

Online Article

Reflecting on Kaunda's Political legacies

Zambia's founding president, Kenneth Kaunda, died on 17 June aged 97, the last of the generation of African freedom fighters who had ushered in independence on the continent. He fiercely fought minority rule in the region, which was a major factor in the eventual fall of apartheid in South Africa and the delivery of freedom to its oppressed black majority.

In his [tribute](#)¹ to Kaunda, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo harkened to the past to bring to mind the other giants who had worked alongside Kaunda to free the continent from the yoke of colonialism and apartheid. Obasanjo said,

Let all Africans and friends of Africa take solace in the knowledge that President Kaunda has gone home to a well-deserved rest and to proudly take his place beside his brothers such as Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, to name but a few.

Kaunda was the last man standing from his generation of freedom fighters who had delivered independence to Africa. For the outside world, their remembrance of Kaunda will always be in relation to his contribution to the freedom project. Zambia's path to independence was through a negotiated settlement with Britain, unlike that of most of its neighbours, which

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was through a gruelling fight that resulted in a bloodbath in which Zambia was caught up, being at the centre of the region.

Kaunda's legacy will inevitably be divided into two:

First, that of a tough and uncompromising anticolonial, anti-apartheid, freedom-for-all activist and Pan-African advocate, who believed in building regional and continental solidarity and consensus to achieve freedom and peace. It is here where his liberation credentials shine to the high heavens and remain a source of great admiration among the international community.

Second, as a domestic politician who courageously led his country to a negotiated settlement of independence, then centralised power around himself, shrank the democratic space and jailed opponents and critics, but one who, to his eternal credit, read the times correctly and bowed to the masses' final call to leave the seat of power. His peaceful hand-

over of power is still a fresh story almost thirty years to the day.

Tackling the Freedom Question: Kaunda on the Frontline

Finally, August of 1978, we landed in Lusaka with no small amount of relief. It was a great honour to be greeted so warmly by President Kaunda and the people of Zambia. None of us had experienced anything like it before. We were treated as VIPs of the highest calibre, met with a delegation on the tarmac and ceremoniously walked from the foot of the plane straight into a waiting motorcade of diplomatic vehicles. Everyone involved was as friendly as they were courteous.

Those were the words of the Zimbabwean Jesuit priest, Father Fidelis Mukonori, in his memoir *Man in the Middle*, recalling the reception his Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) delegation was accorded in Lusaka, as part of the shuttle diplomacy for the country's independence that came two years later.

The welcome that Father Mukonori describes had become a legendary practice. Kaunda extended it to many visitors to Lusaka who were in search of freedom or mere-

ly transiting through this city of peace, which, apart from hosting a chain of freedom movements, was also a venue for peace talks.

After gaining independence for Zambia from Britain in October 1964, Kaunda's next task was to help liberate the rest of the southern African region. This was not a matter of choice but necessity. Apart from his philosophical and political belief that Zambia's political freedom would be meaningless if the rest of the region were still under colonial rule, Zambia's geopolitical position made it unavoidable for Kaunda to tackle the freedom of southern Africa.

Zambia is surrounded by eight countries, which it relies on to provide channels for trade. Having these countries under colonial rule made it difficult for Zambia to trade and operate on a regional scale. The racist regime in Rhodesia and its apartheid counterpart in Pretoria were determined to strangle and punish Zambia economically for supporting the liberation movements of the region and blocked trade to the south. With the southern route shut, Kaunda had to turn to Nyerere's Tanzania, which has access to the sea. On the western and eastern flanks of Zambia, Angola and Mozambique were still waging a war of independence against the fascist regime in Lisbon. Both achieved independence in 1975, although soon after they would both fall into a long-running proxy civil war. Trade through them was near impossible and, instead, Zambia had to host thousands of refugees fleeing the wars.

Even though the government of Ian Smith in Southern Rhodesia held sway, it was under the double onslaught of the African guerrilla movements that were launching incursions from Zambia and Mozam-

bique. The guerrilla fighters eventually prevailed and triumphantly marched to independence in April 1980. Zimbabwe was free.

In the south-west, the Germans had long departed Namibia, but the apartheid regime in Pretoria had its hands on Windhoek until March 1990, when independence dawned. In Malawi, the only other country that became independent in the same year as Zambia, and which should have helped in providing support to other freedom fighters, its leader, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, refused to have anything to do with the liberation wars of the region. He was thus isolated in that eastern corner as a puppet of the apartheid regime.

So, given that scenario, it was Zambia under Kaunda's leadership and Tanzania under Nyerere (and later Mwinyi) who midwived the freedom of southern Africa by providing a base from which all the liberation movements could organise and prosecute their wars of independence. But, given its proximity to the warfront, it was Lusaka where everyone congregated and plotted their freedom.

Under the OAU Liberation Committee, the Liberation Centre in Lusaka hosted Namibia's South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Unity Movement (UM) of South Africa, and the mother of all liberation movements—the African National Congress (ANC)—whose headquarters were in Lusaka for thirty years.

Freedom Radio, the ANC propaganda station, was based in Lusaka and broadcast its messages from there to energise the exiles and freedom fighters inside South Africa, much to the chagrin of the minority apartheid regime. In his resignation speech on 14 September 1989, then South African President Pieter W. Botha angrily claimed: 'The ANC is enjoying the protection of President Kaunda and is planning insurgency activities against South Africa from Lusaka.' He was stating the obvious.

By hosting the liberation movements, Zambia was in the firing line from the colonists and suffered reprisal attacks that led to a colossal loss of life and property. Ian Smith bombed Zambia several times in retaliation to its hosting of the Zimbabwean guerrilla fighters who were launching daring raids in their push for the fall of the Rhodesian regime. But for Kaunda, there was no price too heavy for Zambia to pay to liberate the region. It was a worthy sacrifice, which the country is still praised for to date and for which Kaunda duly takes the credit. Some of the people who are now presidents and ministers in various African countries took sanctuary in Zambia and were educated there. For instance, Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa stayed in Mumbwa, a town 150 kilometres west of Lusaka, and served as youth secretary of Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) before he joined ZANU in Mozambique. His predecessor, Robert Mugabe stayed and taught at Chalimbana, a teacher training college just outside Lusaka before he joined the struggle in Mozambique. Mugabe's counterpart in the struggle and future Vice President Joshua Nkomo was based in Lusaka, from where he commanded ZAPU and survived

assassination attempts by Ian Smith's forces. Future Namibian and South African presidents, Sam Nujoma, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, respectively, all stayed in Lusaka during the difficult days of the liberation struggle, as did Oliver Tambo, who led the ANC until his death in 1993, just a year before the fall of apartheid. Tambo's former house in Lusaka is now a national monument unveiled by President Jacob Zuma while on a state visit on 13 October 2017.

By the fall of apartheid in 1994, when the region became completely independent of colonial rule, the dividends were flowing in—as seen in increased cross-border trade among nationals of the region—and several of the exiles who had stayed and studied in Lusaka were now running their own governments. By then, Kaunda was out of power, somewhat fulfilling a Greek proverb about old men who plant trees in whose shade they will never sit.

As chairman of the Frontline States, Kaunda was committed to the freedom of the region so much that sometimes he ran the risk of being misunderstood even by the people he was helping. For instance, in the 1970s, he initiated contact with the same apartheid regime he was against and without the knowledge of the ANC. Two weeks after Botha's resignation, Kaunda met FW De Klerk, Botha's successor, in the Zambian city of Livingstone. De Klerk described Kaunda as 'an earnest Christian who has thought about the position of southern Africa'.

Had Kaunda sold out? 'God is hearing me. I can never sell out Africa. Never! Not me, not these boys and girls here. We are men and women of principle,' he said in a fiery speech in Lusaka.

For many years, the ANC despised talks with the apartheid regime and believed freedom would be won solely through armed struggle. Similarly, the minority regime vowed never to talk to a group it considered 'murderers'. But, in 1985, Kaunda staged a diplomatic coup when he organised a meeting of the two camps at his private retreat in the South Luangwa National Park, in the east of the country. That effectively opened the floodgates for discussion and by the time of Mandela's release, in February 1990, there were no less than a hundred meetings taking place as various South African government, church, business, student and trade union delegations flowed into Lusaka, according to South African historian Hugh Macmillan, in his book *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia 1963–1994*.

It was Lusaka that Mandela visited on 27 February 1990, just sixteen days after leaving Robben Island, his first foreign trip since 1962. Ever the diplomat, Kaunda was chief host and pulled a masterstroke by assembling the entire region to welcome Mandela. Apart from Kaunda himself, there was Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Joachim Chissano (Mozambique), Quett Masire (Botswana), Jose Eduardo Dos Santos (Angola), Ali Hassan Mwinyi (Tanzania), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), and, not to be outdone, Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat, as well as a whole collection of ANC exiles.

Through his uncompromising fight for freedom, Kaunda raised his name and that of the country high. His immense contribution to the freedom of the continent is his lasting legacy.

Kaunda the Zambian Leader

The youngest of eight children, Kaunda was born on 28 April 1924 at Lubwa Mission in Chinsali District in then Northern Rhodesia, to missionaries of the Church of Scotland who had migrated from the former Nyasaland (now Malawi). He became a teacher, like his parents, but being born and raised in an area that was a hotbed of the freedom struggle had left its imprint. In 1951 he joined the fight for independence under the African National Congress (ANC)—not to be confused with the South African one—led by Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula. In 1958, Kaunda and a host of other radicals broke off from the ANC, accusing its leader Nkumbula of not being militant enough. They formed a new party called Zambia African National Congress (ZANC), later renamed United National Independence Party (UNIP). But in 1959, Kaunda and his group were arrested by colonial authorities for their militancy, with Kaunda imprisoned for nine months in the north-west of the country and in Salisbury. On his release from prison in January 1960, he took up leadership of UNIP.

Following the 1962 election, Kaunda's UNIP and Nkumbula's ANC formed a coalition government that lasted through the independence talks with Britain at Lancaster House. After the elections of January 1964, UNIP won a majority and Kaunda became prime minister. With talks completed, Zambia's independence arrived on 24 October 1964, and Kaunda became president of a new nation called Zambia, whose name was coined from the vast Zambezi River.

Back in 1958 when UNIP was formed, the party had an opportunity to choose as its leader a fire-

brand, a provocateur who greatly appealed to the masses with his fiery speeches and strong denunciation of the colonial regime. His name was Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, Kaunda's childhood friend from Chinsali. But instead it was agreed that Kaunda, the moderate and unifier, be assigned the role. Given the task that would later befall Kaunda in rallying the entire southern region to fight for freedom, it is generally agreed that he was a good choice in that regard, with his tough yet diplomatic demeanour and disposition. Kaunda was just the leader the country needed to shepherd it through some of its most intractable political situations.

Post-independence, Kaunda's government worked hard to deliver the fruits of the struggle. With vast copper reserves and a zealous crop of nationalists eager to demonstrate the benefits of self-rule, Kaunda and his group got to work and put up national infrastructure, such as primary, secondary and trade schools, colleges, hospitals, roads and power stations. The University of Zambia opened in 1966, just two years after independence, and would educate not only future Zambian leaders, but also many future political figures from southern Africa who proved a vital human resource once their own countries became independent.

But, like most post-independence African leaders, Kaunda committed the cardinal sin of centralising power around himself through the declaration of the one-party state. Most African leaders at the time used 'national unity' as a basis for declaring one-party states. They reckoned that to concentrate efforts on national development as well as to forestall ethnic divisions in their countries, it was necessary to eliminate domestic political com-

petition and have the nation 'pull in one direction', as it were. In Kaunda's case, he gave the raging wars in the region as an additional justification, saying internal political competition would only distract the country from the mammoth task of fighting the enemy. Thus, in December 1972 Kaunda changed the national Constitution and made UNIP the sole political organisation in the country.

Thus began the democratic slide that would last the next seventeen years. Kaunda kept a tight lid on dissent, ruthlessly deploying his Eastern Europe-trained security wings to foment a climate of fear in which Zambians were not free to discuss governance issues. He became increasingly paranoid and at every turn detained and tortured political opponents under a perpetual State of Emergency, which ran until he left office. As he closed the political space, removing him by force became the only option for those seeking a change of the oppressive political order. He survived three military coups. That is why, amid so much praise for Kaunda abroad, at home there are some who strongly feel his dictatorial record should not be wished away and his tenure should be discussed in its totality.

'When somebody dies, let's not just highlight the good they did. We must also mention the atrocities they committed. History should never be told in a segregative manner,' wrote Lusaka journalist Bradley Chingobe on his social media page. 'We owe it to the future of this nation to tell the real story of Kenneth Kaunda. The scars of the brutal UNIP One Party dictatorship remain embedded in a lot of families in Zambia. It was not as rosy as many want to make it seem today.'

If the politics was a mess, the economy was worse and is the singular factor that hastened his departure. In 1968 and 1969, Kaunda announced a government takeover of the retail and mining sectors, respectively, with the aim of effecting greater state control of the economy. But the parastatal sector overemployed, grew increasingly inefficient, relied on state subsidies and was feeding the party in typical socialist style as businesses were dominated by party functionaries.

The fall in copper prices and shortage of basic commodities all combined to create a toxic cocktail and an economic fallout. By the mid-1980s, food riots were common and pressure was mounting on Kaunda to either fix the economy or leave. The cookie was crumbling.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of a new democratic wave sweeping across the world, a pro-democracy movement was born in Zambia in July 1990 (just a month after Kaunda had survived another military coup) and began pushing for a return to multiparty politics. The movement was a broad coalition, comprising trade unions, church leaders, intellectuals, businessmen and women, and several politicians Kaunda had pushed out of the political arena with the imposition of the one-party state. They were back, and this time they exploited his weakened position from the economic fallout and the jubilation of the masses at his near ousting by the military.

After twenty-seven years in power, one would think that, like most dictators, Kaunda believed more and more in his invincibility and would defy the odds. But to his credit, he read the times correctly and did not resist the public mood. Having been re-elected as the sole

candidate in 1988 (and before that since 1973), his term of office was due to end in 1993, but he agreed to cut it short and hold elections in October 1991. Kaunda co-operated with the new democracy movement and agreed to constitutional amendments that abolished the one-party state, paving the way for democratic elections. He lost the elections by a landslide and immediately called his successor, Frederick Chiluba, to congratulate him. With the return of multiparty democracy, Kaunda handed over power peacefully, a rare occurrence during a time when most post-independence leaders clung to power as an act of entitlement for delivering freedom.

Abroad, Kaunda is remembered for his role in the liberation struggle. But what is his legacy at home?

First, his ability to unite a country so ethnically diverse under the motto 'One Zambia, One Nation' is widely recognised as a major achievement. Kaunda held the nation together for twenty-seven years without civil strife, even amid some major political disagreements that in other countries would have ripped those nations apart. That Zambia has not been at war with itself nor with its neighbours is largely credited to the strong foundation of peace and unity that Kaunda laid right at the beginning.

Second, most of Kaunda's generation of freedom fighters were of humble education, but his government's decision to quickly build education infrastructure and insti-

tute a policy of free education enabled most Zambians (and citizens of other neighbouring countries) in the early years of nationhood to become educated and contribute to national development. It is said that, at independence, Zambia had only 100 graduates. Therefore, Kaunda is praised for his foresight in investing in human capital through free education, which served the nation very well as it was able to develop a pool of talent on which future governments could rely.

Third, Kaunda could have resisted the call for a return to multiparty politics. Worse still, he could have used force to deny the victors their victory in 1991 and have them locked them up. But his magnanimity to accept the people's will and gracefully bow out remains admirable to date and is a model of leadership in putting the people first.

Fourth, Kaunda instilled a spirit of service above self and respect for public assets. His government had a leadership code that, although now criticised for stifling individual enterprise, is agreed to have saved the public purse from being looted wantonly by government ministers. His successor tried to harass him on suspicion that he had stolen public funds, to the extent that he brought in Britain's Scotland Yard to investigate. But they found nothing, and it was in fact the same public who voted out Kaunda that vouched for his integrity, an act that left his successor deeply embarrassed.

But, **fifth**, his economic policies centred around socialism and humanism were a disaster and detract from what would otherwise have been a shining economic model, given the small population and vast national resources of the country. The nationalisation of the economy did not yield dividends, but instead became a huge drain on the national treasury as the government subsidised loss-making parastatals that had overemployed and were used for political patronage.

Sixth, after twenty-seven years in power Kaunda had overstayed his position, but he saw himself as the pillar around which Zambia revolved. If the ability to groom new leaders and pass on the mantle to them is a yardstick of good leadership, then Kaunda failed in that regard. In a bid to keep himself insulated from political competition, for the reasons discussed above, he resorted to autocratic means that not only dented his record, but also ruined the political careers of those he sought to prevent from accessing state power.

Overall, though, even considering his excesses, he goes to the grave more admired than ever and time has generally rehabilitated him and given him a hallowed place in history.

Note

1. <https://www.theelephant.info/op-eds/2021/06/18/gone-is-the-last-of-the-mohicans-tribute-to-kenneth-kaunda/>