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A rare story of hope: Zambia's democratic turnaround

A surprising election victory in Zambia has morphed into a beacon of hope not only for its people, but for all of Southern Africa

On 24 August 2021, Hakainde Hichilema took oath of office as Zambia's seventh president since independence. Hichilema, leader of the then opposition, United Party for National Development (UPND) defeated incumbent President Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front by almost 1 million votes obtaining 2,852,348 against Lungu's 1,870,780. This landslide victory by an opposition party is a rare sight in Africa where incumbents routinely rig elections to obtain runaway victories of over 80 per cent of the votes.

Months before Zambia's general elections, it was inconceivable that an opposition party would win. They faced all sorts of restrictions during their campaign. The Covid-19 restrictions were also applied to disadvantage the opposition. The police were under instruction to prevent Hichilema from campaigning in areas considered ruling party strongholds – which included Eastern, Northern, Copperbelt and Lusaka.

While most of the political violence was provoked by the ruling Patriotic Front supporters, the situation was framed to show that the violence was being perpetrated by the opposition UPND. The case in point was the Kanyama constituency violence that resulted in two deaths and was used to try to get the UPND disqualified from the election. The Electoral Commission of Zambia lacked public trust to deliver a free, fair, and credible election. Hence, there was increased vigilance because of fears that the election results would be manipulated.

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At first, the deployment of the military on 1 August caused consternation in the population, as they feared that President Edgar Lungu would not concede defeat or would use it to suppress any public protests in the event of

fraud.

disputed election results. As it turned out, however, the Zambian military played an important role in thwarting some attempts at electoral fraud. One senior military source interviewed indicated that they 'had a plan to protect the constitution and not an individual.' And on 16 August, President Edgar Lungu conceded defeat. While he had two days earlier complained that the election was 'neither free nor fair', he changed his mind after mediation from the former Tanzanian president and former Sierra Leonean president.

Election fiasco

There are at least four reasons that explain the opposition victory in Zambia. First, Zambia's 2021 presidential election was more of a plebiscite – a referendum – than a normal election. It was a rejection of the Patriotic Front (PF) and Edgar Lungu, rather than the result of a well-organized UPND campaign. This is because UPND and Hakainde Hichilema hardly campaigned, as they faced a myriad of restrictions.

Thus, Hichilema won in areas where he didn't even campaign. People responded to the clarion call for change. A large voter turnout of more than 70 per cent, signified a determination to deliver a decisive verdict on the performance of the PF government. In his acceptance speech, Hichilema said: 'The people decided it was time for change and today we can boldly say that change is here'.

The election result was a plebiscite in two other important respects. It was a referendum on Lungu's third term bid and his choice of running mate, former Minister of Fisheries, Nkandu Luo. Lungu's desire for a third term was unpopular in his party and in the nation at large. But he forced his way by threatening judges of Zambia's constitutional court and securing a controversial judgment that 'he was eligible,' with one dissenting judge declaring he was not.

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The choice of running mate divided his own party. Consequently, in his perceived strongholds dissatisfaction led many PF supporters to vote for the opposition leader, Hichilema and the UPND. But there were also other deep-seated factional wrangles in the PF, such as the dominance of the MMD in party structures and the manner in which adoption

for parliamentary, mayoral, and council nominations were held.

Deep rooted problems

Another factor was the poor economic performance of the last few years. Zambia's economy has seen a precipitous decline in the last seven years. The real GDP growth rate dropped from 6 per cent in 2014 to -4.0 per cent in 2020, external debt was in excess of USD 12bn, the ILO estimates youth unemployment was as high as 60 per cent, while the cost of living was so high that many Zambians were unable to afford a meal a day. Under Lungu's rule Zambia was classified the third hungriest country in the world.

Furthermore, corruption had become so endemic that the country's investigative agencies, such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and Drug Enforcement Commission, had almost become moribund. Public funds were abused with such impunity that those involved in corruption, even when named, were neither required to resign nor fired from their positions. Two ministers, involved in corruption and brought before the courts were allowed to keep their ministerial positions and President Lungu defended their innocence. Many cases of corruption were never prosecuted giving the impression there was nothing wrong with corruption.

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Finally, the erosion of democracy and human rights under the PF decade in office caused the democratic space to shrink. Citizens were harassed and brutalised by police for exercising their right of expression, assembly, and association. Media organisations critical of the regime were censured, harassed, or closed down. Fear was the order of the day, as people were unable to exercise basic rights, such as freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association and assembly or freedom to hold public demonstrations. The archaic Public Order Act was used selectively and unfairly against citizens and organisations.

The 2021 Amnesty International report sums up Zambia's human rights situation under the PF government as having deteriorated markedly '...(that) (t)he persistent disregard of human rights by the authorities has led to the creation of a general climate of fear and repression'.

Lessons for the region and Africa

The Zambian story, of an opposition party defeating an entrenched and authoritarian ruling party is rare in Africa and in the developing world in general. People have become accustomed to incumbents rigging elections and winning by incredible margins. The opposition victory in Zambia has inspired opposition parties in the Southern African region that it is possible to change governments through the ballot box. It has shown there is a wind of change blowing in Southern Africa. And this wind of change is driven by young people.

In his inaugural speech President Hichilema acknowledged that: 'This victory is not mine, but for all the citizens of our great country, especially the youths, who turned out to vote in great numbers, with great energy and passion and made this day possible'.

There are three important lessons for the region and Africa from the opposition victory in Zambia. These include: first, a large voter turnout has potential to contribute to political change, especially when preceded by a robust voter registration capturing first-time voters; second, there is value in investing in parallel vote tabulation that covers all the 12,152 polling stations as it minimizes electoral manipulation; third, the presence of international observers to mediate in an event an incumbent is unwilling to concede defeat is crucial to avoid losing incumbents clinging on to power.

The huge victory by Hakainde Hichilema brings with it a sea of expectations. Though it is not expected that he will fulfil all of his election campaign promises, the Zambian public will want to see the fixing of economy, tackling of corruption, providing jobs, and addressing the high cost of living among his key policy priorities.



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