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Why Zambia Cancelled RightsCon: External and Domestic Pressures

Hangwei Li

Why did the Zambian government first back RightsCon, a major global digital rights conference, and subsequently cancel it? Based on interviews with relevant stakeholders and fieldwork in Lusaka, this policy brief examines how Chinese diplomatic pressure over Taiwanese participation intersected with domestic politics ahead of Zambia's 2026 general election. It argues that while Chinese diplomatic pressure and Zambia's economic dependency on China increased the perceived costs of hosting the conference, domestic electoral calculations and the shrinking digital civic space under United Party for National Development (UPND) rule reduced its incentives to defend it.

Three months before Zambians went to the polls in August 2026, the Zambian government abruptly stopped RightsCon 2026, one of the world's largest digital-rights gatherings, from taking place in Lusaka. Originally scheduled to take place from 5 to 8 May 2026, the international forum was expected to bring together more than 2,600 in-person participants and over 1,100 online participants, including civil society representatives, journalists, scholars and practitioners in the tech industry, to discuss digital rights and the future of digital governance. [1]Yet only days before the summit, the Zambian government announced its "postponement". In practice, it was a de facto cancellation, as the conference did not proceed in Zambia or online.

At the time, much attention focused on China. According to RightsCon organizers and subsequent media coverage, "foreign interference" was the reason RightsCon 2026 was not able to proceed. Specifically, according to organizers, it was due to Chinese diplomats raising objections with the Zambian government over the planned participation of Taiwanese civil-society representatives.[2] The case echoed an observation by China watchers in recent years: as China's global influence expands, smaller states face growing constraints on their room to manoeuvre. Zambia's close relationship with China, especially its growing economic dependency on it,[3] increased the political and economic costs of disregarding Beijing's concerns.

However, such an explanation may not be fully sufficient to reflect the more complex picture, and may also risk reproducing the narrative of Africa being a passive victim of external

[1] RightsCon, "A Statement to Our Community About Why RightsCon 2026 Will Not Take Place in Zambia", 1 May 2026.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Hangwei Li, Dominik Kopiński and Ian Taylor. "China and the Troubled Prospects for Africa's Economic Take-off: Linkage Formation and Spillover Effects in Zambia." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 861-882.

pressure while overlooking the role of domestic political calculations in the government's decision-making. The subsequent August election, in which President Hichilema successfully secured a second term, and its aftermath offer further insight into the broader political environment under the UPND government. In particular, "Heavy military presence in tallying centres",[4] restrictions on political activity and online expression, arrests of opposition figures and the allegation of treason against them, the killing of a former minister, and the closure of the country's top courts on the last day on which election challenges could be filed all point to the country's authoritarian turn.

What factors did actually shape the Zambian government's decision to postpone (in practice, cancel) RightsCon 2026? And how did external and geopolitical pressures interact with domestic political considerations in shaping the country's participation in global digital forum? Based on fieldwork conducted in late July and early August 2026, and interviews with government officials, civil society representatives, journalists and scholars, this brief argues that the Zambian government's decision should be analysed in terms of both external influences and domestic politics. Chinese diplomatic pressure and Zambia's dependency on China increased the external costs of hosting the conference and have triggered the Zambian government's final reconsideration of the event. However, this pressure was at play in a domestic context where consideration about political survival before the election, along with the shrinking digital civic space under the UPND government's rule, had reduced the government's domestic incentive to defend a high-profile international digital rights forum.

RightsCon 2026: From Government Partnership to Last-Minute Cancellation

RightsCon is a multi-stakeholder summit focusing on human rights in the digital age. Since the 2019 event in Tunisia, RightsCon has not held an in-person conference on the African continent. The choice of Lusaka as the host city was therefore something the Zambian government celebrated. It was believed that hosting the summit would benefit the country's tourism industry and promote Zambia's national image.[5] As a Zambian official put it: "Many international and regional conferences often take place in Kigali, Addis Ababa, or Cape Town. We were proud that RightsCon was coming to Zambia."[6] Beyond the prestige of hosting a major international conference, Zambian officials also saw RightsCon as carrying a more specific reputational value. In particular, the Ministry of Technology and Science (MoTS) viewed the event as a chance to showcase Zambia's progress in digital transformation, underline its commitment to a rights-based digital future, and strengthen its image as a regional leader in digital rights and innovation.[7]

This initial enthusiasm was also reflected in various ministries' and government departments' practical involvement in preparing the conference. MoTS, in particular, was the primary government partner for RightsCon 2026. Other ministries, such as the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Information and Media (MIM), were also actively involved in the preparation process. The Department of Immigration provided support via visa processing.[8] On 3 March, the Permanent Secretary of MoTS expressed optimism that RightsCon 2026

[4] European Commission, "EU EOM Election Observation Update, European Commission", 19 August 2026.
[5] Interviews with Zambian officials, Lusaka, August 2026.
[6] Interview with a Zambian official, Lusaka, August 2026.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

would "provide a platform for constructive dialogue on digital rights, responsible online engagement, and the role of technology in fostering inclusive economic growth".[9] However, not long after, on 28 April, a Zambian state media announced that the government had "postponed" RightsCon.[10] A subsequent letter from MoTS explained that the decision was required by the need for "comprehensive disclosure of critical information relating to key thematic issues proposed for discussion"[11] so that those issues could be aligned with Zambia's national values and wider public interest.

Zambia's Changing Foreign Policy and its Relations with China

Ever since the country's independence in 1964, Zambia's foreign policy has generally followed a policy of non-alignment, or what some would call "positive neutrality".[12] Such policy has enabled the country to proactively and pragmatically engage with a variety of external players, even at times when global politics were deeply divided. This approach continued under Hichilema's first term. After he was elected in August 2021, the UPND-government sought to strengthen relations with Western partners, particularly in areas such as governance, development assistance and, more recently, critical minerals and the Lobito Corridor. At the same time, it continued to maintain strong ties with Beijing. In particular, China remains a major economic partner. Based on calculation using Zambia Statistics Agency data, bilateral merchandise trade reached USD3.85 billion in 2025, making China Zambia's largest individual-country trading partner in 2025. [13]At the end of 2024, China was Zambia's third-largest immediate source of foreign direct investment (FDI), with a stock of approximately USD1.75 billion (10.1% of total inward FDI), after Canada and the British Virgin Islands.[14] At the end of 2024, China was also Zambia's largest official bilateral creditor, accounting for around USD 4.47 billion, or 67.4 per cent of the country's official bilateral debt.[15]

Yet, maintaining such a balancing act has become harder amid domestic pressures and changes in the international environment. During the Biden administration, Zambia developed particularly close relations with Washington. Senior US officials such as Vice President Kamala Harris, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, and USAID Administrator Samantha Power visited Zambia and held bilateral meetings with Hichilema. Biden also met Hichilema in Lobito, Angola, in December 2024. However, domestic critics argued that the UPND government swung too far toward the West and urged the government to recalibrate its foreign policy. Opposition parties and netizens on social media frequently criticized the government as a "puppet of the West",[16] arguing that its close cooperation with Western governments and private-sector actors was a manifestation of imperialism. These criticisms coin-

[9] Ministry of Technology and Science, "Zambia to Host RightsCon 2026: Advancing Digital Rights and Economic Transformation", 3 March 2026.
[10] RightsCon 2026.
[11] Ministry of Information and Media, "Zambia: Press Statement by Mr Thabo Kawana, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Information and Media on the Postponement of the RightsCon 2026 Summit", 29 April 2026.
[12] Christopher Vandome, "Zambia's Developing International Relations: 'Positive Neutrality' And Global Partnership", 3 March 2023.
[13] Zambia Statistics Agency, The Monthly 282, September 2026, Table 2.9-2.10, pp.36-37.
[14] Bank of Zambia, Zambia Statistics Agency and Zambia Development Agency, "Foreign Private Investment and Investor Perceptions in Zambia – 2025", 15
[15] World Bank Group, "Zambia: Joint World Bank-IMF Debt Sustainability Analysis", 6.
[16] Cynthia Kamwengo, "Social Media Debates on Zambia's Evolving Relations with the West and East", Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 21, 2024.

cided with debt-restructuring negotiations under the G20 Common Framework following Zambia's 2020 sovereign default, including a 2023 agreement with official creditors.
In the meantime, Hichilema sought to maintain close relations with Beijing. He visited China and met Xi Jinping in September 2023 and September 2024. According to a veteran Zambian diplomat, Hichilema was supposed to go to China earlier, yet he kept delaying his trip as he sought closer relations with the West.[17] These visits reflected Lusaka's effort to maintain close ties with China even as relations with Washington deepened.

However, after Trump took office for his second term in 2025, relations between the US and Zambia became strained. In 2025, Washington cut USD 50 million in health assistance over the theft of donated medical supplies, while the former US ambassador openly criticized alleged corruption among Zambian officials.[18] A Zambian scholar interpreted the former ambassador's speech as signalling pressure on Zambia not to get too close to Beijing.[19] Simultaneously, Zambia continued to deepen its economic and political ties with China.

Within this broader effort to balance competing external relationships, Taiwan had become an increasingly sensitive issue. Over the years, Beijing has tried to limit Taiwan's role in global politics, but such pressure has become more extensive and assertive in recent years, extending beyond formal diplomatic recognition to questions of visas, passports and participation in international forums. RightsCon brought this wider trend directly into Zambia's foreign-policy calculations.

The Taiwan Issue and Chinese Pressure

During Hichilema's state visit to China in 2023, Zambia reaffirmed its adherence to the One-China principle, recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government representing the whole of China. Following the visit, Zambia and China elevated their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic and Cooperative Partnership.[20] In January 2024, the Zambian government reiterated its position that Taiwan is an "inalienable part of the Chinese territory" and stated that it would work with China to implement bilateral understandings and support the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations through "concrete actions".[21] During Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Zambia in November 2025, Hichilema also reassured Li that "Zambia firmly adheres to the one-China principle and firmly supports the just cause of the Chinese people in opposing 'Taiwan independence' separatist activities and striving for national reunification".[22]

At the same time, recent developments suggest that the practical application of the One-China principle has become broader and more assertive. Beijing has long stated that it has "no objection to Taiwan's non-governmental economic and cultural contacts with foreign countries", provided they comply with the One-China principle. However, recent evidence suggests that Beijing has increasingly also sought to restrict Taiwan's involvement in international conferences, academic exchanges and other non-governmental activities. This is viewed as Beijing's test for "who will stand by Taiwan" and reflects a broader shift from for-

[17] Interview with a former Zambia diplomat, Lusaka, August 2026.
[18] Julian Pecquet, "How Zambia Fell Out of Favour with the US amid Minerals-For-Health Row", The Africa Report, 6 May 2026.
[19] Interview with a Zambian scholar, July 2026.
[20] Xinhua, "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Zambia on Establishing the Comprehensive Strategic and Cooperative Partnership", 15 September 2023.
[21] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Zambia Reaffirms Commitment to Enhancing Comprehensive Strategic and Cooperative Partnership with the People's Republic of China", 16 January 2024.
[22] Xinhua, "China Ready to Explore Industrial Cooperation Potential with Zambia, Says Chinese Premier", 21 November 2025.

mal exclusion towards restrictions on everyday international engagement.[23] And this trend is particularly evident in Africa. For instance, in April 2025, Somalia's ban on all transit and entry of Taiwanese passport holders took effect.[24] In June 2026, Taiwanese scientists were prevented from attending the Our Ocean Conference in Mombasa, Kenya after their previously issued visas were revoked. China's Foreign Ministry subsequently praised Kenya for "resolutely upholding the One China principle".[25] These cases suggest that even scientific and other non-governmental exchanges involving Taiwanese participants can become politically sensitive.

Against this backdrop, the presence of Taiwanese delegates at RightsCon was already a sensitive issue to Beijing. In addition, the RightsCon programme added another layer of sensitivity. As shown in the programme, Taiwanese civil society organizations (CSOs) planned to organize sessions critical of China's global influence and digital governance, including: 1) Amnesty International's Taiwan affiliate's roundtable on "Confronting fear, exclusion and nationalism: how should civil society respond to China's digital authoritarian practices;" 2) Open Culture Foundation's dialogue on "Cybersecurity with Chinese characteristics: from exporting authoritarian norms to civil society resilience;" and 3) Doublethink Lab's co-organized dialogue on "Networked authoritarianism: unpacking the China–Russia FIMI nexus in Ukraine, Taiwan, and Sub-Saharan Africa."[26] Notably, one of the founders of Doublethink Lab was listed as a "Taiwanese independence separatist" by the Chinese government. RightsCon thus combined two issues that Beijing considers highly sensitive: Taiwan's involvement in international forums and potential criticism of China's digital governance and global influence. This explains why Chinese diplomats adopted a very firm position in their communication with Zambian officials, although the Chinese embassy in Zambia has not publicly acknowledged exerting pressure on Lusaka over RightsCon.

According to an official from Zambia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "the Chinese were very uncomfortable with the participation of Taiwanese delegates; they think the Taiwanese might speak very critically of the Chinese government. The summit was also due to be held at the Mulungushi International Conference Center, which was financed and built by China. From this perspective, hosting the summit would have created an additional sense of irony."[27]

The Domestic Context: Electoral Politics, Cyber Laws and Shrinking Digital Civic Space

Instead of cancelling the whole conference, Zambian authorities could have taken a more targeted approach, such as withdrawing invitations to Taiwanese participants or cancelling politically sensitive sessions. The breadth of Zambia's response raises questions about whether external diplomatic pressure alone can account for such a far-reaching decision. This points to the need to examine the weight of domestic politics in shaping the Zambian authorities' response.

As RightsCon was scheduled three months before what would become Zambia's tightly contested August election, the UPND government's decision-making was also affected by electoral politics. Interviews suggest that Zambian officials initially saw no electoral prob-

[23] Nathan Attrill, "Beijing is Testing Who Will Stand by Taiwan", 9 July 2026.
[24] Aljazeera, "Somalia Bans Entry of Taiwan Citizens in Bid to Please China: Taipei", 30 April 2025.
[25] Reuters, "Taiwan Says its Delegates Have Been Barred from Ocean Conference in Kenya", 17 June 2026.
[26] RightsCon Program List.
[27] Interview with an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lusaka, August 2026.

lem with the summit's timing.[28] RightsCon's first site visit took place in 2024, at a time when the former ruling Patriotic Front (PF) was weakened and the opposition generally fragmented. Several interviewees recalled that officials involved in the preparations initially did not foresee the conference becoming a potential electoral issue. At that stage, the benefits of hosting a high-profile international conference outweighed the possible political costs.[29] However, by early 2026, opposition politics became more competitive, with Brian Mundubile emerging as a notable challenger. Hichilema still appeared to hold an advantage, but interviews suggest that the UPND became increasingly concerned with minimizing avoidable political risks in the run-up to the election. RightsCon started to seem less like an international reputational opportunity and more like a possible source of political uncertainty.

The summit covered digital surveillance, media freedom, online expression and the protection of digital civic space. These topics had also become more politically sensitive by 2026 amid growing controversy over cyber legislation and shrinking digital civic space (analysed in the next section). According to interviews, Zambian authorities, especially the technocrats who were in charge of preparing the forum, were worried that the summit would place the country under international scrutiny at a politically sensitive moment. Such scrutiny could create electoral costs for the ruling party. Thus, ministries such as MoTS and the Ministry of Tourism, which had invested personnel and resources in preparing and supporting the summit, became more cautious. As one interviewee put it: "They don't want to be blamed… It is also in their interest to survive the election so they can keep their jobs."[30] With the political risks becoming more apparent, the decision to cancel the summit encountered little resistance across ministries, and officials soon reached a consensus.

As one civil society representative explained: "China, or offending China, was certainly a big issue. That was a particular cause of stress among staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But all of the technocrats also worried about the political cost. They had to carefully weigh the benefits and costs. They worried that hosting the summit would create a global platform for Zambia's critical voices, especially opposition leaders such as Brian Mundubile, on which to connect with international media and civil-society groups. They also worried that it would place domestic controversies in global headlines. If so, the big boss would blame them. They might be asked why they had agreed to host such a summit only weeks before the start of the official campaign."[31]

As mentioned, when the Zambian government "postponed' RightsCon 2026, it stated that the summit did not align with its "national values and policy priorities". RightsCon 2026's official materials explicitly included content related to LGBTQ+ issues, including "Defending LGBTQ+ rights in the digital age". The topics to be discussed also covered surveillance and legal restrictions targeting LGBTQ+ communities, data protection on dating platforms, harms caused by online disinformation, and ways to safeguard LGBTQ+ rights in the design of AI systems.

Zambia's strict anti-LGBTQ+ laws and conservative state policies conflicted with the summit's progressive human-rights and LGBTQ+ agenda.[32] Thus, when evaluating the risks, some of the technocrats were also concerned that hosting the summit would generate controversy among Zambian citizens, which would then harm Hichilema's electoral prospects. Yet, other informants suggested that the use of "national values" was more of a post-hoc justification for a decision driven by broader political considerations.

[28] Multiple interviews with Zambian government officials, Lusaka, July and August 2026.
[29] Multiple interviews with Zambian government officials and civil society representatives, Lusaka, July and August 2026.
[30] Interview with a civil society representative, online, September 2026.
[31] Interview with a civil society representative, Lusaka, August 2026.
[32] Multiple interviews, Lusaka, July and August 2026.

Following the announcement of the postponement (cancellation) of the summit, more than 130 international organizations – a network of digital rights actors – issued a joint statement to condemn the Zambian government's abrupt disruption of RightsCon.[33] The statement highlighted that the decision reflected a major setback for Zambia's digital rights trajectory regionally and globally. Despite a certain level of pushback by civil society organizations, interviews suggested that the government's reference to national values was welcomed by many Zambians. A manager of the Tonse Alliance, a coalition of opposition political parties and civil society groups, explained: "From an electoral competition point of view, that was actually a smart move by the UPND. Zambia is not a LGBTQ friendly country, and many Zambians would welcome any means to defend national values."[34]

[33] Net Rights Coalition. Over 130 organizations condemn the Government of Zambia's abrupt disruption of RightsCon, 30 April 2026.
[34] Interview with a manager for Tonse Alliance, 7 August 2026.

Zambia's 2026 Elections and EU's Responses

The official results showed that Hichilema received around 60% of the votes in Zambia's general election on 13 August 2026, while opposition challenger Brian Mundubile received about 38%.[35] However, the electoral process was highly controversial. On 14 August, state security forces arrested several opposition members, including Mundubile, and fatally shot former minister and opposition member Mutotwe Kafwaya. The EU Election Observation Mission subsequently described the electoral environment as competitive but uneven, noting restrictions on fundamental freedoms, electoral irregularities, incumbency advantages and concerns surrounding the recently introduced cyber laws. It also highlighted serious problems in the tabulation process, including an intimidating military presence at counting centres and the absence of transparency in the publication of results.[36] On 24 August, the authorities closed court premises on the final day for filing challenges to the presidential election results, citing security concerns.

In early September, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen congratulated Hichilema on his re-election. Several EU Member States, including France, the Netherlands and Austria, also sent congratulatory messages. On 10 September, EU Ambassador to Zambia Karolina Stasiak reaffirmed the EU's commitment to strengthen Zambia's democracy and electoral institutions. On 17 September, the European Parliament adopted by 562 votes to 1, with 33 abstentions, a resolution on the post-electoral repression in Zambia and the killing of Kafwaya.[37] It also called all Member States to raise these violations at the highest political level.[38] In late September, European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jozef Síkela met with Zambia's Foreign Minister, during which he reaffirmed the EU's commitment to strengthening relations with Zambia while encouraging continued respect for the rule of law. [39] As of late November 2026, Mundubile remained in detention on treason-related charges.

The Cyber-Law Contradiction and Shrinking Digital Civic Space

The controversy surrounding Zambia's cyber legislation is particularly relevant to RightsCon because many of the conference's core topics (e.g., surveillance, privacy, online expression, media freedom and digital civic space) had become politically contested issues within Zambia. Hosting one of the world's largest digital-rights gatherings would therefore have held the government to scrutiny precisely in areas in which its domestic record was increasingly being criticized.

On 28 March 2025, the National Assembly passed the Cyber Security Bill and the Cyber Crimes Bill. On 8 April 2025, President Hichilema assented to both. The legislation expanded

[35] Dingindaba Buyoya and Basillioh Rukanga, "Zambia's Hichilema re-elected president as main rival in hiding over alleged threats", BBC, 18 August 2026.
[36] European Union Election Observation Mission Zambia, "Transparency Now Key as Democratic Expectations Tested in Competitive but Uneven Playing Field", 15 August 2026.
[37] The European Parliament, "Resolution on the post-electoral repression in Zambia and the killing of Mutotwe Kafwaya", 17 September 2026.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Chomba Musika, "Zambia Beacon of Democracy – EU", *Daily Mail*, 24 September 2026.

the legal and institutional framework governing digital activity. Under the new frameworks, broader surveillance powers and criminal provisions could be applied to online expression.

Civil society organizations and the Law Association of Zambia raised significant concerns about the legislation. They argue that while the bills are intended to address cybercrime and enhance digital security, the laws remain vague, which can grant the state excessive surveillance powers with little oversight.[40] They are also concerned that the new law would threaten digital privacy and press freedom, enabling potential abuse by state agencies. Moreover, this move was exactly the opposite of Hichilema's promise during the 2021 election campaign, in which he mentioned repealing the earlier legislation as a priority once in office. As one interviewee put it: "The cyber law was supposed to be repealed and replaced after the Lungu administration, but they have made it worse than under Lungu."[41]

Concerns over Zambia's digital civic space did not start with the 2025 cyber laws; they were already reflected in the enforcement of existing legislation. Various reports documented arrests and prosecutions of journalists, opposition figures and ordinary internet users for things they said online. Some included social-media posts that were critical of President Hichilema and other officials. Such enforcement pushed people toward self-censorship. It also raised fears that the threat of arrest and prosecution could inhibit online activism and political mobilization. For example, in 2024, investigative journalist Thomas Allan Zgambo was arrested after publishing an article on Facebook, in which he criticised the government for renting a property allegedly linked to Hichilema.[42] More cases tied to social-media expression followed in 2025. Against this already restrictive backdrop, the adoption of the Cyber Crimes Act and Cyber Security Act in 2025 intensified existing anxieties about the narrowing space for free expression and civic mobilization online.

How External and Domestic Pressure Interacted

Zambia's decision regarding RightsCon was not simply the result of Chinese pressure acting on an economically dependent state; it was also the product of selective accommodation, in which Zambian decision-makers chose to respond to an external constraint. For Zambia, disregarding Beijing's pressure may have carried diplomatic and economic costs. Yet the government's willingness to accommodate this pressure was closely related to electoral politics. The proximity of the August 2026 election reduced its incentives to defend a conference that could intensify scrutiny of Zambia's shirking digital civic space.

In its explanation for the cancellation, the ruling party also deliberately highlighted its concerns over "sovereignty" and "national values". These two terms were used to justify restrictions on participation or discussion that would otherwise have been seen as inconsistent with Zambia's diplomatic commitments, including its One-China policy. It could also recast contested rights questions through morality, culture and national identity rather than universal rights.

These pressures were further translated into government decision-making through a bureaucratic process rather than simply being imposed from the presidential level. According to interviewees, technocrats in the relevant ministries and government departments assessed the potential risks and reported their concerns to ministers. Ministers then reached a collective position and made recommendations to President Hichilema.

[40] CIVICUS, "New Restrictive Laws Raise Concerns", 30 May 2026.
[41] Interview with a Zambian researcher, Lusaka, July 2026.
[42] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Yet Again, Zambian Journalist Thomas Allan Zgambo Faces Prison Over Reporting", 21 August 2024.

Policy Recommendations

Zambia has traditionally been viewed as one of Germany's most reliable partners in Southern Africa. It has also become increasingly important to German and broader European economic interests, especially in critical minerals and the Lobito Corridor. Yet the cancellation of RightsCon, the controversies over the 2026 general election, as well as the emerging debate over presidential term limits have raised concerns about Zambia's democratic trajectory and shrinking (digital) civil space. These developments also serve as a reminder that interest-based and pragmatic cooperation should go hand in hand through sustained engagement on digital rights and digital civic space.

The RightsCon case suggests that China's economic and diplomatic importance can raise the costs of resisting pressure from Beijing, especially regarding politically sensitive issues. Instead of putting pressure on Zambia to pick a side, Germany and the EU should help widen Zambia's room for manoeuvre by diversifying its economic, development and digital-governance partnerships. This might lessen the extent to which dependence on any single external partner translates into pressure on domestic policy choices. At the same time, German and European engagement should pay closer attention to the domestic conditions that make Zambian decision-makers more or less willing to accommodate external pressure, while supporting institutions that can manage such pressure transparently and accountably.

Germany and the EU should continue raising concerns about Zambia's cyber legislation and digital restrictions on online expression in their dialogue with the government. However, given the government's own political incentives to restrict digital civic space, such dialogue alone is unlikely to be sufficient. Greater emphasis should be placed on supporting the institutions and organizations that sustain Zambia's digital civic space. The dismantling of USAID has created significant funding gaps for Zambian civil society organizations. Lack of staff and funding has become their everyday struggle, preventing them from participating effectively in debates over cyber legislation, surveillance and digital rights. European support needs to move beyond funding short-term projects to the provision of more flexible and sustained assistance and the stimulation of cooperation between digital rights organizations, independent media, activists and grassroots networks.

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