia

Burkina Faso’s constitutional framework, established under the 1991 Constitution and amended through 2015, reveals vulnerabilities that have contributed to recurrent political instability and military interventions. In contrast, Zambia’s constitutional system incorporates mechanisms that strengthen civilian governance and reduce the risk of unconstitutional changes in government.

Burkina Faso’s Constitution stipulates that in the event of a presidential vacancy; the President of the National Assembly assumes office and organizes elections within 60–90 days. However, it lacks detailed procedures for interim governance, creating power vacuums and disputes over authority. The 2015 coup attempt exemplified this weakness, as the interim President’s legitimacy was contested. Conversely, Zambia’s Constitution mandates automatic succession by the Vice President, ensuring continuity of governance and minimizing opportunities for military interference.<sup>57</sup>

The Constitutional Council in Burkina Faso is tasked with overseeing law constitutionality and electoral processes. Yet judicial independence has been undermined by political interference and resource constraints, limiting its ability to hold military leaders accountable. In Zambia, the judiciary is constitutionally independent and empowered to adjudicate electoral disputes and uphold constitutional provisions, reinforcing the rule of law and deterring unconstitutional actions.<sup>58</sup>

Although Burkina Faso’s Constitution imposes a two-term limit for presidents, enforcement has been inconsistent. The 2014 popular uprising against President Blaise Compaoré, following his

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<sup>55</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Articles 143–144; Defence Act, 2016 (A judge in Zambia may be removed if found incapacitated, incompetent, guilty of gross misconduct, or bankrupt, through a complaint reviewed by the Judicial Complaints Commission, which investigates and recommends to the President, who then suspends and, if proven, removes the judge.)

<sup>56</sup> Wikipedia, “2012 Malian Coup d’état,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Malian\\_coup\\_d%27%C3%A9tat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Malian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat).

<sup>57</sup> AP News, “Burkina Faso junta dissolves electoral commission,” July 17, 2025. Online: [apnews.com/article/910d22d0493e5302509782c7c18953c0](https://apnews.com/article/910d22d0493e5302509782c7c18953c0)

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<sup>58</sup>Reuters, “Burkina Faso military sacks PM, dissolves government,” Dec 6, 2024. Online: [reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-junta-fires-prime-minister-dissolves-government-2024-12-06](https://reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-junta-fires-prime-minister-dissolves-government-2024-12-06). Accessed August 20, 2025.

attempt to amend the Constitution to extend his tenure, illustrates the fragility of term limits. Zambia's Constitution provides for strict term limits under judicial oversight, making circumvention legally and politically difficult. However, this does not prevent the president from initiating an amendment.<sup>59</sup>

Burkina Faso's Constitution lacks robust mechanisms for civilian oversight of the military. This gap has enabled impunity, as seen in the 2022 coup when the junta dissolved the Independent National Electoral Commission and extended its rule. By contrast, Zambia's Constitution provides for civilian control of the military and parliamentary oversight, promoting accountability and mitigating the risk of military-led governance.<sup>60</sup>

## 16. Comparative Insights on Constitutional Design and Coup Prevention

A comparative assessment of Zambia, Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso highlights the critical role of constitutional design in shaping civil-military relations and preventing unconstitutional transfers of power. Zambia's constitutional framework stands out for its clarity and robustness: it enforces presidential term limits with judicial oversight, provides automatic succession to prevent power vacuums, mandates time-bound adjudication of electoral disputes, and establishes civilian control and parliamentary oversight of the security sector.<sup>61</sup>

By contrast, Mali's recurrent coups (2012, 2020, 2021) illustrate the risks of weak succession rules, fragmented security institutions, and contested elections, which create openings for military intervention.<sup>62</sup> Guinea's 2021 coup followed attempts to manipulate term limits and undermine judicial oversight, showing how ambiguous or malleable constitutional provisions embolden militaries as arbiters of political disputes.<sup>63</sup> Burkina Faso demonstrates similar vulnerabilities: ambiguous presidential succession procedures, compromised judicial independence, unenforced term limits, and weak security sector accountability have contributed to repeated interventions (2015, 2014 popular uprising, 2022 coup).<sup>64</sup>

Together, these cases underscore that constitutional precision, enforceable limits on executive power, independent adjudication of disputes, and structured civilian oversight of security forces are essential preventive mechanisms. Zambia's experience suggests that when these mechanisms are coherently implemented, they create a durable institutional web that reduces incentives for extra-constitutional actions and strengthens democratic resilience.

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<sup>59</sup> Reuters, "Junta extends Burkina Faso transition by 5 years," May 25, 2024. Online: [reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-extends-junta-rule-by-five-years-2024-05-25](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-extends-junta-rule-by-five-years-2024-05-25). Accessed August 20, 2025.

<sup>60</sup> AP News, "Burkina Faso junta dissolves electoral commission," July 17, 2025. Online: [apnews.com/article/910d22d0493e5302509782c7c18953c0](https://apnews.com/article/910d22d0493e5302509782c7c18953c0). Accessed August 20, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Wikipedia, "2012 Malian coup d'état," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Malian\\_coup\\_d%27%C3%A9tat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Malian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat), accessed 20 August 2025; BBC News, "Mali Soldiers Stage Coup and Oust President," 21 March 2012.

<sup>63</sup> AP News, "Guinea Army Dissolves Government," 5 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-guinea-army-government-dissolved-214f607402a533c581bbd7ef91d5bb0f>, accessed 20 August 2025.

<sup>64</sup> Government of Burkina Faso, *Constitution of Burkina Faso* (1991, amended 2015); Wikipedia, "2022 Burkina Faso coup d'état," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022\\_Burkina\\_Faso\\_coup\\_d%27%C3%A9tat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Burkina_Faso_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat), accessed 20 August 2025.

## 17. Emerging vulnerabilities and reform options

Zambia's model is not without risks. First, the executive retains expansive appointment powers over the security services, and parliamentary oversight remains thin, especially on promotions, procurement and doctrine. Second, the policing of elections rather than the Defence Force has often been the flashpoint for allegations of partisan coercion. Third, highly polarized politics can tempt governments and opposition alike to test the boundaries of constitutional restraint.

Reform options include: strengthening parliamentary committee oversight of defence and intelligence with security-cleared membership; requiring ex post reporting on domestic deployments of the Defence Force in aid to the civil power; insulating senior promotions through transparent, merit-based boards; sharpening legal rules separating policing from military roles during elections; and improving the capacity and impartiality of electoral dispute mechanisms. These steps would deepen civilian supremacy while preserving the professional distance that has served Zambia well.

## 18. Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Zambia's experience from 1964 to 2025 illustrates that the avoidance of successful coups is not the product of legal design alone but of the interplay between constitutional rules, political culture, and institutional practice. The 2016 constitutional amendments introduced reforms such as majoritarian presidential elections (50+1 rule), automatic succession by the Vice-President, and strict timelines for electoral dispute resolution, all of which reduced the uncertainty and vacuums that often invite military intervention.<sup>65</sup> These formal provisions have been reinforced in practice by a Defence Force that has internalised a professional and non-partisan ethos, refraining from assuming political authority even during moments of leadership transition.<sup>66</sup>

Yet Zambia's stability has not been cost-free. The country faces persistent vulnerabilities, most notably the over-centralisation of power in the presidency, the frequent rewriting of the Constitution often close to elections which undermines predictability, and the weakness of intra-party democracy that fuels succession disputes within dominant parties such as UNIP, MMD, and PF.<sup>67</sup> These weaknesses represent latent risks, for where constitutional guardrails are undermined by partisan manipulation, the resilience of Zambia's system could erode.

At the regional level, Zambia provides an instructive counter-example to the coup-prone trajectories of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, where ambiguous succession rules, politicised militaries, and manipulated term limits opened space for armed actors to intervene.<sup>68</sup> The Zambian case suggests that clear succession protocols, enforceable term limits, judicialised dispute resolution, and depoliticised security services are essential safeguards. For the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, the lesson is that constitutional clauses alone are insufficient unless they are embedded in political practice and backed by credible enforcement.

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<sup>65</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Articles 101–104, 110, 103

<sup>66</sup> Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act, 2016, Articles 192–198.

<sup>67</sup> Nic Cheeseman and Miles Larmer, *African Politics in Comparative Perspective: Zambia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>68</sup> International Crisis Group, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation* (Africa Report No. 292, 2020); AP News, "Guinea Coup Leaders Dissolve Government, Seal Borders," 5 September 2021; IISS, *Armed Conflict Survey 2023: Burkina Faso*.

Zambia therefore stands as both a caution and a model: a caution that executive dominance and weak party institutions remain dangerous fault lines, but also a model that demonstrates how institutional clarity and civilian supremacy can sustain constitutional order even in a region marked by democratic fragility.

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