

# **The State of Zambian Democracy: left organizations and their role in political struggles**

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## **Introduction**

Since the great wave of democratization began in the early 1990s more than 100 episodes of political reform have taken place around the world. Despite some democracies surviving longer than fifteen years many have faced backsliding or are at risk of reversals, if this has not already occurred. There may be many causes for democratic collapse, but many observers agree that poor economic performance and unequal distribution of wealth have provided the impetus for tyranny, authoritarianism on the one hand and provoked popular democratic struggles on the other hand. However, the nature of the political system has had different impacts on political stability. For example, during the early 1990s post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe experienced economic distress yet did not backslide from democracy. But in Thailand, however, robust growth did not prevent a military coup in 2006.

Democracy in Africa has had mixed experiences. The early optimism with multiparty democracy has been replaced with skepticism, cynicism and outright frustration. While the majority of African countries adopted multiparty political systems in the early 1990s and many have held at three elections since then, the quality of this democracy has been poor. A number of countries have experienced reversals, backsliding, rigged elections or civil conflict. Military coups have taken place in a handful of countries, that were previously stable such as Ivory Coast, Guinea, Gambia, Madagascar and Congo Brazzaville to mention but a few. In many others, the new rulers did not adhere to the rules of

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the game: election results were routinely manipulated to suit incumbents, opposition forces were harassed or repressed, human rights of citizens were suppressed and internal democracy rarely existed. Politics was personalized and highly dependent on patronage. While most political parties lacked a class character and were not well rooted in society nor linked to civil society organizations. To be sure political parties were but instruments by ambitious politicians to attain state power for purposes of accumulation for themselves and their cronies and not a political project to advance class or social agenda for the great mass of the population.

Indeed, the liberal project of democracy measured by the formation of political parties and holding of regular elections may have been achieved in many African countries, but in many cases this has not advanced political rights of participation and representation. African democracy remains hollow, as masses of the people have often been excluded from voting due to a number of factors, which include: extreme poverty and deprivation, bad constitutions, unreliable voters' rolls, political repression, civil war or political and electoral manipulation. There has been little alternation in power, political competition has been very low as opposition parties have often been weak, fragmented, factionalised and easily coopted. Progressive opposition groups have often been criminalized, banned and their leaders detained, exiled or eliminated. While other opposition forces have been a target of constant harassment, intimidation and cooptation. Many have lacked ideological clarity and cohesion and lacked capacity to effectively compete in multiparty elections, either at presidential, parliamentary or local government level.

It is important to take stock of the state of democracy on our continent and in specific countries. It is important to interrogate the factors that have low institutional development and lack of commitment to democratic values by the leaders of our countries. Why, for example, have erstwhile democrats turned dictators? Why are African leaders repudiating the constitutions they helped design? Why are African leaders extending their terms or removing constitutional term limits? Why have our ruling elites preoccupied with devising strategies of excluding large sections of the population from political participation, intolerant to dissenting views and bent on eliminating any forms of opposition? The answer to these questions lies in the nature and content of the multiparty democratic systems we have in place. We have come to glorify the form and not content of liberal democracy. It is important that we pay attention to the content of democracy if political participation has to be meaningful.

Democracy is only meaningful if people reasonably participate and their elected representatives articulate and represent their aspirations. Participatory democracy is where the people continuously engage in the political process

through voting, policy-formulation and hold their leaders to account. It is a continuous process and involves constant struggles over rights and duties. This African conference on participatory democracy could not have come at a better time than now, when the democracy project in Africa has seen so many reversals in countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya Madagascar, Zimbabwe and even Zambia. External power-sharing arrangements were imposed upon Kenya and Zimbabwe after incumbents attempted by incumbents provoked violence and political stalemates. The liberal democratic project appears to have run its course and there is need to seriously examine why democracy has faltered and what the left can do.

### **State of democracy in Zambia**

Democratisation in Zambia in the last few years can be described by its limitations. While Zambia was heralded as a model of peaceful transfer of power following the landmark elections of 1991 that saw the defeat of founding president Kenneth Kaunda it has regressed into a semi-authoritarian and intolerant regime. The MMD government that came to power on the banner of promoting transparency, good governance and the rule of law gone against most of the lofty ideals on which the pro-democracy struggle was waged. The problems facing Zambian democracy are located in an international context and set against the background of formal and informal institutional patterns carried forward from previous decades. While the multiparty system and holding of regular elections provides a veneer of international legitimacy, 65 percent of Zambians do not belong to a political party, while less than 50 percent have participated in Zambia's last major elections (1996, 2001, 2006 and 2008). In the 2008 presidential elections only 45 percent of registered voters participated representing only 32 percent of the eligible electorate.

Apart from poor electoral participation are issues of low weak political parties that are largely personalized. Zambia has about 45 registered political parties, with seven (Movement for Multiparty Democracy, Patriotic Front, United Party for National Development, United Liberal Party, Forum for Democracy and Development, United National Independence Party, National Democratic Focus) represented in parliament. The Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) has dominated Zambian politics since it came to power in November 1991. Between 1991 and 2001 MMD was highly dominant and Zambia was described a one-party dominant system, like South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique in the region controlling between 83 and 87 percent of the seats in parliament. But the situation changed following the 2001 elections when MMD's share of parliamentary seats dropped to 46 percent and the opposition had a majority of seats. But because of the First-Past-the-Post electoral system,

coupled with presidentialism, the MMD have retained power and were able to use advantages of incumbency to co-opt some opposition groups into the ruling coalition.

While the combined opposition seats were slightly greater than that of the MMD in both the 2001 and 2006, the MMD has continued to hold on to power based on the winner-take-all electoral system. In addition to the deficiencies of the FPTP system in Zambia which has privileged the ruling MMD and excluded significant political forces from partaking in political power. But importantly, the opposition in Zambia remains institutionally weak, fragmented and not well-rooted in the people. The major opposition groups, Patriotic Front (PF) and United Party for National Development (UPND) are not different from the ruling MMD in terms of ideological orientation and political practices. PF is now by far the biggest opposition party and led by a populist leader whose only grievance with MMD was that he was not allowed to be selected as presidential candidate in 2001. He has been able to use populist rhetoric to mobilize the political support of the urban poor and unemployed. Without a clear ideological agenda, Michael Sata performed reasonably well in the 2006 and 2008 presidential elections coming second to Levy Mwanawasa and Rupiah Banda respectively. In the 2008 presidential elections Michael Sata obtained 38 percent of the vote compared to Banda's 40 percent.

When one considers the performance of the opposition in Zambia in 2006 and 2008 there is a temptation to conclude that the country is consolidating as a democracy and that it can be described as competitive. What is not often discussed is the content of this democracy.

They are those who argue that democracy is only consolidated if there is alternation in power. When elections do not produce alternation, it is argued that a country cannot be said to be democratic in any meaningful sense.

However, in the context of Zambia the main political actors have no real commitment to democratic values. Their parties are not only personalized and undemocratic, but are not well-rooted in society. The ruling MMD and main opposition parties exhibit anti-democratic and undemocratic tendencies. The major political parties lack internal democracy. There is widespread intolerance to internal opposition and debate of party policy (PF leader has never been elected); competition for leadership nominal and election for leadership resented; little or no mass involvement of people in policy formulation; those who oppose the leadership or criticize party policy risk being expelled or not adopted as parliamentary candidates; most positions filled by appointment and not through elections and loyalty to the party leader as opposed to an ideology defines relationship between leaders and the rank and file.

Zambia's party system is characterized by dominant personalities, lack funding, lack of organizational presence, absence of clear ideological orientation and incapacity to mobilize social groups. Importantly, the main political parties espouse capitalism as the panacea to Zambia's development predicament. All the major political parties agree on liberalizing the economy and living the allocation of resources to market forces. This consensus on ideological orientation, which dismisses socialist and social democratic alternatives as unattainable and utopian has complicated the policy debate in Zambia. The defeat of world socialism following the collapse of the Soviet Union has kind of de-legitimised the debate for socialist orientation and de-mobilised progressive forces who had hoped to achieve their goals through the formal multi-party democratic institutions. But the newly created democratic structures were dominated by reactionary capitalist forces that re-defined rights to suit the interests of a few.

The dominance of capitalist institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in shaping economic and social policy in Zambia has reduced policy space and captured the initiatives and reduced internal capacity to devise economic and policies that were in the interest of the people. The dominance of capitalist ideology as in government policy has meant that the country has formulated public policies that have been injurious to the mass of the people. Liberalization of the economy and introduction of structural adjustment programmes has had the effect of demobilizing the working class through retrenchments, creating mass unemployment through the closure of state companies, reduction of wages and other workers' benefits, and mass deprivation of the poor. Liberalization has also demobilized the trade union movement and other popular forces that had derived some of their militancy from existence of a large number of state employees and a post-colonial social compact between trade unions and the nationalist state. In Zambia today hundreds of people are engaged in a permanent struggle for everyday existence. The country is littered with thousands of small-scale traders, known as *tuntembas* who eke a living on barest of income. In 2008, 80 percent of the Zambian population lived below two US dollars a day, while life expectancy is one of the lowest in the world at 38 years. Living conditions have deteriorated to an extent that more than 70 percent of the population lack basic amenities such as water and sanitation. Social indicators have deteriorated in the last ten to fifteen years to an extent that they are only comparable to a country engaged in war.

However, in terms of performance on the liberal capitalist index Zambia is praised as an emerging economy. It has attracted more than US\$3 billion direct foreign investment in the last four years, inflation is at its lowest (9%) in the last 30 years, exchange rates are stable and the copper mining sector has recorded

unprecedented production. Yet, very little employment is being created in the economy; social and living conditions remain precarious for the majority of Zambians; poverty remains unresolved; inequality in income and wealth is high; infrastructure is in a state of disrepair; many parts of the country are impassible and thousands of Zambians die of preventable diseases, such as malaria.

### **Left organizations and their role in political struggles**

The future prospects for democracy in Zambia signal fatal erosion in the short to medium term. Participatory democracy is not possible without the involvement of the left and other progressive or popular forces. As it is the dominant forces in our political system are parties that do not represent the popular classes, such as the poor, working classes and the peasantry. While the all the major political parties appropriate the discourse of socialism by claiming to represent the interests of the poor and put poverty as their main policy agenda the content of their policies is anti-workers and anti-poor. The MMD government that came to power on the back of the trade union movement and the Zambian working class has unashamedly prosecuted economic and social policies that has destroyed jobs, reduced incomes, exacerbated inequality and favoured the capitalist class.

The left in Zambia is small, fragmented and without a coherent organization. Leftist political parties that emerged in the early 1990s have disappeared and those that still remain exist on the fringes of the Zambian political landscape. Since 1996 efforts have been made to unify left forces into an organization and these efforts are still on-going. Left and progressive organizations, such as trade unions, cooperative associations, youth organizations and civil society organization have been engaged in fighting for democratic space to influence political and economic reform in the direction that would benefit the majority of the Zambian people.

The Zambian trade union movement that had forged links with the MMD in the early 1990s now finds itself in an unenviable position of having to fight for workers' rights from within. The integration of the trade unions in the ruling coalition in Zambia and the destruction of the state sector have combined to weaken their bargaining power and influence on public policy. Trade unions have continued to wage consistent struggles for workers rights and joined other progressive forces in voicing out their concerns on matters that affect the majority of the Zambian people, who include the poor and working classes. In the last five years the trade union movement has taken political positions on the nature of government they desire and have worked to influence electoral outcomes.

But the challenge facing Zambia today is the construction of a viable left political alternative. As a matter of fact, objective conditions exist for the organization of a coherent left political alternative in Zambia. The mass poverty facing the majority of the Zambian people and mass deprivation and destitution provide an opportunity for organization. The unemployment and underemployment, with only 10 percent of the labour force employed in the formal sector this is another opportunity for left and progressive forces strategic intervention.

While there is no political party in Zambia that is expressly leftist in both ideological orientation and mobilization, there are leftist-oriented and progressive organizations that have been advancing a left agenda for the past 19 years. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) led by committed communists, who had originally formed a socialist formation, have been working in the last four years to create a left platform to propagate and encourage a leftist political alternative. Its long-term agenda is to create an alternative society in Zambia that is socialist and to provide ideological content to policy debates. Specifically, CPD is committed, with other progressive forces in Zambia, to achieve the following:

- Create platform for a left discourse on socialism as an alternative;
- Provide socialist ideological content to policy debates;
- Challenge capitalist policy prescriptions in government public policies and fight to influence policy orientation to ensure it reflects the interests of the poor and working class;
- Help form a left political formation that would organize for political power;

CPD is not naïve to the fact that organizing the left is not an easy and trouble-free affair. It will require struggle, it will involve political and personal sacrifice and it will come with enormous costs. We are alive to the fact that organisational funds will be required and not easily be provided by those organizations and governments who subscribe to capitalism. We know that it will take time and effort to change the consciousness of our people to realize that socialism is the only answer. Under the current political circumstances, a socialist alternative is the only one that can be popularly accepted. It is only a left political formation that will be able to provide content to popular struggles for democracy.

### **Conclusion: what is to be done**

There are several tasks that should occupy the African left and the Zambian left in particular. First, the immediate task of the Zambian left is to provide class bases to political mobilization. We believe the poor and working class will need a political party promote and represent their class interests. A party that

represents the class interests of the capitalist class (such as the MMD) cannot be expected to promote interests of the poor and working class.

Second, there is need to address the national question to ensure that the country does not end up in civil strife due to inequitable distribution of national wealth. Since 2001, political mobilization has tended to ethnic and regional. A closer examination of the social bases of the main opposition parties suggests that they have relied exclusively on ethnic support. This narrow nationalism can be dangerous to forging a stable nation-state and nationalism. There is need to ignite class political mobilization to drown narrow ethnic nationalism which in conditions of poverty can act to destabilize national cohesion.

Third, a left agenda for promotion of democracy is to organize all the popular forces, including youth, student and women's organizations. The struggles of the poor and working people will need to be coordinated by ensuring that they have a common policy platform. Currently, these energies have not been harnessed and coordinated to create a critical mass of left forces for the country.

Fourth, the left will need to coordinate their activities and network with international left forces and fraternal organizations to be effective. CPD welcomes the establishment of the Africa Left Network as timely and an important step in energizing the African left. Coming at the time of a crisis in world capitalism, there is need to put socialism firmly on the political agenda. In the spirit of this conference, we call for the democratization of the Africa Left Network by the creation of democratic structures that will include all the important the regions of Africa.

Lastly, CPD is fully committed to working with other left forces in Africa in creating a viable socialist alternative. We strongly believe that socialism is possible in our lifetime. We realize that we need to analyze and understand the concrete economic realities that create and opportunities for a left alternative. While others doubt the viability of the idea of socialism, we are convinced that given the failure of capitalism to resolve the fundamental social contradictions of our time, we are convinced that socialism is the only solution.

We believe that the SACP occupies an important political space in galvanizing left forces on the continent. This leadership is invaluable and it will inspire us. We thank SACP for the invitation to participate in the Workshop on Participatory Democracy and defining the tasks and challenges of the

African left. We salute the Swedish Left Party (VIF) for their collaboration and generous support in promoting the Africa Left Network.