

Role of Civil Society in Democratisation: A Case Study of Zambia

By

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Democratisation, in contemporary politics has been considered a sine-qua-non of political maturity and modernisation. However, the process of democratisation involves not just the transition to democracy but also its subsequent consolidation. While scholars across the world have deliberated on the requisites of accomplishing democratisation, most concede that the process requires a crucial role to be played by the civil society. Zambia has served as a case in point. Democratisation process in Zambia has been considered by most as a success story. The electoral defeat of the United National Independence Party (UNIP) under the leadership of Kenneth Kaunda after twenty-seven years of rule and the abolition of the one-party state were primarily instigated by mass-based popular movements. The subsequent multi-party elections on 31st October 1991 ushered the regime of another political party the ‘Movement for Multi-Party Democracy’ (MMD) and led to peaceful change of government.

The present paper argues that in the light of the recent democratic election of President Rupiah Banda, the existence of an alert and strong civil society would remain crucial for Zambia. It would be an imperative to keep in mind the lessons learnt from the mass movement of the 1990s, against the regime of Kenneth Kaunda. For the purpose, the paper proposes a case study of the role of the civil society in the processes of democratisation and re-democratisation in Zambia in the 1960s and 1990s respectively. The paper would highlight certain challenges faced by the civil society in remaining an

important democratic player in Zambia and conclude with the prospects for the near future.

Scholars have defined the civil society as an arena of action and interaction, operating from spaces between the family, the state, and the private sector. It exists in the plural, as it is cross-cutting in its approaches to sectors and issues, and absorbent and reflective of a basically unlimited range of interests, purposes and influences. As an arena of action and interaction, civil society is shaped, first, by the nature of the needs and interests it responds to, and, second, by the specific environment that determines its rooms for manoeuvre, for mobilisation, co-operation, articulation and influence.¹ Civil society in Zambia has been shaped by a history of authoritarian traditions, first during the colonial area, later-on during one-party rule in a welfare state. For several decades, therefore, civil society was largely restricted to activity within the agendas and control of the state. However, some membership-based organisations and institutions with well established traditions eventually formed the nucleus of a powerful citizens' movement that eventually lead to a peaceful political transition.

The Historical Setting: The Republic of Zambia was declared on 24th October 1964, under the leadership of Kaunda's UNIP. Scholars observe that political life in Zambia at this time was paradoxical in nature as on the one hand, political power was centered in the hands of the President, at the same time it was diffused among many offices. In 1973, the old constitution was abrogated in favour of a new one, which emphasised on a strong President, a unicameral legislative assembly, formulation of national policies by the Central Committee of the UNIP, and the President of the UNIP to be the President of Zambia, who in turn would be nominated by the UNIP General Council. Following the Chona recommendation for one-party participatory democracy the Second Republic was established in 1968. Though Kaunda condemned human exploitation and laid the foundation of Zambian Humanism to promote central planning, preservation of traditional African values like trust, loyalty to the communists and mutual aid, strong education system, affirmative action for the poor and so on, he largely remained inclined towards authoritarian tendencies. He relied on repression though opposition was tolerated

within the party as well as from the non-governmental platforms. Kaunda firmly entrenched the Presidential system and his presidential powers were vast. He never abolished the state of emergency which had been promulgated during the rising of the Lumpa sect in 1964. During the whole of his rule, parliament remained at best a platform to let off steam and at worst an inert mass.ⁱⁱ

Civil Unrest and Mobilisation: By the 1970s however, the civil society in Zambia began to mobilize against the Kaunda regime. This involved not only the political parties but also intellectual groups, businessmen, sections of mineworkers and trade unionists.

The *causes* for the grievance maybe highlighted at this juncture:

- Incapacity of the one-party rule to combat declining economic fortunes of Zambia,
- Inflation and instability: Zambia depends for its foreign exchange and government income on the copper mines. The massive increase in the price of oil in the 1970s was coupled by a slump in the price of copper which culminated in a serious slump in Zambian export earnings. The underlying strength of the economy was impaired. Food prices began to soar and unemployment was rampant.
- Though Kaunda had consistently tried to co-opt the opposition on as broad a front as possible, he could not cope with the decline in resources to distribute.

Nature of the Protest: The civil society was fiercely active in its protest especially in urban areas. The evidences of the government's mismanagement of economy and malpractices further discredited the regime. There was an increasing demand for the introduction of multi-party system. By February 1990, two trade unionists called for a referendum on the one-party state because the apathy in party elections was a sign that enthusiasm for one-party system had been eroded to an unacceptable degree. The MMD mobilised a cross-section of the civil society. In other words, the continuing of political protests in Zambia found a legitimate platform under the MMD. There were prominent UNIP politicians, elite sections of the population, trade union leaders and even religious factions. Churches took the initiative of establishing their own monitoring organisations:

the Zambian Elections Monitoring Coordinating Committee. This was supported by the *Law Association of Zambia*; the *Press Association of Zambia* and the *Women's Lobby Group*. Factors outside Zambian society also played a significant role. The international institutions legitimised MMD. The resistance to one-party system was also supported by the judiciary's impartial nature. Scholars thus opine that the call for multi-party system should not be seen as a sudden break with the past but rather as a logical expression of opposition which had always been there.ⁱⁱⁱ

The re-introduction of multi-party system bore testimony to the success of the active intervention of the civil society. Though Kaunda tried to forge a national consensus on political reform through a broadly composed commission, the MMD refused such encapsulation by Kaunda in a national forum and opted for a strategy of maximising demands. On 30th November, 1990 the Parliament voted unanimously for a constitutional amendment which made the introduction of multi-party system possible. This was ratified by Kaunda in December. The Mvunga Commission reported on the re-introduction of multi-party system at the end of April 1991 and the new features of governance were articulated. Elections were organised on 31st October 1991 by the Zambian government itself as the state of emergency had not been repealed. The election resulted in an overwhelming victory for Chiluba and MMD which won 125 out of the 150 Parliamentary seats.

Growth in the Role of Civil Society: Civil society organisations have continued to grow in Zambia since the 1990s. In addition to a consolidation of established key players, a plethora of new organisations, umbrellas and formal or informal networks have been entering the scene. By 2003, in a country of some ten million people, about ten thousand civil society organisations have been registered, making up even double as many with their branches. They have addressed a wide range of issues concerning development; from eradication of poverty, governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. A recent example of civil society participation would be in the context of formulating *Zambia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)*, where a large network was formed, cross-cutting in its sector-specific, regional and topical dimensions. It involved a process

of consultation between the civil society and government. Eventually, a major national policy paper was formed largely shaped by knowledge and experience gained within civil society.

The media is an important civil societal force in Zambia and has played a crucial role in developing a much more open society. Although far from being totally free, the media in Zambia has been far freer than it was in the 27 years from independence in 1964 to the 1991 electoral defeat of Kaunda and the UNIP. Though the MMD continued to control the *Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation* as a state broadcaster during the 1990s, it did open up the airwaves to other voices. The number of radio receivers in Zambia grew from 760,000 in 1994 to 1,000,000 in 1996. Television grew more slowly, rising from 245,000 receivers in 1994 to 270,000 in 1996.^{iv} In 2002 there were four newspapers in Zambia: the state-owned *Zambia Daily Mail* and the *Times of Zambia*; *The Post*, which is independent; and the UNIP-owned *Sunday Times of Zambia*. Recently, to counter governmental control, each of these papers took advantage of technology and started publishing online editions. Thus, Zambians now have access to competing and opposing voices. The private press has taken upon itself the role of public watchdog and defender of freedom and the truth and criticism of the government is no longer a crime.

Challenges to the Role of Civil Society: Robert A Dahl had written if ‘ordinary citizens cannot exert a relatively high degree of control over the leaders, then the minimal threshold of democracy has not been reached.’^v Though the role of the civil society in Zambia has continued to grow, a robust participation of the civil society in Zambia is still impeded by certain factors. These have been analysed by leading research scholars and maybe highlighted as follows^{vi}:

- There is a lack of institutionalised mechanisms for citizens’ participation in decision-making other than elections and political parties. Government and administrative structures are highly centralised. Even entirely local concerns have to be brought to the attention of provincial or national level.
- The relationship of government and civil society has been confrontational with regard to issues of governance, participation, human rights and the rule of law.

- The heavy dependence of civil society organisations on donors results in a highly competitive environment and places serious constraints on home-grown strategies for development.
- Organisational and monetary constraints often force them to serve their own survival needs and compromise on larger goals of development and change.
- A vast majority of civil society organisations are based at national level, and do not have local representation.
- Nationally or internationally based organisations that operate in rural areas, have a tendency to implement prescribed programmes. Frequently, these do not sufficiently respond to local needs and take into account local knowledge, interest and level of organisation.
- There is a definite lack of efficient coordination and collaboration within and between sectors of activity, regions and issues. In the same area, activities often duplicate efforts or contradict each other. Collisions of NGO activity with structures of community based organisations are common.
- Though the Zambian media remains one of the most vibrant in Africa, access to it remains limited because of illiteracy, poverty, inability to afford newspapers, and the costs of radio and television. Moreover, poverty and the lack of electricity have kept the electronic media out of the reach of a majority of Zambia's citizens.

Need for Civil Society Participation and Prospects: Despite the process of re-democratisation, Zambia has continued to face certain concrete challenges to its democratic consolidation which include political crises of governability, complex legislative process, the explicit lack of impartiality and fairness in the electoral process (for example, the UNIP boycotted the election in 1996) on the one hand and deteriorating social conditions on the other like widening gender inequality, falling life expectancy (in the first half of 1990s it had fallen to thirty seven years), malnourishment of children, the rising AIDS pandemic, maltreatment of Zambian casual labour in the Chinese industries and so on. The government has largely been unable to address these issues comprehensively. It has also been noted that the Zambian government is failing to

address the life-threatening obstacles to Zambian women with HIV, who experience gender based and domestic violence. “*Hidden in the Mealie Meal: Gender- based Abuses and Women’s HIV treatment in Zambia*”, as a 96 paged document shows how the government has fallen short of international legal obligations to combat violence and discrimination against women.^{vii} Moreover, Zambia experienced streaks of authoritarian rule under President Mwana Wasa from 2001 to 2008. In 2007, the Zambian government expressly sought to curb the role of the civil society by introducing a bill to the Parliament, which sought government regulations over the work and arena of action of non-government organisations. The *Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders* considered that the adoption of this draft law would blatantly violate regional and international instruments on human rights that guarantee freedom of association, in particular the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights and the provisions of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1998.^{viii}

With the change in the Presidency and the democratic election of Rupiah Banda, Zambian civil society must assume an active role as an imperative for limiting and regulating both the intensity and competition between different groups within the society and the exercise of power by the government. Maintaining of social values and institutions will also help to provide a popular base for democratic government. It is thus, of extreme significance that the civil society in Zambia retains its strength to formulate a vision for political, economic and social development. It must facilitate wide dissemination of information and initiate debate on legal and human rights, governance, with a particular focus on rural areas, women, girls and youth and suggest ways of their enforcement. Civil society organisations must strengthen organisational infrastructure to ensure the successful planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes even at the grassroots level. It may be hoped that the civil society would continue to act as a vanguard for Zambia’s democracy.

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Dr. Sabine Fiedler-Conradi, *Civil Society in Zambia, Study Conducted to Inform a Focal Area Strategy Paper “Strengthening Civil Society in Zambia”*, Commissioned by the German Development Service (DED), Lusaka / Munich, February and March, 2003, accessed electronically at, http://zambia.ded.de/cipp/ded/lib/pub/object/downloadfile.lang,2/oid,2750/ticket.g_u_e_s_t/~/Studie_Civil_Society_in_Zambia.pdf, on July 1, 2009.
- ⁱⁱ Jan Kees van Donge; "Zambia: Kaunda and Chilluba: Enduring Patterns of Political Culture", in John A. Wiseman (ed.) *Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 196.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 198.
- ^{iv} ‘Zambia Press, Media, Television, Radio, Newspapers’, Press Reference, information accessed electronically at <http://www.pressreference.com/Uz-Z/Zambia.html>, on July 10, 2009.
- ^v Richard Joseph, "Challenges of a Frontier Region", *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 19, Number 2, April 2008, Washington D.C, p. 96
- ^{vi} Dr. Sabine Fiedler-Conradi, *op. cit.*
- ^{vii} *African Chronicle*, Volume IX, Number 1, Jan 1-14, 2008, New Delhi. pp 2507-2508.
- ^{viii} ‘Zambia: A Restrictive Bill on Civil Society Activities Currently under Debate in Parliament’, July 23, 2007, accessed electronically at <http://www.fidh.org/Zambia-A-restrictive-bill-on-civil>, on July 1, 2009.
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