

THE 2011 ZAMBIA ELECTIONS WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE WORKERS?

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The 2011 elections in Zambia have come and gone and the country now has a new president, a new government and most importantly, democracy carried the day. As expected the race was always going to be tough and the candidates took it down to the wire. In spite of ten presidential candidates having been nominated, the election almost certainly was a two horse race. The main protagonists included former president Rupiah Banda of the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) and the new president Michael Chilufya Sata of the Patriotic Front (PF). Tilyenji Kaunda of United Independence Party (UNIP) and Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND) were the two other candidates who deserve mention outside of the pacesetters' group. Most other parties were definitely too small and weak and barely existed beyond their leadership.

MMD LEGACY

From 1991, the MMD dominated the Zambian political landscape. The MMD entered power as a broad-based coalition of mainly trade unions, students, the church, and other civil society organizations with a promise to ensconce important political and economic reform that would benefit the majority of Zambian people, with a socialist orientation given their trade union background. Twenty years after coming to power the government that had promised a lot to the workers and the poor had greatly peregrinated in the opposite direction. The Fredrick Chiluba¹ led administration embarked on a free market fundamentalist approach to economic management which they pursued without much compunction. The MMD embarked on one of the most radical and fast tracked privatization programmes the African continent has ever witnessed. Most social partners, particularly in the labour movement, argued that consultation was inadequate in implementing the market liberalization policies.² These policies saw the macroeconomic environment in Zambia become more unhinged. Even the late MMD leader, Levy Mwanawasa was forced to admit that privatisation of crucial state enterprises led to increased poverty levels amongst the ordinary people, asset stripping , job losses and that there has been no significant benefit to the country. This was after the Chiluba

¹ * Frederick Chiluba was the first leader of the MMD and successfully contested against the long time independence leader Kenneth Kaunda

² Seshamani, V. and Kaunga, E: (1999) Employment and labour markets during adjustment. Zambia" in Van der Geest, W. & van der Hoeven, R. eds. (1999), Adjustment, employment and missing institutions in Africa. The experience of Eastern and Southern Africa. ILO, Geneva, Switzerland

administration sold 257 of 280 state firms from 1992 to 2002.³ The labour unions, particularly the ZCTU decried that economic liberalisation failed dismally to create new jobs as promised and instead unemployment rates went frighteningly up particularly in the 1990s. By 1999 formal employment, which represented 75% of the labour force in 1975, declined to 10.3%.⁴ Some keen observers and strong critics of the MMD's reign have even gone further to accuse the party of defenestrating the 'socialist' legacy of Kenneth Kaunda who had led the country since 1964.

Twenty years after assuming power in a dramatic election upset of Kaunda's government, the MMD was faced with a battle to defend its own neoliberal economic track record, which many observers agree, has taken a toll on employees, particularly mineworkers, their families and communities who endure bad working and living conditions as well as slave wages. There are serious allegations that privatization was implemented without regard for the laws governing labour, common consequences, and the future sustainability of the mining industry and other former state sectors. The MMD also had to defend its position against a reputation of rampant corruption and an increased suppression of dissent. Such a reputation was justified by observations that the government poked its nose a lot into the business of labour movements to the extent of influencing the election of labour leaders. In recent years the MMD was once again at loggerheads with unionists over allegations of violating international conventions on labour. Some of the conventions have been ratified by the Zambian government. For example, the MMD administration stopped people who are not in employment from representing workers as trade union leaders. Amendment of the labour laws has also seen the mushrooming of 'yellow' unions which are said to have been collaborating with the MMD government in destabilizing 'genuine' labour unions with workers' interests at heart. This is after the MMD government changed the clause that allowed the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZaCTU) to be the only labour federation in Zambia. On the other hand, unions have lamented the reluctance of many new foreign investors to negotiate with trade unions arguing that there were now too many of these unions and thus negotiations had become too unwieldy. One direct result of such a situation has been the increase in casualisation of labour or total hostility to unionism by certain companies.

Amidst all the inadequacies, the MMD could also be granted justifiable encomiums for steering the Zambian economic ship into a strait of real growth for the first time since the generalized economic collapse of the 1970s. In the second half of the first decade of the 21st century Zambia's copper and agricultural outputs soared to over 7.6% by the end of 2010.⁵ The agricultural output was the biggest ever recorded in Zambia, with maize production reaching an estimated 2.8 million tons.⁶ The World Bank added colour to an impressive economic growth by elevating the country to a 'middle income economy' along with Ghana

³ BBC News. (2003) Zambia to re-think privatization. 11 February. Internet: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2749219.stm> (Accessed on 07/09/2011).

⁴ GRZ. (2005). National Employment and Labour Market Policy. Lusaka, Zambia.

⁵ Redvers, L. (2010) The rise and rise of China in Zambia. September 9. OSISA. Internet: <http://www.osisa.org/economic-justice/zambia/rise-and-rise-china-zambia>. (Accessed on 10/09/2011).

⁶ The Africa Report (2011). Zambia-Regional Breadbasket. No. 26.

in West Africa.⁷ This economic growth remains an exclusive privilege for a small rich section of the Zambian society together with foreign investors, whilst a few morsels fall for the slowly rising middle-class. Prevailing unequal income distribution patterns have meant that poverty levels remained unnerving amongst the toiling working class people and the rural hoi polloi. Most mine workers still earn paltry salaries averaging less than 500000 Zambian Kwachas per month.⁸ Eighty percent of Zambians live in poverty of which 63% live on less than \$1.25 per day.⁹ While the government was fixated with impressive economic growth statistics little was moving on the ground to ensure that these groups of people also benefited.

PATRIOTIC FRONT VICTORY-WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE WORKERS?

The biggest challenge to MMD's hold on power was undisputedly, Michael Sata of the PF. Sata lost the last presidential election in 2006 to the late Levy Mwanawasa of the MMD. Sata had 29% of the votes while Mwanawasa garnered 43%. In a 2008 special by election, Sata ran again on the off-chance that he might tip the scales against Mwanawasa's successor, Rupiah Banda. Again Sata narrowly lost by only 35 000 votes in a tightly contested race. He came into the 2011 bout licking his wounds from three previous defeats at the hands of the MMD, but yet battle-hardened and boasting a wealth of experience from the time he served in the governments of both Kenneth Kaunda (UNIP) and Frederick Chiluba (MMD). In another tightly contested race, endurance and a consistently pro-poor campaign finally paid off for Sata as he swept to victory in the 2011 elections. Sata won by 43% of the total votes against Rupiah Banda's 36.1 %.¹⁰

Sata and his PF's approach to the election sounded soothing to the ears of the downtrodden Zambian workers and the poor people in general. During the campaigns, PF adopted a 'populist' anti-neoliberal stance castigating foreign investors particularly the Chinese, who stand accused of doing little to alleviate the lives of ordinary Zambians. An economic relation with the resource ravenous Chinese economy is indeed a headache for the trade unions. Between 2000 and 2010, Sino-Zambian economic relations increased by leaps and bounds. Chinese investment in Zambia amounted to USD\$1.2 billion in 2009 alone.¹¹ The PF's pre-election campaign was sharp-tongued and more often than not, took a swipe at Chinese investment in Africa's number one copper producer. It however remains to be seen how the new government will strike a balance between retaining investor confidence and delivering on the promises of 'putting money in the pockets of Zambians' by ensuring that some of the big profits generated by investors remain in Zambia for the majority's benefit. The call for "change" by the PF party was met with mixed feelings by some in the labour movements,

⁷ World Bank (2011) How we classify countries. WB list of economies. July 18. Internet: <http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-classifications>. (Accessed on 13/09/2011).

⁸ This amount averages to USD100 as of 05/10/2011.

⁹ U.S. Department of State (2011) Background note: Zambia. Bureau for African Affairs. Internet: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2359.htm>. (Accessed on 10/09/2011).

¹⁰ Africa Review (2011) Zambia laps up world praise after Sata win. Internet: <http://www.africareview.com/News/Zambia+laps+up+world+praise+after+Sata+win/-/979180/1242292/-/jqhh6rz/-/index.html>. (Accessed on 26/09/2011).

¹¹ New York Times (2010) Zambia Uneasily Balances Chinese Investment and Workers' Resentment. Internet: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/world/africa/21zambia.html>. (Accessed on 25/09/2011).

like the Mineworkers Union of Zambia (MUZ) who felt that the PF manifesto did not provide enough new ideas to improve the mining sector and indeed the working and living conditions of the mineworkers. Yet the most consoling factor that appears to give the PF an edge over its contenders, especially with respect to the workers, is the party's leadership which has a rich history in labour circles and a reputation for being 'action orientated people' - all the more reason why Sata earned himself the nickname "King Cobra" among the Zambian populace. Action is something that they promised to bring to the new government if elected.

Action to deal with unruly and exploitative foreign investors was always welcome to ensure that the majority of Zambians, particularly the toiling workers, also benefit from the growing economic cake. This is exactly what the Zambian workers looked forward to after years of the MMD government's obtrusion in labour politics and meddlesome behaviour with regard to labour laws that confounded union activities and indeed the workers' ability to assert their rights. In addition, PF also has Fackson Shamenda in their lineup. Shamenda won the Ndola central parliamentary seat for PF in the bustling Copperbelt city of Ndola. Way before the election, he was tipped for the Minister of Labour portfolio in the event of a PF election victory. Shamenda has 'seen it all' as far as labour politics is concerned. He is former president of the ZaCTU, former president of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and also Union Network International-Africa (UNI-Africa) regional secretary. In the run up to the election, Shamenda was very critical of neoliberalism and the interventionist relationship between ZaCTU and the ruling party MMD. One other factor, not to be ignored about Zambian urban areas, which the PF's populist approach exploited, has to do with the great number of unemployed youths and informal sector traders who are displeased by years of MMD's empty promises and slow pace in alleviating their lives. The informal sector, according to estimates by the Alliance for Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA), could easily be employing seventy percent of Zambia's working age population. This is another major factor that could have tilted the votes against MMD.

At the end of it all there was no doubt that PF would make a killing in the regions of Ndola, Kitwe and Lusaka as the MMD got its comeuppance for its failure to address the deteriorating lives of informal traders, unemployed youths and the workers.

It remains to be seen whether the new government of Zambia can turn the electoral campaign promises into action.

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