

Digital Revolution and the Prospects for Online Political Communication: A Review of Political Parties' Social Media Status in Tanzania

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Abstract

A revolution in information and communication technology has introduced social media as alternative platforms through which political parties can interact with the public. Political parties' success in using these avenues depends on the online strategies applied. Tanzania has not been an exception in the use of social media as political parties have been using them for political activities. However, little is known regarding the way political parties have established themselves on social media platforms. Using the equalization, normalization, and hybrid perspectives as an analytical framework, this paper examines the status of Tanzania's political parties in social media. The data obtained through the review of social media pages, key informant interviews and documentary analysis reveal that although political parties have been using social media for political activities, the profile of their social media status is low. The findings further show that social media have not altered the balance of power among political parties in Tanzania as the social media profile of opposition political parties does not significantly differ from that of the ruling party CCM as revealed by the number of their social media pages, followers and posts as well testimonies through interviews regarding social media usage. Several factors including political parties' limited awareness of the potential of social media, the unpredictability of the political system as well as resource constraints are attributed to this status. To overcome these challenges, a call is made for policy and capacity building interventions to empower political parties and the citizenry for effective online engagement.

Keywords: Political parties, social media, Instagram, Facebook, balance of power, Tanzania
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Introduction

Effective communication between a political party and the electorate is essential for the successful realization of its routine and strategic goals. Political communication provides information, educates the public and offers platforms for articulating and aggregating political



issues. It also publicizes political party's policies and programmes (Alam & Yousuf, 2021). The ineffective functioning of the elements of political communication limits political parties to achieve their goals (Alam & Yousuf, 2021). Conventionally, political parties relied on traditional means of communication (print newspapers, radio, and television stations) in interacting with the public (Johansson, 2019). Since the 1990s however, social media have emerged as alternative means of political communication (Lachapelle, 2015, Cardenal, 2013). The extent to which political parties have benefitted by using social media varies. To this variation, there are contrasting opinions regarding the impact of social media on political parties' functioning as explained by the equalization, normalization, and hybridization viewpoints (Surotchak & Macdonald, 2020). According to the concept of equalization, social media have served as an alternative to traditional political institutions and means of communication. It lauds social media for introducing new forms of participation replacing the traditional ones. As per this view, social media have simplified the availability of information and increased the speed of communication. It believes that social media have empowered weaker parties and undermined stronger and centralized ones (Barber, 2001; Bene, 2021, Wolfsfeld *et al.*, 2015, Surotchak & Macdonald, 2020). This perspective is however challenged on the grounds that, the size of the party and its level of institutionalization matter in explaining the benefit of that party with regard to using social media (Larsson, 2017).

The normalization perspective on the other hand claims that social media have just reinforced the existing institutions and inequalities also known as politics as usual. It assumes that social media would be captured by traditional political players leading to no significant changes in the balance of power within the political systems (Gainous *et al.*; 2018). This perspective provides that rather than empowering previously marginalized parties, social media are just contestation arenas for established political parties. It sees political parties with superior organization, resources, and expertise as best positioned to benefit from social media compared to less-established parties. The normalization perspective further maintains that the majority of the citizens utilizing social media have entrenched partisanship that cannot be changed by online interactions. This perspective sees social media as additional campaign instruments to win votes (How *et al.*, 2016, Spierings & Jacobs, 2019). This perspective is somehow reflective of political realities, especially in developing countries where interparty competition is affected by an unlevelled playfield (Makulilo, 2012). Meanwhile, the hybridization perspective maintains that rather than replacing traditional structures, political parties are using social media to broaden the scope of participation. It does not see the superiority of social media over traditional means of communication (Zeh & Holtz-Bacha, 2015; Gainous *et al.*, 2018).

Irrespective of these varying opinions regarding the role of social media in politics, literature shows their growing popularity in contemporary politics. In developed countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom, social media have proved to be very important campaigning tools (Olson & Nelson, 2010, Lachapelle, 2015, IDEA, 2020; Surotchak & Macdonald, 2020). The same experience has been observed in several African countries such as Tunisia, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon where social media have been used for political mobilization and political campaigns (Makinen & Kuira, 2017; Ngange & Elonge, 2019). Since the 1990s, political parties in Tanzania have been relying much on ground operations such as political rallies to interact with the electorate. Ground operations have however proved beneficial to the ruling party, which is well institutionalized compared to the opposition parties (O'Gorman, 2012, Kwayu, 2022). This institutionalization gap makes the adoption of social media as an

alternative communication channel inevitable especially to opposition parties. For this reason, as recent studies indicate, some political parties in Tanzania have started to actively use social media to engage with the electorate (Kwayu, 2022, Awinia, 2021). While these studies shed light on political parties' use of social media, little is known regarding the extent to which these parties have established themselves on social media platforms. Against this observation, this paper seeks to answer two key questions: (i) *what is the status of Tanzania's political parties on social media platforms?* (ii) *Which factors explain political parties' current status in social media?* The paper is divided into six sections. Section one is an introduction with the background information to the subject under study, section two presents a review of the literature on social media and political parties and section three presents the data and methods used by this study. Sections four and five present the findings and discussion of the findings respectively while the last section provides a conclusion as well as policy implications.

A Review of the Literature

Since the late 1990s social media have become a key platform for political parties' communication with the electorate (Lachapelle, 2015). These platforms have served as alternative communication channels to traditional means such as national media, canvassing and brochures (Olson & Nelson, 2010; Montigny, 2015). Social media have also facilitated the sharing of and access to information among some marginalized groups (Uwalaka, 2021). Social media have as well served as liberating tools by allowing political communication outside the control of state authorities (Karekwaivanane & Mare 2019, Bosch, 2019; Diepeveen, 2019). Social media have also been used as alternative communication channels in times of political crisis (Makinen & Kuira, 2008; Sasaki, 2017), and served as an electioneering tool (Olson & Nelson, 2010, IDEA, 2020; Surotchak& Macdonald, 2020; Lachapelle, 2015). For instance, during the 2017 German federal elections the utilization of social media was high as political parties used these platforms to mobilize public support (Surotchak& Macdonald, 2020). Similarly, during the 2014 parliamentary elections in Ukraine political parties combined traditional forms of campaigning and social media to sell their manifestos to voters. Social media usage was nonetheless outweighed by traditional means (Surotchak& Macdonald, 2020). During the 2015 parliamentary elections in Venezuela, opposition parties used social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and SMS to mobilize voters and managed to secure two-thirds of the National Assembly (Surotchak& Macdonald, 2020). In the United States, politicians use Twitter and Facebook to communicate their political positions (Chekunova, *et al.*, 2016). Political parties are also using social media for funds mobilization, especially during election campaign periods (Olson & Nelson, 2010).

In India, the 2014 parliamentary elections witnessed a significant increase in the use of social media platforms particularly by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). These parties used WhatsApp to recruit new party members (Surotchak& Macdonald, 2020). In New Zealand, the 2008 and 2011 election campaigns witnessed an increase in the popularity of Facebook, Bebo, and MySpace. Despite such an increase in usage, political parties did not maximize the full potential of these platforms as they did not integrate ICT in their strategic goals (Murchison, 2015, Olson & Nelson, 2010).

Africa has also witnessed the use of social media in politics. For instance, during the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections in Tunisia political parties used Facebook to mobilize public support (Surotchak& Macdonald, 2020). During the 2012 presidential elections



in Ghana, supporters of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) actively used Facebook and Twitter during their political campaigns (Dzisah, 2018). In Nigeria, social media use for political communication has been a strong predictor of political participation (Mustapha *et al.*, 2016).

In Kenya, social media were used as a tool for political contestation and an alternative communication channel during political crisis (Makinen & Kuira, 2017; Mukhongo, 2020). Political parties used Facebook to recruit voters and mobilize support during elections as was seen during the 2017 elections (Kamau, 2017; Diepeveen, 2019). In Cameroon, the incumbent Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) and the Social Democratic Front (SDF) were using social media to communicate with the public (Ngange & Elonge, 2019). While the literature lauds social media for facilitating political participation, it is not always the case that this effect is always realized. Experience from Zimbabwe shows that the majority of the youth in social media do not spend their time on politics but on fashion and music. Rather than enhancing youth's participation, social media have sometimes contributed to political apathy (Chiweshe, 2017). In other instances, effective utilization of social media by political parties has been hampered by the digital divide between the rich and the poor in favour of the former as was observed in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda (Bosch *et al.* 2020, Kamp *et al.* 2016).

Notwithstanding the variations in the use of social media in politics across African countries, experience shows that these platforms have contributed to democratization in the continent (Olaniyi, 2018). Effective utilization of social media however faces several obstacles particularly those imposed by the state (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018). One of these is the granting of monopolies to communications regulatory authorities (Burnheim, n.d). Social media have also suffered from government control on grounds that they instigate violent protests, issue subversive statements, and spread fake news, hence causing fear amongst citizens (Mugari, 2020).

There are mixed experiences regarding the use of social media by the public and political parties in Tanzania. Evidence however shows limited use of social media by the public in political matters. For instance, adolescents in Tanzania have been using social media to discuss issues such as reproductive and sexual health (Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2014). A similar experience is provided by Tarimo and Kavishe (2017) whose study revealed that secondary school students were primarily using social media for non-political matters such as having fun and reading online newspapers. A corresponding observation is provided by Kipapy *et al.*, (2018) whose study indicated that apart from academic purposes, Tanzania's university students were using social media for sexual relationships. The level of social media use in politics seems to be affected by the amount and quality of political information shared by political parties online. As Abdu *et al.* (2017) argue, youth online political participation is influenced by several factors including the interactivity of social media platforms, the quality of information shared and youth's political interests. This observation notwithstanding, there have been positive developments regarding the use of social media in Tanzania. As Awinia (2021) and Kwayu (2019) have observed, political parties have been using social media to perform some routine and strategic functions.

In addition, political parties have sometimes used social media for political mobilization and fundraising (The Citizen, 2020; Awinia, 2021). Social media usage has nonetheless varied across political parties in Tanzania. For instance, while Alliance for Change and Transparency-Wazalendo (ACT-Wazalendo) has an official social media strategy for support mobilization, communication and recruitment, CCM and Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA)

still rely much on ground mobilization (Kwayu, 2019). CHADEMA's use of social media has largely been restricted to communication and support mobilization without focusing on membership recruitment (Kwayu, 2022). It is nonetheless worth-noting that during election times, the most popular social media platforms have been those that are not affiliated with political parties. Reports on the 2015 elections show that *Jamiiforums* and personal blogs were the leading platforms for election-related debates than those owned by political parties (TACCEO, 2016). Likewise, during the 2020 elections, popular social media platforms included EATV and Millard Ayo Facebook pages, which are not affiliated to any political party (REDET, 2021).

The Government, like elsewhere, has enacted various laws to control online communication thus affecting the use of social media by political parties. Some of these include the Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations, 2018 which grants control powers to the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) and the Cybercrimes Act, 2015 which contains several prohibitions (Cross, 2019; Cross, 2021). These controls have had dire effects on citizens' online political interactions. For instance, due to this Act and other regulations, social media platforms were generally submissive during the 2020 general elections (REDET, 2021).

As pointed out earlier, the study by Awinia (2021) and Kwayu (2022) provide various revelations pertaining to political parties' use of social media in Tanzania by being informative on the trends in the use of social media by political parties, but missing some important information. Awinia (2021) relies much on respondents' accounts to draw conclusions on political parties' social media use without testing such accounts with political parties' social media profiles (e.g. the activeness of social media pages as informed by their number of followers posts). As such, it is difficult to establish whether the said political parties' social media use at the grassroots is spatially defined or just a reflection of nation-wide strategies for social media use. Consequently, while social media are lauded for facilitating political mobilization, promotion of party ideology, interacting with voters as well as facilitating fundraising, little is known regarding the examined political parties' social media status. On the other hand, Kwayu' (2022) study limits its scope to only one social media platform (Twitter) and focuses only on official social media pages. It is against this backdrop that this paper broadly examines the status of political parties on social media platforms.

Data and Methods

This paper purposively looks at five major political parties (CCM, CHADEMA, ACT-Wazalendo, Civic United Front (CUF) and National Convention for Construction and Reform-Mageuzi (NCCR-Mageuzi) which for the past ten years have at least had a representation in the national assembly. The study used a multiple cases research design and a multi-methods approach involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Given that the study was interested in ascertaining the status of social media platforms, it looked at social media pages owned or related to political parties. Looking at official and unofficial social media pages aimed at generating an aggregated overview of political parties' social media status. The search for these pages was done within Facebook, Instagram and Twitter platforms using the name of the party as the search word. These social media platforms were selected because they are among the most popular networks in Africa. Being mindful of the possibility of having unofficial social

media pages that could be aimed at tarnishing the image of a political party, the inclusion of the social media page in the list of selected social media pages was guided by two conditions namely: that a selected social media page must have been active for at least the last six months and that such page contained posts that provided a positive image of the party. Using the saturation method, the study conducted an online search of social media pages associated with these parties with a view to establishing the number of followership and posts per page. As Saunders *et al.*, (2018) observe, the saturation method rests on a belief that based on collected data; additional gathering and analysis of data are not necessary. This review was done between May and August, 2021. As table 1 shows, 57 Facebook, 122 Instagram and 31 twitter social media pages were selected.

Table 1: The number of reviewed social media pages

	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter
CCM	13	59	14
CHADEMA	9	54	11
CUF	7	2	1
NCCR	5	4	3
ACT	23	3	2
Total	57	122	31

Source: Author, 2021

Data gathered were subjected to simple quantitative descriptive analysis using Excel. Comparative data/statistics indicating each party's number of followers and posts per page were tabulated. In addition, the study conducted three key informant interviews with officials from NCCR-Mageuzi, CUF, and ACT-Wazalendo. The selection of these officials sought to get a broader party's position and perspectives regarding the use of social media in politics, including the measures that were being taken to promote the use of these platforms. Selecting NCCR-Mageuzi and CUF for key informant interviews was due to their limited coverage in the literature on social media and politics in Tanzania. On the other hand, ACT-Wazalendo was selected as a representative of the exemplary case of using social media. The interviews thus involved a senior administrative official at NCCR-Mageuzi's headquarters and two officials in charge of communication and publicity from CUF and ACT-Wazalendo. Collected qualitative data were thematically coded and qualitatively analysed to allow for some generalizations and drawing of meanings. The generated information was complemented by documentary sources.

Findings

Seeking to examine political parties' social media status, three social media platforms namely Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were thus reviewed. The review findings in terms of followership and posts are presented in Table 2. The findings generally show that political parties have been relatively active in Facebook, Instagram and Twitter social media platforms as revealed by the number of followership and posts. Based on the number of social media pages, followers and posts, the findings also show that CCM and CHADEMA are relatively more established in social media compared to ACT-Wazalendo, CUF and NCCR-Mageuzi. In addition, across all political parties, the number of followers is higher than that of posts. Specifically, CHADEMA had high followership on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages

followed by CCM. On the other hand, ACT was relatively popular on Twitter and Facebook than in Instagram. CUF and NCCR-Mageuzi had few social media pages, followers and posts.

Table 2: Political parties' followership and posts in social media

	Pages	Facebook		Instagram			Twitter		
		Followers	Posts	pages	Followers	Posts	pages	Followers	Tweets
CCM	13	555,027	1,668	59	560,991	28,661	14	655,469	22,795
CUF	7	2,579	52	2	1,833	1,198	1	522	614
CHADEMA	9	760,677	5,704	54	1,361,938	14,154	11	561,371	33,484
ACT	23	224,069	2673	3	5,842	51	2	297,428	33,636
	5	6682	1,248	4	6,682	1,248	3	1,396	1025
NCCR									
Total	57	1,549,034	11,345	122	1376295	45,312	31	1,516,186	91,554

Source: Field data, 2021

On the other hand, the study noted, through key informant interviews, that political parties had started to take some initiatives to champion the social media agenda as was confirmed by one respondent who maintained:

Our party has started to take bold measures in digitizing its communication. Specifically, in order to ensure the effective use of social media the party has assigned this responsibility to the publicity department and the youth wing. These units have been using Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The party has also formulated a strategic plan for using social media. This strategy is however still missing the action plan for its implementation. Also, following the amendment of our party constitution in 2020, some party meetings can now be held online. This is a big step that shows an increase in digital awareness in our party (Interview with NCCR-Mageuzi official, 14th April 2022, Dar es Salaam).

A similar opinion was provided by another respondent who insisted:

The party has been strategically using social media for political activities. We have been using Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube channels such as HakiSawa TV, though this channel is not very active. The party has also been using telegram accounts to communicate party events without censorship. As you may recall, during the 2016-2020 period, the media could not freely and objectively report the political activities of opposition parties. We opted for the use of social media so as to evade state-influenced media censorship (CUF official, 15th April, 2022, Dar es Salaam).

Benefiting from social media use also challenges political parties to adopt effective online strategies. A mere number of social media page subscribers cannot guarantee political parties' effectiveness in communication. This was similarly revealed by an interviewee who maintained:

Following the shrinking of political space in 2016, our party opted for more use of social media as a strategy for not disappearing from the public eye. To a great extent, social media have proved to be very useful and contributed significantly to the



survival of our party during these challenging times (ACT-Wazalendo official, 14th April, 2022, Dar es Salaam).

It should however be noted that the said political parties' social media strategies are mainly verbal. No party has a clearly laid down strategy detailing how it plans to effectively use these platforms. While some parties have recorded relative gains as a result of using social media, such gain has been pragmatic. Political parties in Tanzania still rely much on ground operations. This characteristic was confirmed by one of the respondents who maintained that:

Social media is for the youths and the middle class. Its use is not ideal for rural areas whereby the majority of the people do not have smartphones. We have learned from CCM which is well established in rural areas due to its active and effective ground operations (NCCR-Mageuzi official, 14th April, 2022, Dar es Salaam).

Complementing political parties' ground operations thus calls for mentality change among elderly party leaders to make them social media champions. Given that majority of the elderly in political parties' leadership have been digitally passive, making them aware regarding the use of social media is crucial for a party's digital transformation. This challenge was underscored by an interviewee who maintained that:

Awareness among party leaders about social media use is low. It is only the chairperson and somehow the secretary general who have been active in using social media for party activities. The majority of top leaders are elderly and thus not accustomed to using social media for political activities (NCCR-Mageuzi official, 14th April, 2022, Dar es Salaam).

Similar views were shared by another respondent who insisted that:

Digital awareness among party leaders is on average, about 50%. It is mainly the youth at or below 40 years of age who have been actively using social media. Only a few leaders aged 50 years and above have been using social media (ACT-Wazalendo official, 14th April 2022, Dar es Salaam).

As pointed out earlier, political parties are also suffering from an age-based digital divide. The existence of this divide was underscored by one respondent who argued:

The use of social media in political activities is affected by the nature of our community. Unlike TVs that are easily accessible to many people in rural and urban areas, social media is only for a group of people (the youth), the majority of whom have Smartphones (CUF official, 15th April 2022, Dar es Salaam).

The findings also noted some hesitancy among political parties in committing themselves too much to the use of social media due to the uncertainties of the political system. This hesitation was revealed by one respondent who maintained:

Banking too much on social media use is a challenge. There is a danger of their use being affected by government shutdown as was witnessed during the 2020 elections. It is thus important for the party to be cautious and aware of this danger and plan beforehand for other possible means of communication (ACT-Wazalendo official, 14th April 2022, Dar es Salaam).

It was further learnt during key informant interviews that political parties had limited or no budget at all for championing the social media agenda. The CUF respondent maintained that there was no specific budget allocated for social media use, thus the party was using some funds allocated for other activities to champion the use of social media. For NCCR-Mageuzi, it was also learnt that the party was spending about 200,000/= Tanzanian shillings from other allocations to facilitate social media-related activities. The same experience applies to ACT-Wazalendo which relies on supporters and volunteers to champion the social media agenda due to a lack of a specific social media budget.

Discussion

The findings show that despite using social media to some extent, political parties are yet to effectively and strategically utilize these platforms including ACT-Wazalendo which Kwayu (2019) points out as being a good example of strategically using social media. Lack of or insufficient budget for social media-related activities attests to this observation. Therefore, a claim by the equalization perspective that social media tend to empower weak parties is yet to apply to Tanzania due to the fact that the social media profiles of opposition political parties do not differ from that of the ruling party CCM which relies on ground operations (Kwayu (2022).

In addition, the findings reveal lack of strategies for ensuring consistent usage of social media by political parties. Even during election period, the branding of political parties is mostly done through non-party owned or affiliated social media as revealed by election observation reports. Thus, while political parties aspire to benefit from social media, they have invested very little to champion this course. This sporadic and quick-win syndrome does not give way for political parties to design long-term social media usage strategies that can regularly keep them in touch with the electorate. Moreover, the findings show a correlation between political parties' popularity and their social media profile. As the review of social media pages shows, it is mainly CHADEMA and CCM (the country's major political parties) that have more social media presence compared to other political parties. Given that these parties have relied much on ground operations, it is difficult to establish an isolated contribution of social media in changing or transforming the functioning of political parties in Tanzania.

Similarly, while Kwayu (2019) shows that ACT-Wazalendo has been strategically using social media to recruit members, there is little to prove this claim since the majority of political parties suffer from several managerial weaknesses, including the keeping of non-updated registers of their members (Bakari, 2010) hence difficult to establish whether some party members were recruited using the social media. Experience can be drawn from the ACT-Wazalendo which has been very popular in Kigoma region where its leader originates and Zanzibar where it benefited from a massive defection of the then members of CUF. ACT-Wazalendo's popularity in Kigoma is marked by its securing only one parliamentary seat during the 2015 elections and the winning of some parliamentary seats in Zanzibar during the 2020

elections. Securing some seats in these areas was attributed much to the personality of party leaders and not due to the influence of social media. As Whitehead (2000) observes, opposition political parties in Tanzania have tended to be synonymous with their respective party leaders. These observations show that the position of social media in Tanzanian politics is concomitant to the normalization and hybrid perspectives which insist that social media do not change the status quo.

The findings further reveal the predominance of the one size fits all tendencies among political parties in using social media. Responses from key informant interviews show that political parties do not have strategies for dealing with specific categories of prospective members/supporters such as the elderly people in rural areas as well as the youth. Apart from benefiting from youth's voluntary support especially during election periods, youth engagement has been pragmatic. Consequently, the operationalisation of the social media agenda has relied on the survival of the fittest for both the leaders and members/supporters. This weakness has limited the use of social media by elderly leaders and members as revealed by the key informant interviews. The observations above notwithstanding, several factors are attributed to the current status of political parties in social media.

As it was revealed during key informant interviews, political parties' use of social media is seriously affected by leaders' low level of awareness about the use of these platforms for political parties' activities. While there is some social media advocacy among political parties, very little has been done to raise the awareness of top leaders and members over the need to strategically use social media for achieving their parties' strategic goals. Key informant interviews and election observation reports have revealed that it is mainly the youth who are more politically active online. Given that the youth generally serve as volunteers, it is difficult for political parties to systematically monitor and assess social media use.

Political parties' use of social media is meaningful when the information delivered via these platforms reaches the targeted recipients. However, the literature does not show automatic connection between internet access and increased citizens' online political participation through social media. Active online political engagement thus depends on members'/supporters' level of awareness of the potential of social media in serving as a politicking tool. Experience shows that citizens have tended to use social media for non-political issues. Gibson and Ward (2008) as well as Soon (2010) observe that citizens' level of online engagement is often determined by several factors including the type of the predominant political culture.

There has to be a participant political culture that motivates people to engage in digital political interactions (Loader *et al.*, 2014). Participant political culture can be realized when citizens' level of civic competence is high. Experience shows that the level of civic competence among Tanzanians has for quite some time been low. The study which was conducted by the University of Dar es Salaam in 1999 revealed limited citizens' knowledge of political affairs (Mushi, *et al.*, 2001). Likewise, the 2002 Afrobarometer study observed that Tanzanians were uncritical citizens (Chaligha *et al.*, 2002). In addition, the National Strategy for Civic Education (2011) acknowledges the existence of civic competence gaps in the country. Consequently, there has been limited public usage of social media for political discussion. Irrespective of some positive changes since the advent of social media, lack of a politically active online public somehow discourages political parties' devotion to the use of social media. As Cardenal (2013) argues, political parties' motivation to use social media is determined by various factors including the likely benefits to be accrued from using these platforms. Limited use of social

media by the Tanzanian public, therefore, does not guarantee political parties with prospects for significant political gains.

Additionally, the nature of the political system has been crucial in explaining the level of political parties' use of social media as it has contributed positively and negatively to political parties' social media use. The positive side is associated with the unpredictability of the political context. Since the adoption of multiparty politics in 1992, Tanzania has enjoyed a stable political climate that enables individuals and organizations to actively engage in politics. Despite this stability, there have been some developments that have made the political context unpredictable. With this unpredictability, no longer can political parties continue to only rely on ground operations to engage with the public. As Cheeseman *et al.*, (2021) and Paget (2021) observe, Tanzania's political parties have suffered from strict regulations. The ban on political rallies in 2016 and the enactment of the Cybercrimes Act, 2015 are living examples (Collord, 2020). Having relied too much on political rallies, this ban left opposition parties with no alternative and reliable options for undertaking their routine and strategic functions. Given that they had done little to build their social media profile; they were not able to effectively use online communication as an alternative. Irrespective of this weakness, some political parties at least opted for the use of social media as a survival strategy from 2016 to 2021 as the findings have revealed.

On the negative side, the unpredictability of the political system has somehow discouraged online operations. This discouragement is based on the fact that championing the use of social media has sometimes not been a panacea to the government's political restrictions. As is the case for political rallies and meetings, the use of social media has also suffered from government controls. For instance, during the 2020 Tanzania's general elections, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram became defunct on the ballot day and afterward. This control denied citizens the right to share and exchange election-related information (Collord, 2020). Besides TCRA's shutdown of social media, mobile phone services particularly short text messages and voice calls also experienced a slowdown during the same period (Tanzania Elections Watch, 2021). In addition, allegations of committing cybercrimes invited punitive measures to some individuals hence forcing social media users, including political parties, to exercise self-censorship (Cross, 2019).

Resource challenges also limit political parties' use of social media. As Shana and Holmner (2015) as well as Bornman (2016) observe, high cost of infrastructure, accessibility of Internet services and connectivity have negatively affected the level of the use of social media in developing countries. In Tanzania, the resource factor has two dimensions. One dimension explains financial constraints inhibiting political parties from expanding their social media activities as it has been revealed through key informant interviews. The second dimension looks at the prospective recipients of political parties' online political information. It is worth-noting that Tanzania's development vision 2025 identifies having a well-educated and learning society as one of its long-term strategic goals (URT, 1999). Realizing this dream however faces a digital divide challenge. The intensity of this challenge is exacerbated by inadequacy of basic economic, social, educational, and technological resources facing Tanzania as the case for many other African countries (Fuchs & Horak, 2008). Consequently, Tanzania is yet to be an information society (Mercer, 2006). In principle, an information society is characterized by several attributes including the intensive use of information by the general public and the availability of technological infrastructure and information-related products such as computers and mobile

phones (Bornman, 2016). Realizing these features passes through various stages such as the development of ICT-readiness, an increase in the use of ICTs for information-related purposes on a wide front and lastly; the ICT impact in which society reflects on effective and efficient use of ICTs (Bornman, 2016). Tanzania has recently witnessed an increase in Internet and mobile phone subscribers. For instance, as of March 2022 the country had 29,913,513 internet users and 55,365,239 telephone subscriptions (TCRA, 2022). It is nonetheless worth-noting that about 86 percent of people in rural areas do not have internet connectivity compared to 44.6 percent in urban areas (Vaughan, 2021). A lot thus still needs to be done in improving the flow and access to political information.

Conclusion and policy implications

Political parties in Tanzania have to some extent been using social media platforms to communicate with the public, though not as a strategic politicking tool. The findings show that social media have mainly played a normalization role as they have not affected the balance of power among political parties. Several factors such as overreliance on ground operations, limited awareness among political party leaders over the potential of social media in political activities, the unpredictable nature of the political system as well as resource challenges are attributed to the current status of political parties in social media. A low social media profile calls for the empowerment of political parties by enabling them to integrate social media platforms into their routine and strategic functions. As a testimony from NCCR-Mageuzi has shown, recognizing online communication as a formal information flow channel within political parties may steer online communication culture among party leaders thus, open windows for increased interactions between leaders and party members/ supporters via social media. In addition, initiatives aiming at enhancing public access to electricity and internet services are needed. As Bagula *et al.*, (2011) observe, having policies that aim at reducing the cost of internet infrastructure and connectivity as well as reliable electric power positively helps to address digital divide challenges. Lastly, promoting participant political culture by reforming prohibitive laws may motivate citizens' online engagement through social media.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Reviewed Instagram pages

CHADEMA		CCM		CUF, ACT & NCCR
Bawacha_tz	Chademasingida	Ccm Tanzania	Binticcm	Cuf masasi mji
Chademawani	Chademaarusha	ccm_in_blood	ccm_kigamboni	Cuf-habar1
Chadematzofficial	Chadema_kanda_yaziwa	Ccmchina	ccm_yetu_tz	actwazalendo-official
Chadema_in_blood	Chadema_victoria	Ccmamaniyatanzania	damu.ccm	Actwazakendoudsm
Chademakandanyasa	Chadema nyamagana	uvccm_open	Ccmuniformtz	Actwazalendo-tz
Chadema digital	emma_chadema	Ccm Tanzaniaidaima	Ccmsumbawanga	nccr-vijana
Chadema_tz	Chadema_kata_mtoni	wazaciccm_tz	Ccmmtwaravijijini	Nccrماغهuziofficial
Chadema kaskazini	Official_chadema_new_tz	sisi_na_ccm_mpaka_ikulu2020	ccm-vijana-muhimbili	nccr-mbeya
Chadema samba)	Chadema666	Naibukatibumkuu	ccm-bukoba	wanawake-nccr
Chademadiaspora	Chadema.kanda.ya.kusini	ccm_forum	Ccmsupporters	
Chadema media	Chadema_2020	Ccmmarekani	ccm.chamachamapinduzi	
Chademakaskazini	Chadematanzania	Ccmmtwara	ccm.mipanga	
Chadematz	Chadema_mkao_iringa	ccmnatta1	ccm-online-2020	
Chadema.kihurio	Chademahai	ccm_segerea	ccm-utekelezaji	
Chadema_members	Chademanguvu	Ccmchangeorquit	ccm-dijitali	
Chademakandayaserengeti	Chadema_damuni	Ccmakundi	ccm-kasulu-page	
Chadema_in_blood forever)	Chadema-mara	samiasuluhu_tu	ccm-nanyumba	
Chadema_yangu	Jose_chadema	ccm_kata_mwandege	Yusuphlima	
Chadema_repost	Fatma_chadema	ccmwazalendo	ccm-kwanza	
Chadema 2	Chadema_wilaya_yahai	Damuccm	ccm-kanda	
Chademanet	Chademakandaya.kati	Kigogoccm	ccm-ya-vijana	
Chadema_blood	Chademadaima	ccm_zanzibar	ccm-tanzania1	
Chadema magharibi	Chademakalela	ccm.taifa	kasulu-ccm	
Chadoudom	Bavicha_kasulu_mjini	Ccmubungo	ccm-kambarage-saut	
M4change2025	Chadema_updates	uv_ccm_uvinza	Uvccm-lindi)	
Chademajimbolakawe	Afisahabari	ccm_chamachetu_2020	Mwarabuwaccm	
chadema_news_updates	Chademaprincess	ccm_taifa	ccm-ilula	
		samia_gang_	Ccmupdates	
		Ccmmoshi	Mkombozi-2020	
		kada-ccm		

Appendix 2: Reviewed Facebook pages

CCM	CUF & NCCR	ACT		CHADEMA
CCM PATANDI	CUF Mwandege kwanza	ACT Wazalendo	ACT Wazalendo toangoma	Chadema in blood
CCM in blood	Okoa cuf (vision for change)	Act wazalendo Zanzibar	ACT Wazalendo damu	Chadema yetu
Uvccm (Tanzania)-	Cuf newala	Act wazalendo Zanzibar jimbo la kijini	ACT Wazalendo jimbo la sumve	Chadema
Cem	Cuf kanda ya kusini	Act-wazalendo	ACT Wazalendo kazuramimba	Chadema Tanzania
Ccm Tanzania	Cuf chama chetu	Act-wazalendo kuelekea 2025	ACT Wazalendo rombo	Ushindi wa Chadema
Chama cha mapinduzi	CUF- Chama cha Wananchi	Act wazalendo party	ACT Wazalendo segerea	Shujaa tundu lissu
Ccm yetu daima	CUF Ngangari	Act wazalendo Mtwara	ACT Wazalendo mbeya	Chadema news media
Jumuiya ya wazazi ccm wilaya ya kibaha mjini	Nccr MAGEUZI hQ	ACT Wazalendo Tanga	ACT Wazalendo mbuluvijijini	Chadema kwanza
Ccm kanda ya kati	Nccr MAGEUZI Tanzania	ACT Wazalendo Mwanza	ACT Wazalendo nungwi	Chadema diaspora
All'S ccm in blood tanzania	Nccr MAGEUZI Rukwa Mwandele	ACT Wazalendo Tabora	ACT Wazalendo jimbo la kijini	
Uhuru na umoja	Nccr kanda ya ziwa	ACT Wazalendo Kilimanjaro		
Uvccm kojani	Nccr Mbeya	ACT Wazalendo chunya		
Jumuiya ya wazazi ccm mbinga		ACT Wazalendo igunga		

Appendix 3: Reviewed Twitter Pages

CCM	CHADEMA	ACT , CUF & NCCR
Chama cha mapinduzi	Chadema Tanzania	ACT WAZALENDO
Ccm amani ya Tanzania	@ChaDeMa	ACT WAZALENDO ZBAR
Chama cha mapinduzi z	Chadema Tanzania @_chadema	ACT WAZALENDO Kigoma
Uvccm-tz	Chadema Diaspora@Chademadiaspora	CUF Habari
Uvccm taifa	Chadema kaskazini	Nccr Mageuzi hq
Uvccm dsm	Chadema news	Nccr Mageuzi
Uvccm mpya	Chadema nyasa	Nccr Mageuzi vijana taifa
Uvccm Zanzibar	Chadema mkoa wa iringa	
Uvccm geita	Chadema kanda ya Serengeti	
Uvccm kibondo	Chadema kanda ya pwani	
Uvccm iringa mjini		
Ccm wazazi		