

Zambia goes to the polls

(by Zarina Geloo)

Zambia goes to the polls on the 28th of September in an election with five presidential candidates, which is in reality a two horse race between incumbent Levy Mwanawasa and his long time nemesis Patriotic Front (PF) leader Michael Sata.

ECZ shows some teeth

The election process has some differences from the last elections in 2001 which were fraught with rigging and corruption, by the ruling Movement for Multi Party Democracy, a fact acknowledged by the Supreme court hearing the presidential petition that followed.

The Election Commission of Zambia (ECZ), hitherto heavily influenced by the government of the day, has this time around shown some teeth and has been very firm about the electoral process to avoid accusations of malpractices. It has established an electoral code of conduct which bars vote buying through donations during the campaign period. It also bars candidates from insulting each other and penalises political parties for violence.

The media too has been reigned in. There will be no speculation or analyses about the election results, only the ECZ will be authorised to announce results. This is in order to safeguard against the confusion of the last elections, where Mwanawasa was announcing his victory and the European Union was announcing the victory of someone else. The media has also been instructed to give fair coverage to all political parties and aspirants.

In spite of these guidelines however, there have still been some violations, albeit not as rampant as in the last elections. These violations have mainly been perpetuated by the ruling Movement for Multi Party Democracy (MMD) whose candidates have continued to make donations during the period. Chief among the violators is President Mwanawasa's wife Maureen, using her NGO the Maureen Mwanawasa Initiative (MMCI) which has continued to make donations in spite of the cries of 'foul'. The ECZ has yet to take action.

The state print and electronic media which dominates the media landscape, has continued to give prominence to the MMD and Mwanawasa. The Media Institute of Southern African (MISA) has made repeated appeals to the state broadcaster Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) to cover all political issues fairly to no avail. The ECZ has remained mute on this issue.

To avoid chances of rigging, the ECZ very determinedly and despite pressure from government, awarded a tender to print the ballot papers to a South African company. This was quite crucial as in past elections, the accusation has always been that government printers which used to print the ballot papers, printed pre marked papers and the printing premises were crawling with staff from the office of the president (special branch) to ensure the ruling MMD won the day.

The relative calm and lack of frequent inter party violence has come as something of a surprise, as that is what has characterized Zambian elections in the past. Many attribute this to a change in attitude of the police. The police were told to be impartial (not just looking after the ruling MMD) and were put on high alert by inspector General Ephraim Mateyo. The ECZ has also threatened punitive against unruly cadres and their parties.

Character assassinations

There is one area that has not changed however, the campaigns. While there was hope that the campaigns would focus on the 'meatier' issues of AIDS, poverty and development, they have as usual, degenerated into character assassinations. While all parties have in their manifestos the ideals of creating employment, reducing poverty and introducing free education and medical health, none of the documents outline exactly how this will be done.

Sata says people will begin to see change in their livelihoods within 90 days of his government. He will create opportunities for employment and local investment. His government would reduce taxes on workers and introduce free education up to university level. He has also said he would provide ARVs (antiretroviral treatment) for all, something Mwanawasa's government has failed to do. Out of the 100,000 people needing treatment, only 50,000 are accessing it.

Mwanawasa on the other hand says Sata is a liar who has failed to improve people's lives in the more than 20 years he was in government.

That notwithstanding, the Treatment Advocacy Literacy Campaign (TALC) has pinned aspirants down, it has dispensed a questionnaire to all political hopefuls in which it wants them to state what they will do people living with HIV and to fight AIDS. TALC will use their answers as their commitment to fighting HIV and AIDS.

Where Mwanawasa would like to herald his governments achievements in reaching the High Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) completion point, a stable currency and a reduction in inflation, Sata says this is a result of policies began by the last government where he was a cabinet minister, and instead he accuses Mwanawasa of having failed to put drugs in the hospital, provide ARVs for people living with AIDS, and achieve education for all children.

The rivalry between Mwanawasa and Sata dates back to when they both served in the last government under President Frederick Chiluba. While he was vice president, Mwanawasa quit government citing corruption. He recently revealed that it was Sata who was corrupt though he has not said what it is that Sata did.

Sata in turn says Mwanawasa must explain his role in suspicious fuel deals, and accuses Mwanawasa of having interests in the newly privatized copper mines and in the businesses of foreign investors that have flooded the country.

Sata makes denigrating remarks about Mwanawasa's health (he suffered a mild stroke recently and has a history of epilepsy). Mwanawasa's riposte is to liken Sata to Idi Amin the former Ugandan dictator.

Mwanawasa has further been incensed by his predecessor Fredrick Chiluba's support of Sata. He describes it as an alliance of 'plunderers'.

Mwanawasa appears to have failed with his corruption drive. The Task Force on Corruption which he set up amidst much criticism has failed to vindicate him. There have been no convictions and instead a government audit revealed that the Task Force itself was guilty of abusing its office and powers and acting in a similar manner as those it is prosecuting. Mwanawasa has carefully avoided talking about corruption except to respond to Sata who has said he would review the current charges against Chiluba and his coterie if he is made president.

The MMD and PF are likely to split the seats in the 150 seat parliament with a very few going to the other parties. Unfortunately, the other candidates have been over shadowed by the spats between the two.

UDA alliance

There is the political novice Hikainde Hichilema, a 44 year old accountant who cut his teeth in the privatization of parastatals in Zambia. He took over the mantle of the United Party for National Democracy (UPND) when Anderson Mazoka died just before election campaigns. He heads the alliance his party created with UNIP, which ruled Zambia for 27 years under Kenneth Kaunda and the Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD).

Flashing lots of money and a man with obvious wealth, his role in the privatisation process as the liquidator has come to haunt him. His opponents have asked him to explain his wealth which they suspect came on the back of 'peoples suffering' through unemployment as companies were privatized and liquidated. He too has avoided talking about privatisation but has promised to increase employment and expand businesses.

Coming from the corporate world, it is understood that the IMF and the World Bank would prefer him as the next Zambian president. As a partner in the international firm Grant Thornton, and with experience in international financing, he 'knows the drill'.

His support base is in the Southern province where he hails from. While UPND was the strongest opposition in the country, it has been diluted somewhat with the death of Mazoka and is now seen as a tribal party. First president Kenneth Kaunda has thrown his weight behind "the young man".

With its UDA alliance, and the fact that many of its parliamentary candidates are old hands and popular, it is expected that the alliance will come in third after MMD and PF in parliament. It is highly unlikely that "HH" as he is commonly known will beat Mwanawasa or Sata to the presidency. He came in a little too late.

However HH has been the refreshing face in the political sphere even though his message of how he will develop the country and reduce poverty is old and filled with rhetoric.

Miyanda's HP

Brigadier General Godfrey Miyanda leading the Heritage Party (HP) is relying on the peoples wish to have 'a leader of integrity'. A former vice president and cabinet minister in the Chiluba government, he heralds the fact that unlike others, (including Chiluba) he has never been involved in any corruption or abuse of office. This however has worked negatively for him as the impression he has given is that he operated as a 'lone wolf' who did not know what his colleagues were doing or the issues at hand. The fact that Miyanda, a former soldier, has refused to join alliances and electoral pacts has given credence to assertions that he is not a team player.

With no funds, his party is still very much Lusaka based. With no money for campaigns, Miyanda has relied on the media to sell himself to the public. HP will, like in the last election, maybe get one or two seats in parliament. Miyanda is certainly not a front runner in the presidential race.

ACP

The other candidate is Ken Ngondo of the All Party Congress (ACP). A former UNIP stalwart, Ngondo has been in and out of politics, usually resurfacing in times of elections. This is the first time that he has actually made it to the presidential campaigns. His attempts have hitherto ended at forming a political party. APC is smaller than HP and is also confined to Lusaka. Ngondo failed to file nominations for seats in many constituencies because he did not have enough members. APC is unlikely to get any parliamentary seats.

More interest

The electorate might be undecided between Mwanawasa and Sata, but at least this time around, there appears to be more interest and debate on the electoral process and on the candidates. In almost all campaign rallies where *chitenge* (cotton wrappers), food and money are given out, people have said they will accept the gifts but "will vote wisely". which is a major turnaround in a country where gifts and alms were enough to buy a candidate a vote.