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Zambia: 2021 Elections and New Government

In Zambia's August 2021 general elections, longtime opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema won the presidential race with 59% of votes—after five prior unsuccessful runs. In concurrent National Assembly elections, his United Party for National Development (UPND) party won a majority; it holds 56% of 165 seats, including appointed ones.

U.S. post-poll statements, including from Members of Congress, lauded the electoral process and the “peaceful transfer of power” to Hichilema by then-President Edgar Lungu of the Patriotic Front (PF) party. Secretary of State Antony Blinken later called “Zambia’s unshakeable commitment to democratic ideals... an inspiration to all who seek the freedom, prosperity, and justice.” He attributed the elections’ success, in part, to the participation of “a record number of young and first-time voters.” (Voter turnout, at 69%, was the highest since 2006.) Opposition activists elsewhere in Africa hailed the outcome as demonstrating that years of dogged opposition activism can result in the democratic ouster of powerful incumbent regimes.

Hichilema has pledged to reverse negative human rights and civil liberties trends under Lungu, such as arbitrary detentions of opposition leaders and civil society activists, police repression of peaceful protests and opposition events, and forced closures or suspensions of some media outlets. U.S. officials have welcomed Hichilema’s governance agenda and announced development aid in support of it.

2021 General Election

Ahead of the 2021 polls, a number of news reports and polling by Afrobarometer (an independent public opinion research network) indicated that Lungu and his PF party would face strong political headwinds. Factors cited included a sharp drop in growth rates, high unemployment and public debt, public service delivery shortcomings, corruption, and growing opposition to the government’s alleged use of authoritarian tactics—over which Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez raised concerns in August 2021. A range of analysts, however, speculated that the Lungu government might use its powers of incumbency—including control over state media, the national security apparatus, and public order laws—to enable Lungu and his PF to retain power.

Days prior to polling day, the government deployed the military to bolster security and curtail high levels of election violence by rival party supporters after the killing of two PF backers. Some observers saw this move as potentially intimidating to opposition supporters, given an alleged prior pattern of anti-UPND law enforcement actions by police, which had drawn U.S. admonishment. On voting day, authorities restricted social media, with implications for vote results monitoring and reporting transparency, though a court halted that action. After the vote, Lungu—who, citing various bases, had threatened to have his opponent arrested after the election—claimed that the process was not free and fair and reportedly considered

challenging the outcome in court. Ultimately, given Hichilema’s large margin of victory and reported U.S. and other behind-the-scenes diplomatic pressure, Lungu accepted the results and conceded defeat, permitting a constitutional transfer of power to Hichilema.

2021 Election: Controversies

Several controversies preceded the 2021 vote. One centered on Lungu’s eligibility for a third term, which the Constitutional Court ruled was legal, given the partial nature of his first term. (He won that term in a 2015 by-election to choose a successor to President Michael Sata, who died in late 2014, and complete Sata’s term. In 2016, Lungu won a full term.) The Lungu government also tried—but failed—to pass a wide-ranging constitutional amendment bill. The bill would have broadly expanded executive power and amended presidential election laws in a manner that critics saw as intended to enable Lungu to eke out a narrow win in an anticipated close 2021 race and continue in office with broadened authorities.

The opposition also interpreted Electoral Commission (EC) decisions to scrap an existing voter register, rapidly compile a new one in late 2020, and not allow independent auditing of the new registry as favoring Lungu. The new registry significantly expanded the number of voters in historical PF strongholds and decreased in those in pro-UPND areas. The EC also drew criticism for suspending campaigning to dampen election violence and COVID-19 transmission risks. The action allegedly targeted UPND activities primarily, however; critics asserted that PF-affiliated state officials continued to campaign the guise of carrying out official business.

Hichilema: Background and Priorities

Hichilema, born in 1962 in a rural southern town, grew up herding cattle. He later earned several higher education degrees, including an MBA, and headed local affiliates of two blue chip accounting and business consulting firms. He also has been a private enterprise promoter and investor active in the finance, health, tourism, and other sectors.

Hichilema’s political career began in 2006, when he was selected to be the UPND’s leader and presidential nominee after the death of UPND founder Anderson Mazoka. Hichilema proved to be a vocal opposition leader and was repeatedly detained or questioned by police, often on arguably dubious grounds after sparring with incumbent governments. Political tensions between the UPND and the PF increased after Lungu’s 2016 re-election. In 2017, Hichilema was arrested on treason charges, though the case was later suspended and he was released after mediation by the Commonwealth. Political tensions then decreased for a time, but grew again in 2019 and 2020 in advance of the 2021 polls and over issues such as the government’s attempt to amend the constitution (see Textbox above).

Hichilema’s stated priorities are to promote good governance and economic growth, foster fiscal and debt sustainability, and reduce poverty, notably through efforts

to create jobs and socioeconomic equity and inclusion. Women and youth, reported core bases of support for the UPND, are key targets of such efforts; Hichilema has pledged to prioritize political and economic gender equality, female access to education, and women's participation in governance. His Vice President, Mutale Nalumango, is a woman, and the UPND elected females as speaker and deputy speaker of parliament.

Economy

Zambia is a top global copper producer, though employment is highly concentrated in the agriculture sector. Poverty is widespread, and the economy has faced headwinds in recent years. The economic growth rate fell from 4.0% in 2018 to 1.4% in 2019, before contracting by 3.1% in 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Meanwhile, inflation rose and unemployment rates remained high, notably among youth, whose jobless rate is roughly double that of the broader adult labor force. To foster growth, the new government seeks to diversify the economy, expand productivity, attract and protect local and foreign investment by fostering a stable, transparent business environment, and support small and medium business growth and entrepreneurship generally. Key state sectoral investment targets include agriculture, mining, energy, financial services, tourism, as well as technology, healthcare, and education. Hichilema also has prioritized efforts to address climate change impacts, including by establishing a Green Economy and Environment Ministry.

Debt

Zambia's external debt grew rapidly under Lungu, more than doubling between 2015 and 2020, the World Bank reported, as public spending ballooned and growth withered. The Hichilema administration estimates that as of June 2021, total national debt stock stood at nearly \$27 billion. These data show that Chinese state and private firms, which often use Chinese state-linked credit, are owed \$5.9 billion, about 36% of the foreign portion of this debt. (Separate prior World Bank and private analysts' estimates suggest that total and Chinese-owed debt could be even higher; the Lungu government reportedly withheld some loan data on national security or other grounds.)

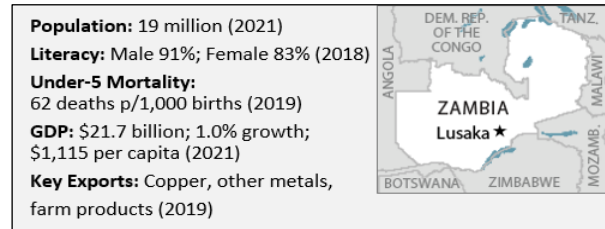
State debt is concentrated in the power sector, which is ailing, leading to periodic blackouts and hindering copper processing, the source of about 80% of Zambia's export earnings in 2019 and a target of substantial Chinese investment. In late 2020, Zambia became the first African country to default on its external debt during the COVID-19 pandemic. The default, a missed payment to Eurobond holders, followed these creditors' refusal to renegotiate repayment due to a lack of data on debt owed to China and their reported fear that any concessions offered would effectively subsidize repayments to Chinese lenders. In late 2021, the Hichilema government and the IMF reached a tentative lending agreement that would support the government's economic and governance reform agenda. The IMF also has indicated that it may push for Zambian debt renegotiation under the G20 Common Framework.

Governance

Hichilema has appointed new police and military leaders and pledged to strengthen oversight of state institutions and

constitutional checks and balances. He also has vowed to support civil society-advocated reform efforts and ensure respect for media freedom, civil liberties, and human rights. His government has hedged on repeal of the historically repressive Public Order Act, however, and some observers see his approach to civil service reform as partisan. He also has pledged zero-tolerance for corruption, which had reportedly grown under Lungu, but also has suggested that amnesty might be permitted for past corruption if illicitly-acquired funds are returned to the state. How such an amnesty might work is unclear, and in late 2021, police arrested an ex-foreign minister on corruption charges.

Figure 1. Zambia at Glance



Source: CIA, World Bank, and IMF reference databases.

U.S. Assistance and Relations

Roughly \$9 million in U.S. aid supported the 2021 electoral process, with a focus on civil society-led electoral cycle and vote observation, education, and political inclusion efforts centering on empowering women, youth, and those with disabilities. This aid also supported technical support for the EC and reform of the repressive Public Order Act.

U.S. officials welcomed the democratic transfer of power to Hichilema, who met with U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Power days after the vote. She commended “the critical...vigilant oversight” of civil society in enhancing “the transparency of the electoral process and... widespread confidence in the results, despite the constraints imposed by the government.” They also discussed his anti-corruption and governance agenda, and Power pledged ongoing U.S. partnership with the new government, building upon past congressionally-authorized support for Zambia in the areas of health, education, climate change, economic growth, and democracy and governance. In September, Hichilema met at the White House with Vice President Kamala Harris, who lauded his governance and economic agendas and welcomed a deepening of bilateral ties.

Zambia, which joined in the Biden Administration's late 2021 Summit for Democracy, was allocated an estimated \$441 million in USAID and State Department development aid in FY2021, much of it focused on healthcare projects, notably to counter HIV/AIDS. Zambia also has received U.S. vaccine donations and at least \$34 million in emergency U.S. aid to combat COVID-19. Since Hichilema's election, the United States has separately pledged at least \$23 million in new aid supporting civil liberties, governance reforms, and economic growth.

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