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**CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC
CONSOLIDATION IN ZAMBIA:
PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO
DEMOCRACY AND THE
ECONOMY**

by Neo Simutanyi

**A comparative series of national public
attitude surveys on democracy, markets
and civil society in Africa.**



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- No.17 Simutanyi, Neo. “Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Zambia: Public Attitudes to Democracy and the Economy.” 2002.

Abstract

This report briefly summarizes the findings of a 1999 national opinion survey in Zambia that measured public attitudes toward democratic and economic reforms. It finds that while Zambians are supportive of “democracy as a value,” their participation in “democracy as a system” is low. They display very low attachment to political parties, and voter turnouts are also quite low. Zambians are the least likely of all Southern Africans to feel that they can make things better through voting and elections. But while Zambians are not overly enthusiastic about their present political system, there is little nostalgia for the former one-party regime. They show the highest levels of opposition among all Southern Africans to such potential anti-democratic actions of government as shutting down critical news outlets or dismissing judges. On balance, substantial proportions of Zambians see the multiparty government as more effective than the one-party regime and more responsive to public opinion, though it does not compare so favorably in terms of corruption and trustworthiness.

Introduction

Zambia went through a democratic transition as it entered the 1990s, ushering in a multiparty constitution that saw the establishment of a new political regime, and the election of a new government in 1991. While approaches focusing on constitutional protections, institutions, and institutional performance all have their own significance for understanding the prospects for consolidating democracy, it is equally important to understand the political attitudes and behavioral predispositions of Zambians as citizens. How do they view democracy? What does the concept of “democracy” mean to people in their everyday life? How do they evaluate government and economic performance? What factors influence these views?

In this paper, we document the results of a survey of a nationally representative sample of Zambians about their attitudes toward democracy and governance. Interviews were conducted with 1198 people in all nine regions of the country between November and December 1999. The project was implemented by researchers from the University of Zambia (UNZA), in conjunction with the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), as part of the Afrobarometer, a twelve-country survey of citizens’ attitudes to democracy and governance. The results were initially analyzed as part of a seven-country set of Southern African countries that included Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.¹

Results from this first round of surveys in Zambia suggest mixed prospects for the future of democracy in the country. While “democracy as a value” is widely supported, participation in “democracy as a system” is low.

Background

The re-introduction of plural politics in Zambia in the early 1990s was expected to help engender new types of political attitudes and restructure the orientation of Zambians towards politics. In 1996, a second round of national elections took place, with the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) again emerging victorious. These second elections were expected to consolidate democracy. However, there were complaints from opposition political parties and civil society organizations, which found the procedures adopted discriminatory and arbitrary, leading to a boycott by the main opposition party, the United National Independence Party (UNIP), which had ruled Zambia prior to the transition.

In the early 1980s, the country had also embarked on an economic reform program, commonly referred to as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), with the assistance of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The SAP affected the livelihood strategies of Zambians as it required the liberalization of hitherto controlled markets, closure or privatization

¹ See Mattes, Robert, Yul Derek Davids, Cherrel Africa and Michael Bratton, “Public Opinion and the Consolidation of Democracy in Southern Africa: An Initial Review of Key Findings of the Southern African Democracy Barometer,” Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 7, Michigan State University, 2000; and Mattes, Robert, Yul Derek Davids and Cherrel Africa, “Views of Democracy in South Africa and the Region: Trends and Comparisons,” Afrobarometer Working Paper No.8, Michigan State University, 2000.

of state companies, and liberalization of financial markets. The implementation of the SAP under the UNIP government had been rather half-hearted as a result of fear of public outcry given the government's professed socialist ideology. However, the MMD government embarked on a vigorous implementation of the SAP during the 1990s that saw the closure, liquidation or privatization of major state companies. The introduction of a market-oriented economy affected the livelihoods of many people as pricing was liberalized making food expensive, and jobs were lost through retrenchment, dismissals, or occasionally early retirement. The new market environment required people to adjust to situations that Zambians were not used to. This brought with it a lot of individual initiative and saw more people embark on entrepreneurial ventures.

A decade after the MMD government came to power, it is an opportune time to assess the extent to which democratic and economic reforms have taken root. The institutionalization and consolidation of democracy involve appropriate values supportive of the system. It is not expected that democracy can be consolidated over a short period.

General Survey Findings

The survey yields these general conclusions:

- Democracy is widely supported in Zambia, and there are also relatively high perceived levels of supply of democracy.
- Zambians are apparently unconcerned about the significant flaws of the 1996 elections, though one could speculate that people would have been more concerned if the object of the abuses had been a legitimate, popular opposition leader rather than the head of the discredited former regime.
- There is little desire to return to the past regime of one-party rule, and little interest in other non-democratic alternatives. Although Zambians are not overly enthusiastic about their present political system, there is little nostalgia for Kenneth Kaunda's UNIP-led one-party regime. On balance, substantial proportions of Zambians see their multiparty government as more effective than the previous one-party regime and more responsive to public opinion, though it does not compare as favorably in terms of corruption and trustworthiness.
- Zambians have very low levels of trust in their political institutions and relatively high perceptions of the levels of corruption in government.
- Zambians want their government to place priority on health care, job creation, education, and improving the conditions for farmers and agriculture.
- Ratings of government performance in managing health, education and the economy were quite low. However, these perceptions of government performance do not seem to be linked to evaluations of the way the President performed his job. It is also clear from our findings that Zambians do not think that their poor economic conditions are a result of government policies or politicians. This tends to reduce the citizens' propensity to participate in voting so as to bring about political changes, and thus explains the prevalence of political apathy.
- Zambians are the least likely of all Southern Africans interviewed to feel they can make things better through voting and elections.
- Conversely, they are the most active in civic associational life, especially church

organizations.

- Zambians demonstrate the highest levels of potential in the survey to take action in defense of democracy if it were under threat.
- Finally, while Zambians are supportive of democracy, they display very low attachment to participation in political parties. This has implications for a party system of government, and may also help explain the low voter turnouts in Zambian elections (which have averaged 43 percent in the last two general elections). It also shows that political parties have limited appeal and importance in people's political lives.

Specific Findings

Democracy and Its Alternatives

- A large majority of respondents (74 percent) say that democracy is always preferable to any other system of government.
- However, in the event that democracy is “not working” there is a significant level of “slippage.” In this case, democracy would still be supported by a slim majority (54 percent), a decrease of 20 percent.
- Recognition of “democracy” is very high, with nearly eight of ten respondents (77 percent) able to supply some definition of the concept.
- People in Zambia have an overwhelmingly positive image of democracy; 72 percent attach positive connotations to it.
- In Zambia, democracy is most frequently understood in terms of civil liberties and freedoms (65 percent of respondents). Participation in decision-making (e.g., “government by the people”) is the second most frequently mentioned response (12 percent).
- By overwhelming margins, Zambians disapprove of non-democratic alternatives: 89 percent disapprove of dictatorial, presidential rule; 94 percent reject military rule; 80 percent reject the idea of a one-party state; 80 percent disapprove of traditional rule on a national basis; and 76 percent disapprove of returning to life under Kaunda's one-party regime.

The Extent of Democracy In Zambia

- Sixty-five percent of respondents are relatively satisfied with the conduct of the 1996 elections. It should be remembered that this election was boycotted by the largest opposition party and former ruling party (UNIP) due to constitutional amendments banning its leader – the most prominent member of the opposition – former President Kenneth Kaunda.
- Twenty-four percent of respondents say that the way Zambia is governed is “completely democratic,” and another 38 percent say that it is largely democratic but “with minor problems.” All told, more than six out of ten Zambians perceive a healthy supply of democracy from their government.
- A sizeable majority (59 percent) are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy works in Zambia.

Attitudes Toward State and Government

- With regard to the legitimacy of the political system, 71 percent agree that the present government was elected through acceptable procedures, while 57 percent feel that their government exercises power in an acceptable way, and 50 percent agree that their country's constitution expresses the broader values of the society.
- Majorities express trust in the army (53 percent), the Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation (58 percent), and the courts of law (64 percent). Zambians are less trusting of local government (20 percent), Parliament (23 percent), the President (37 percent), the police (38 percent), the electoral commission (45 percent), and the government press (47 percent).
- Less than half of respondents feel that their political institutions are responsive to public opinion. Only 46 percent say that the President is interested in what happens to them, while 44 percent believe their local councillors are. Zambians are the least positive about Parliament, with just over one-third (36 percent) indicating that Parliament is responsive to their opinions.
- Zambians are fairly cynical with regard to official corruption. A majority of respondents (51 percent) say that "almost all" or "most" officials in government are involved in corruption. Ordinary civil servants are also viewed in quite a negative light (50 percent), followed by local government officials (42 percent). Forty percent see significant corruption among parliamentarians.

Government Performance

- The President receives the highest approval rating among government officials with 64 percent saying they approve of the way President Chiluba has performed his job in the previous year. Approval of Parliament's work is much lower at 46 percent, and local government scores just 39 percent.
- Zambians give their government poor ratings on the management of specific issues. Less than half believe their government is performing "very well" or "fairly well" in the following areas: managing land issues (49 percent), education (43 percent), basic service delivery (40 percent), health care (37 percent), building houses (36 percent), fighting crime (35 percent), managing the economy (33 percent), controlling inflation (28 percent), and creating jobs (26 percent).

The Most Important Problems Facing the Country

- When asked to name the three most important problems facing the country that the government ought to address (respondents could give up to three answers), seven problems are mentioned by at least 10 percent of respondents: health care (41 percent), job creation (32 percent), education (31 percent), farming and agriculture (26 percent), the economy (20 percent), transportation (18 percent), and poverty and destitution (14 percent).

Political Interest and Knowledge

- Forty-four percent of respondents say they "never" talk about politics with their friends, while

just 14 percent say they do so “frequently.”

- Twenty-six percent of respondents say they follow politics “hardly at all,” and another 17 percent do so “only now and then.” Thus, 43 percent could be said to be relatively inattentive to political affairs. Only 22 percent say they follow politics either “always” or “most of the time.”
- Knowledge of prominent leaders is also relatively low. While just over half (55 percent) are able to name the Vice President, only 33 percent are able to correctly identify their member of parliament. Only a quarter (25 percent) can correctly name the Minister of Finance, and just over one-fifth of respondents (23 percent) can name their local councilor.

Political Efficacy

- A majority of respondents feel they do not have enough information about politics (63 percent), and an even larger number cannot understand what goes on in politics and government (73 percent). Just over half also feel that they are not able to speak their minds freely about politics (52 percent).
- Zambians are not very optimistic about the positive impact of voting or the importance of who holds power. Just 53 percent say that the way they vote can make things better, while less than half (49 percent) feel that it matters who is in power because it can make a difference to what happens.

Civic Participation

- Participation in religious and church organizations is significantly higher than for any other type of group, with 73 percent saying that they have attended a meeting of such a group in the past year. Thirty-one percent have attended meetings of a group concerned with local matters such as schools, housing or rates. However, only 23 percent have attended meetings of a community self-help group or a group concerned with community issues at least a few times. An even lower proportion (16 percent) have gone to a meeting of a local commercial organization. Finally, 7 percent have attended a trade union meeting at least a few times in the past year.

Political Participation

- Forty-three percent of respondents have participated in an election rally, while just one-tenth have done work for a political candidate or party. Thirty-eight percent have participated with other people to address an important community or national issue (other than an election). Only 6 percent have written a letter to a newspaper.
- One-in-five Zambians (22 percent) made contact with a state official in the past year, and 31 percent made contact with a community leader.
- Nine percent of respondents have participated in protest marches and demonstrations, while an additional 21 percent say they would take this action if they had the chance.
- Only 3 percent have taken part in boycotts of rates, services or taxes, while an additional 17 percent would do this if they had the chance.
- Sit-ins, or disruptions of government offices or meetings, have been used by just 2 percent of respondents, although 10 percent say they would take part in this behavior if they had the chance.
- Finally, just 1 percent claim to have taken part in the use of force or violence. An additional 7

percent say they would do this if they had the chance.

Citizen Compliance

- Zambians are largely law-abiding when it comes to the duties of citizenship. Just 2 percent of respondents admit to claiming some sort of government benefit to which they were not entitled, though another 5 percent say that they would do so if they had the chance.
- Similarly, 2 percent admit to having avoided paying fees or rates to local government, and an additional 5 percent would do this if they had the chance.
- Just 2 percent have avoided paying income taxes, and again, another 5 percent say they would do so if they had the chance.
- Finally, 2 percent say that they have obtained services like electricity and water without paying for them, and 4 percent would do this if they had the chance.

Defending Democracy

- Respondents in Zambia would be highly opposed to anti-democratic actions by the government. Among the Southern African countries surveyed, Zambian respondents show the highest levels of opposition to such potential government actions as a shut down of news media that are critical of the government (93 percent would oppose), dismissal of judges who hand down rulings critical of the government (92 percent), banning political parties (92 percent), or suspension of parliament and cancellation of elections (92 percent).