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Country Brief | Zambia

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The territory of Northern Rhodesia, first administered by the South Africa Company and later by the British government gained independence in 1964 and became Zambia. In 2010 the population was estimated at just under 13.5 million in a country that was ranked 150 out of 169 by the HDI in that same year. Levels of socio-economic development are low. Social exclusion is extensive and structural. Traditional extended family systems of social security have all but collapsed, in urban areas especially. Nearly 65% of the population lives in poverty. Formal sector employment is minimal. Public healthcare is extremely poor. Gender discrimination is high, especially in rural areas. Zambia is a male orientated society. Men are viewed as an economic asset and generally have better access to education and resources, though the number of females in secondary and tertiary education is slowly increasing.

At Independence, struggle leader Kenneth Kaunda of the United International Independence Party (UNIP) was elected president. Throughout the 1960's his leadership became increasingly authoritarian and increasingly intolerant of opposition. This culminated in the amendment of the constitution, allowing for only one political party, UNIP. From 1972 to 1991 Zambia was a one-party state. Opposition to UNIP's monopoly on power led to the rise of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). In 1991, under intense international pressure and a growing domestic opposition multi-party elections were held. The MMD won by a landslide and from 1991 to 2011 was in power, under successive presidents. In the last elections Michael Sata of the Patriotic Front (PF), who in the past lost to MMD candidates, was elected president. The PF victory was based on populist campaigning aimed at the youth vote, calling for change and job creation. Civil society was widely supportive of the PF campaign. Expectations for the new leadership are high.

Political Environment

Zambia's electoral system consists of parliamentary and presidential elections. The president is elected by plurality vote to serve a 5-year term. The National Assembly consists of 150 elected members of constituencies (first past the post), 8 members appointed by the president and a Speaker. All serve 5-year terms. The president is Chief of State and Head of Government. Each of the ten provinces is administered by an appointed Provincial minister.

Traditional rulers are recognised through an advisory role for the House of Chiefs. They have called for more formal powers and they are increasing their political visibility by supporting particular parties and/or candidates.

A dominant party system has emerged within the political framework, this has not been con-

ductive to consolidating democracy, as it renders the opposition ineffective in holding government to account. There is a tendency toward relatively autocratic leadership in both government and opposition parties. Corruption and political patronage persist.

Elections in Zambia since the re-introduction of the multi-party system have often been deemed neither free nor fair. Election violence and intimidation of opposition leaders and supporters is common. The use of state resources to fund campaigning is common practice among incumbent leaders causing major inequalities between parties. During the last two presidential and parliamentary elections more transparent and peaceful voting has taken place offering a more accountable election process.

Zambia actively participates in Regional and international politics. It is a member of many intra-state organisations including SADC, COMESA and the AU. However it has not yet operationalised many of the commitments made. Zambia has been involved in various mediation efforts in the region. It is an outspoken critic against President Mugabe.

In general the government is inconsistent in devising its own development priorities. Even though it has developed a 6th National Development Plan, these policies are largely shaped by international donors. Recently the government published Vision 2030, in an attempt to establish long-term development goals.

Major Political Parties

Zambia's 4 main parties are: The United International Independence Party (UNIP), former President Kaunda's party. During this time Kaunda tried to follow the principles of humanism, condemning human exploitation and promoting community ideals. The Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) ruled Zambia for two decades (1991-2011), with three different Presidents successively. In his ten years in office Frederick Chiluba failed to address economic crises or raise living standards. Corruption, political patronage and bureaucracy characterised his presidency. Levy Mwanawasa, his handpicked successor, was considered a great improvement his mantra was to head a government of laws and initially he tried to crack down on corruption. After his abrupt death in 2008 his vice Rupiah Banda replaced him to complete the remainder of the presidential term. Contrary to expectation this transition went smoothly. Current President Sata's party The Patriotic Front (PF), won the 2011 elections based on populist campaigning focussing on winning the youth vote by calling for change in general and job creation specifically. The United Party for National Development (UPND) is the only major party to have not held office.

None of the parties have a clear political ideology, they are highly factionalized and prone to defections. Voting tends to focus on personality and marked shifts in voting can be observed at each election suggesting volatility among voters. Campaigning has focussed on ethnicity in the past, but recent election results suggest a greater focus on other issues in urban areas at least. Most parties have a geographical stronghold but these have shifted over time.

Other Political Stakeholders

Chinese business interests have been present in Zambia since the 1970's, in the last ten years however investment has grown explosively, interests are concentrated in the mining sector but are expanding to manufacturing and retail. It is rumoured that the Chinese government was financially supportive of the MMD in previous elections as President Sata of the PF, was severely critical of foreign mining firms and of labour conditions at Chinese companies in particular. It is hoped that now he is in office Sata will re-address the way in which mining contracts are awarded to make them more beneficial to Zambia. However the Zambian government does not want to scare off Chinese investment as it has driven economic growth to impressive new levels.

The churches have always been a persistent and vocal societal interest group. The Pentecostal movement is strong in Zambia but it is the Catholic Church that plays a more prominent role

in politics. The trade unions also have some influence but are much less dominant than in past decades. These interest groups currently focus on issues of constitutional reform, election malpractice, human rights and other socio-economic issues. They are able to influence government policy to some extent.

Democracy

Rule of Law

The biggest threat to rule of law in Zambia is corruption, which is widespread and prosecuted selectively and inadequately. Prosecution, where it happens, is often aimed at officials of former administrations for political gain. Very few prosecutions are concluded successfully. Major corruption cases in the health and infrastructure sectors caused international aid to be suspended. President Sata has made some attempts to curb corruption, it is yet to be seen if his attempts will be either consistent or successful. The public welcomes the fight against corruption but is very sceptical of the government's intentions and possibilities of success.

Separation of Powers

The judiciary is fairly independent; it has passed judgement against the legislature but it is poorly equipped to be effective as a check on government actions. It is furthermore considered compromised when dealing with cases involving the executive because these high profile cases are prone to interference by government. The judiciary is affected by corruption, especially in lower subordinate courts. Inefficiency is ascribed to understaffing, lack of trained personnel, poor remuneration and lack of equipment, all causing a huge backlog of cases and overcrowded detention centres.

State Institutional Capacity

President Sata has made sweeping changes to the leadership of the security services, the Anti-Corruption Commission and state owned media houses. He has also replaced many high ranking officials of the Foreign Service and the Central Bank. The move was stated to be an attempt to improve state institutions but is viewed by some as an attempt to position political allies in prominent positions.

The operations of local government structures are deficient. There have been decentralisation efforts since 2003 but central government maintains effective control of policy and budget. Parliament, human rights commissions, the ombudsman and other democratic institutions are generally considered ineffective in holding the government to account.

Rights and Freedoms

Zambia has a state owned media house with one television and one radio station. There are a number of independent radio stations that do not have broad coverage. There are a number of private television stations mainly available in Lusaka. There are three main newspapers, two of which are state-owned. Both private and state owned media show structural political bias in their reporting. Cases of intimidation of journalists by government officials have been observed in the past.

Civil rights violations concerning detainees persist in Zambia. Furthermore violence and discrimination against women is common. The government's infringement on citizens' privacy has been flagged as a concern by civil rights organisations.

The police selectively apply laws concerning freedom of association. Political rallies of those opposed to government are often obstructed by security forces. Political freedoms were recently challenged when the Registrar of Societies announced in March 2012 it was planning to de-register the main opposition party (MMD) because of unpaid dues while holding office.

The case has gone to court. If politically motivated and upheld in court this move will severely impact the quality of governance and democracy in Zambia.

Civic Participation

In addition to the role of churches and trade unions, there is a reasonably active civil society in Zambia, which is mostly led by an urban-based educated elite. There is a new wave of civil society organisations emerging as some established NGOs seem to have become compromised due to their backing of the PF. Many prominent civil society leaders have been incorporated into government structures. This move is seen by some as a positive step as government is taking broader views into account. Others consider it a move to keep civil society in check.

In 2009 Zambia enacted an NGO-bill instituting a regulatory structure for the charitable sector. It was severely criticised due to its emphasis on ministerial oversight, offering ample opportunity to regulate NGOs critical of government. In April 2012 the PF announced a review of the act, suggesting modifications are needed to accommodate the views of the NGO sector.

Even though women make up a majority of the population they are severely underrepresented in the political arena. Politics is not seen as an appropriate or even respectful career choice for women.

Economic Situation

Subsistence agriculture is by far the most common economic activity. Infrastructure and services to support economic activity are poor. There are income and development imbalances between provinces that have not been addressed, based on an urban-rural divide. The market economy is based on copper extraction but in recent years food and agricultural products have started playing a larger role.

President Kaunda's policies led to the nationalisation of copper mining companies in Zambia. This had a crippling effect on national debt when copper prices dropped in the 1990's. New economic policy moved towards privatisation which relieved the government of its financial obligations. The privatisation of the mines turned out to be very difficult because of policy mistakes by the Chiluba government. Not all state owned companies were eventually privatised but some were rather commercialised (private sector management with the state as majority shareholder).

The economy is still dependent on copper mining and commodity prices which make it vulnerable. However Zambia has experienced several years of robust economic growth because of commodity prices despite the global economic crisis. However, this has not led to improved socio-economic standards for the general population. A high birth rate, high HIV/AIDS infection rates and counteractive agriculture policies are considered the cause of this.

The government doesn't always use its resources efficiently; there is a bloated civil service and unreliable tax administration system. There is no balanced state budget however government has managed to keep exceptionally low interest rates over the past few years. Market competition operates within a weak institutional framework. The Competition Commission was established to regulate competition but is ineffectual and lacks legislative clout. Furthermore, the Central Bank is not considered fully independent and is therefore prone to political influence and spending.

Constitutional Reform

Zambia's original constitution was enacted in 1964. A new constitution was adopted in 1974 which provided a legal framework for the one-party state. In 1991 the demand for multi-party

to stop constitutional amendments in 2001 to allow the president to seek a third term in office. Since 1991 a new and more democratic constitution has been promised by government. In recent years the process has been derailed on several occasions. Civil society interests towards reforms focus on diminishing presidential powers and a 50% - plus one system of election. In April 2012 a draft constitution was published. The Technical Committee charged with drafting the document included a programme of participation by a cross-section of society. The Committee also indicated it would implement a broader consultative process based on the first draft. First reactions suggest that civil society is reasonably positive towards it.

Opportunities and Threats - Tentatively hopeful for the future

In September 2011 President Sata was voted into power by a youthful electorate hoping for change. There is currently a sense of tentative hope that President Sata and the PF will bring Zambians what they are looking for, namely poverty reduction in the form of increased employment and a better quality of governance. The incumbent administration has made some progress, at the same time budget mistakes and abrupt policy changes have also occurred. Even though many civil society organisations campaigned in favour of Sata and the PF it is imperative that they continue to be critical and hold government accountable. The coming months and years of the administration will be closely followed by many, as there is a lot of pressure on the new government to succeed.

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