

Political Parties

Background

The decision by the Government of Zambia to restore multi-party democracy was a significant one. We considered that the Zambian experience might serve as a useful example for other countries, not only in the Commonwealth, but in the developing world generally.

The background to the present situation is that nine years after achieving independence in 1964, Zambia elected to adopt a one-party system of government, described then as a one-party participatory democracy underpinned by a philosophy of humanism.

International pressure for democracy and multi-party elections served to assist the process of local political dissent which culminated in the formation of an opposition Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) in July 1990. This was followed by the formation of seven other political groupings.

Negotiations took place between the MMD, the Government and the ruling party, UNIP, and a referendum was planned to decide the issue of a return to multi-party parliamentary democracy. This was abandoned and instead a Commission was appointed to draft a new Constitution which would re-introduce multi-party democracy to the country after a lapse of 17 years. The new Constitution took effect in August 1991.

This Constitution provided the foundation for a new multi-party system. Perhaps, the centre-piece of this legal instrument was the provision guaranteeing the right to form new political parties. Indeed, we can do no better than quote it as follows:

Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of assembly and association, that is to say, his right to assemble freely and associate with other persons and in particular to form or belong to any political party, trade union or other associations for the protection of his interests.¹

Current Position

On their arrival in Lusaka members of the support staff called on the Registrar of Societies, with whose office all associations including political parties must be registered, to ascertain the precise number of political parties. Although 12 'parties' had applied for registration, only seven had by then fulfilled the requirements for registration and were registered as such. We were informed that the policy was to allow a political party to operate from the date of its application while the formalities prerequisite to registration were satisfied. A full list of parties is at Annex IX.

¹ Section 21(1) of the 1991 Constitution of Zambia.

In the end the election was contested between the two major parties, the United National Independence Party (UNIP), and the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD). Their election logos are at Annex x.

UNIP was formed in 1958 when it broke away from the Zambia African National Congress during a period of intense political agitation for independence in many African countries under colonial rule. Six years later under the leadership of its President, Dr Kenneth Kaunda, it led Zambia into independence under a multi-party system of government. In 1973, a system of government described then as one-party participatory democracy was introduced and UNIP became the only recognised political party under the law.

Subsequently, as a result of a combination of deteriorating economic conditions and, more recently, internal pressures for political pluralism the Government was faced with increasing demands for political change. During 1990, influenced by political developments elsewhere on the African continent and beyond, the pressure for change became unstoppable. As had been indicated, international pressure and local political dissent created an atmosphere conducive to a return to multi-party democracy.

The election campaign was marked by bitter personal attacks. Many of the leaders of the MMD had held positions of influence in UNIP, and personal recriminations were inevitable. UNIP portrayed itself as an experienced party which had managed change in the past, established Zambia as one nation, improved the infrastructure, particularly in the field of education, and could be depended upon to manage the changes needed in the future to continue the process of development it had begun. The MMD stressed the need for change, an approach crystallised in a slogan which proved extremely effective – *“The Hour Has Come”*. It championed human rights and free enterprise as catalysts which would release the energies and give scope to the talents of the Zambian people and promote development.

The remaining ten parties showed no signs of posing a serious challenge to either UNIP or MMD and seemed to have been merely exercising the newly re-established right of freedom of association.