

Elections in Zambia: What is at stake for the new government?

Edgar Lungu was inaugurated as the President of Zambia on 13th September 2016 following a Constitutional Court ruling against the Opposition which had challenged his victory. Fr. Leonard Chiti, SJ, director of Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) based in Lusaka, Zambia and Chair person of The Zambia Elections Information Centre (ZEIC) Council of Elders looks at the elections in Zambia and implications for the new government.

On 11th August 2016, Zambia held a general election to elect new councillors, members of parliament, mayors and a President. At the same time, a referendum to adopt an expanded Bill of Rights was held. Voting on Election Day went smoothly with a 56% voter turnout, which is quite robust given that only last year in January 2015, turnout was estimated at 33%.

Several weeks before the elections, I gave an interview to a local daily where I stated that the results of the August election might mirror results of an election that took place in January 2015 to replace the late President Michael Sata who died in October 2014. The paper went on publish an article whose title was: ‘It is a two horse race, says Fr Chiti.’

The article obviously did not please some of the presidential candidates. One of them publicly criticized me. On Monday, 15th August 2016, the chairperson of an independent Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) announced the results of the election indicating that the ruling party, the Patriotic Front (PF), had won the Presidency with a 50.4% of the total votes validly cast. The nearest Presidential candidate from the United Party for National Development (UPND), Hakainde Hichilema, polled 47.7%. Under the amended constitution, a winning presidential candidate needs to get more than 50% of the votes to be declared winner.

The PF also garnered the majority of seats in parliament as well as those of mayors and local councillors. Not surprisingly, the UPND challenged the results in the Constitutional Court. The Court ruled in favour of the President-elect and PF’s Edgar Chagwa Lungu was inaugurated as president on 13th September 2016.

The key issues in the election revolved around the poor performance of the economy in recent years, with Gross Domestic Product (GDP), expected to fall to 3.5% against a projected 6% at the end of 2015. The high cost of living as measured by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR), basic needs basket (BNB) shooting up to USD 400 for low-income families whose minimum wage is a paltry USD 100. Jobs were also lost at the beginning of 2016. To many observers 2016 looked like a ‘change election’ with a real prospect for an opposition leader winning the Presidency. In the event, PF was returned to power. Voters chose continuity over change. To me this represents a situation where voters chose their leaders on sentiment and predisposition rather than critically examining issues.

In their campaigns, PF claimed that they had delivered on electoral promises made five years ago. They pointed to the construction of new roads, schools, and hospitals as a demonstration that they had lived up to their promises. They also pointed to an amended constitution as delivered on an electoral campaign of facilitating a ‘people driven constitution’, which actually turned out to be a “parliament driven constitution” passed in parliament against the wishes of the people.

UPND on the other hand claimed PF had failed to manage the economy with the high cost of living as an example. The party also points to the chaotic mining policies, which have contributed to the poor performance of the sector as an example of PF failure. Copper mining brings in the bulk of Zambia's foreign earnings. With his background as a successful business, the leader of UPND presented himself as a viable alternative who would turn around the economy, reduce the suffering of people and sort out the mess in the mining sector.

Edgar Lungu on the other hand presented himself as a candidate for ordinary people with his humble and unassuming personality. He pointed to infrastructural development, facilitation of an amended constitution and construction of schools and hospitals as visible track record upon which the people of Zambia could base their choice. He effectively used a Bemba (one of the biggest ethnic groupings in Zambia) word 'sonta' meaning point at what you have done to canvass votes from the electorate. The tactic evidently worked.

The results of the election confirmed a divide that had appeared at the end of the January 2015 elections. PF won most of the votes in the north and eastern part of the country. The also swept the urban areas. UPND on the other hand won the southern, western and north-western provinces and picked up significant votes in the central province.

This is one significant legacy of the just ended elections. Some refer to it as regional voting others are not so diplomatic and simply refer to it as tribalism. I think the election has divided the nation no matter what term is used. The new President has his work cut out to unify the country.

The second key issue that the new government will have to deal with is the economy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is waiting in the wings to come and assist the country to stabilize the economy. The presumptive president elect has already sounded a warning. Tough measures are in store for Zambians with electricity tariffs a prime issue to deal with. Zambia has for a long time maintained low electricity tariffs compared to other countries in the region to make power affordable to the majority of Zambians. This has led to serious structural problems in the generation of enough power to meet local demand.

Another issue that the new government has to deal with is agricultural subsidies. For years, successful governments have maintained input subsidies to appease a rural population who depend on farming to earn a livelihood. PF got the majority of its votes from rural provinces. Subsidies have been a major drain on government coffers and considered extravagant by the international community. It is quite likely that the subsidies will be withdrawn. This will push up the cost of farming for peasant farmers and will translate in the rise in prices of maize a major staple food for Zambians.

Ultimately, the most important challenge the government will face is delivering promises to an expectant electorate. Five years ago, the PF won the election on electoral promises of more jobs, less taxes and more money in people's pockets. That is one promise that remains largely unfulfilled. How much time will the Zambian people give the PF to deliver on what really matters?

The Movement for Multiparty Democracy, MMD, was thrown out of power in 2011, because Zambians lost patience. PF is well aware of this and it will be interesting to see whether with another five years in power they can deliver development to Zambians. President Lungu will

have to live to his words at the inauguration on 13th September 2016: "There is no time and latitude to settle scores. We have work to do..It is our duty that as citizens of this country we are on this journey together and be peaceful." His words to business leaders in Zambia were emphatic: "I have five years now which is sufficient time to take more decisive actions. I will take measures to grow the economy and control expenditure."

Finally, in terms of lessons learned, one can ask some questions: Do ideas, issues, track-records matter in African elections? In the recent Zambian elections, ideas, issues and track-records did not matter much. What mattered was the geographical location of the voter and the popularity of a party in that area. A second question could be about what conditions might lead to a change of government from an incumbent to a new government? In the Zambian situation, the conditions were ripe for a change of government. However, this did not happen and as things stand, the situation of the majority of Zambians will not change in the medium term. In fact, things might get worse. Does this really matter to an average Zambian? Only time will tell!

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