

***Democracy and Electoral Politics In Zambia* by Tinenenji Banda, O'Brien Kaaba, Marja Hinfelaar, and Muno Ndulo, Brill, Leiden & Boston, 2020, pp. vii, 374.**

Zambia's elections in 2015 and 2016 were accorded a generally clean bill of health by international observers and monitors. For example, the European Union team found the electoral process free and transparent. Several teams noted that election day had been mainly peaceful, despite a polarised campaign. EISA's mission statement (2016) concluded that election day procedures and what followed them met normally accepted standards of credibility despite an 'uneven playing field' during campaigning.<sup>1</sup> The opposition's presidential candidate and his party rejected the outcome and petitioned the Constitutional Court but their case was not tested. The Court found that their petition had not been submitted within the required fourteen days after the poll, a requirement which, as the EISA observers' report noted, would have been nearly impossible to fulfill.

This comprehensive volume is likely to become the definitive study of the poll. Its editors generally view the contest as having been a setback to democratisation, though 'not an outright slide into brute authoritarianism' (EISA 2016, p. 2).

One key feature of Zambia's politics is the character of its political parties which mobilise around ethnic cores: Bemba for the then incumbent Patriotic Front presided over by Edgar Lungu, Lozi in the case of the opposition United Party for National Development led by the businessman Hakainde Hichilema. In a setting in which ethnic blocs are not large enough to predominate, winners are inevitably coalitions constituted by 'big men'-led factions. Big-man politics is reinforced by the ways in which opposition groups finance themselves, relying chiefly on the fortunes of very wealthy individuals. While the ruling party benefits from its unregulated access to public resources, the dynamics of party formation still leave room for civil society mobilisation.

Survey data cited in this volume shows that voters mix ethnic loyalty with instrumental calculations and performative evaluation, factors that help to explain the turnover in 2011 that brought Michael Sata's Patriotic Front into office. Since 2008, margins of victory have contracted and elections have become increasingly competitive. Whether ethnic identity supplies a stable cement for party loyalty in Zambia is an issue that remains a puzzle explored by Eric Hern and Jeremy Seekings in the chapters that address the question. Robbie Kapesa, John Bwalya and Owen Sichone suggest that growing 'horizontal' inequalities between regions may reinforce politicised ethnicities, though they also observe that many material resentments arise from misperceptions of economic unfairness.

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1 The statement refers to an impending final report but no such assessment was published subsequently.

The opposition claimed that the Electoral Commission of Zambia was paid off by the incumbents and that its management of the election was heavily biased. In this book, Biggie Joe Ndwamba and O'Brien Kaaba offer a more qualified picture in their treatment of the Commission's role, identifying failures to enforce regulations and the opaque procedures for ballot aggregation. The main difficulties with the Commission are institutional, not intentional, they maintain, to do with its financing and the way it was constituted. They find that Commission's autonomy needs better protection.

By continental conventions, the 2016 Zambian poll and the campaigning before it were not singularly violent: fatalities were limited to two deaths on polling day, when two ruling party officials were attacked. But data from focus groups and the Zambian Election Monitor Survey indicate that non-lethal localised violence between rival groups of activists had become quite generalised. In his contribution, Michael Wahman also presents plenty of evidence of other kinds of coercion and the illegal use of money to manipulate voters. In a tight contest these abuses could well have been decisive. Zambian courts, though, operate on the basis of a demanding notion of 'materiality' in deciding whether an abuse is sufficiently serious to affect electoral outcomes. In the past, Tinenenji Banda shows, the Court has applied the materiality test in an inconsistent manner. As noted above, in the vital presidential contest in 2016 it dismissed the opposition petition without considering the issue, though it did invalidate six constituency results; however, Mwale and Mwanza (2017) present a more favourable treatment of the judiciary's role in the 2016 election.

For researchers, the absence of reliable media reports is a major impediment in any attempt to assess the validity of accusations of abuses. Here the government's repressive treatment of independent journalists in 2015 and 2016 accentuated the unevenness of the 'playing field'. Chanda Mfula's analysis in this volume demonstrates that the quality of reportage from opinionated social media platforms is an inadequate substitute for professional journalism.

So, did the 2016 poll represent a decisive setback to Zambia's democratisation? Not if we are to judge from the outcome of the latest poll in 2021 in which Hakainde Hichilema and the UPND unseated Edgar Lungu in a second historic turnover. Lungu was running for a contentious third term with the approval of the Constitutional Court which decided that as his first term lasted only a year – he was elected in 2015 after Michael Sata's death – he had not served the constitutional limit. Whether the law implied two full terms remains questionable, and Lungu's own threats to the Court before its decision may have influenced its judges. Parallel vote counts by local monitoring groups as well as Hichilema's success in wooing disaffected Bemba voters in poorer urban districts both helped to explain the outcome (Resnick 2022, pp. 70–84). But as the careful analyses

assembled in this useful volume suggest, Zambia's electoral procedures and its party system need a major re-organisation if Zambian democracy is to be secured. Even two turnovers may not be enough by themselves.

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----- REFERENCES -----

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