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Zambia

The Republic of Zambia, a landlocked southern African country, has historically been politically stable and has held regular elections since a return to multiparty politics in 1991, after nearly two decades of one-party rule. The government reportedly uses the state legal apparatus to restrict opposition political activity and muzzle critics, however, curtailing the exercise of civic freedoms. Corruption is also a governance challenge, and Zambia faces economic headwinds. Since 2014, economic growth has slowed, while public debt has risen. U.S.-Zambian relations are cordial and center primarily on bilateral development cooperation, notably in the health sector.

Politics: Background and Recent Developments

Zambia has a presidential system with a unicameral parliament. The country has held multiple elections since 1991 and is rated “Partly Free” by the U.S. nonprofit Freedom House. Surveys by Afrobarometer, a think tank, suggest that the public supports free and fair elections, but a number of elections since 1991 have featured alleged irregularities and limited political violence. Fierce electoral competition and frequently polarized politics may account for an arguably antidemocratic current: Several recent governments, and the current one, have used presidential clout, state powers, and repressive laws to target political opponents and favor allies.

Recent Elections

Incumbent President Edward Lungu, of the Patriotic Front (PF), came to power after the 2014 death in office of his predecessor, Michael Sata (PF), whose term Lungu was elected to complete. Lungu then won election for a full term in 2016 by a slim margin, defeating his archrival, Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development (UPND), the main opposition party. The PF also holds a narrow majority (80 of 156 seats) in the parliament. General elections are next slated for 2021.

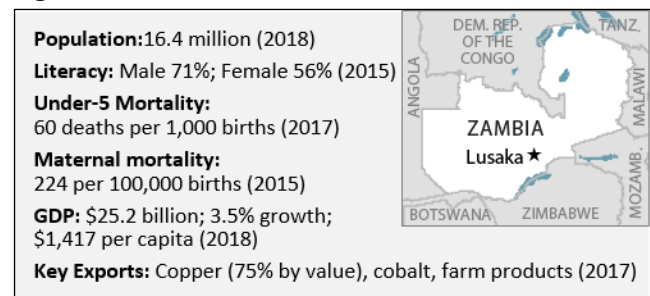
The 2016 elections featured pre-poll violence, partisan PF use of state resources, state harassment of media that hosted the opposition, and the arguably questionable use of the Public Order Act—which governs public assembly—to hinder opposition political rallies. A UPND court case seeking to overturn the election was thrown out on a technicality, drawing criticism from the U.S.-based Carter Center. The UPND has since contended that the vote was fraudulent and that Lungu’s tenure is illegitimate.

Political Climate

The ongoing politicized use of state authority has spurred some observers to warn of creeping authoritarianism under Lungu. Concerns over governance trends are reflected in reports by such organizations as Freedom House and Human Rights Watch, as well as the U.S. State Department’s 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights

Practices report. The government also appears to use the award of state positions to help secure its agenda in parliament—nearly half of PF members in parliament hold ministerial posts—and has dismissed numerous allegedly pro-UPND public servants.

Figure 1. Zambia at a Glance



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

A range of opposition parties and individuals face state harassment, particularly the UPND and its leader, Hichilema. In 2017, Hichilema was charged with treason and held in a maximum security prison for months. The charges were suspended—just prior to a trial seen as having the potential to spur instability, given heated tensions over the case—but could be renewed. Hichilema has since faced other constraints on his political activity, and in late 2018 was detained for questioning after allegedly inciting riots by making remarks on the possible sale of a state-owned firm to Chinese interests during a radio interview. Freedom House reports that the latter incident could be used to disqualify Hichilema as a 2021 presidential candidate.

Rule of Law and Press Freedom

The judiciary also has faced periodic political pressure, notably in relation to election legal disputes and other political cases. In late 2018, Lungu warned of chaos should the Constitutional Court block his bid for a third term in 2021. Weeks later, the entirely Lungu-appointed court ruled unanimously that a two-term presidential tenure limit did not apply to Lungu with respect to the 2021 elections, as his first term had been a partial one. His eligibility had been a matter of heated contention since his 2016 election.

While the press is lively and some privately owned media sources criticize the government, according to Freedom House, the state pressures the media to minimize opposition coverage. Many media outlets, notably government-aligned ones, reportedly comply and also self-censor. In recent years, authorities have routinely used tax, licensing, libel, and sedition laws to harass selected media outlets and curtail their activity, and PF supporters have periodically disrupted broadcasts airing opposition views.

In April 2019, the PF-dominated parliament enacted a law ostensibly aimed at fostering government-opposition

cooperation. The law contains a series of provisions for changing the constitution, ensuring the independence of the judiciary and other institutions, amending the Public Order Act, and enacting electoral reforms. The law also established a national dialogue on these and other issues. The UPND opposed the law's passage and, with some other parties, has boycotted the dialogue, contending that these efforts are PF-dominated and partisan.

Economy and Key Development Challenges

Zambia has large deposits of minerals, particularly copper. Mining accounts for 70% of Zambia's exports, making Zambia vulnerable to market fluctuations. The country enjoyed fast growth from 2005 to 2014, averaging 7.4% a year, but in 2015 gross domestic product growth (GDP) fell to 2.9%. GDP growth later recovered moderately; it stood at 3.5% in 2018. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects continued low growth over the next five years.

The local currency, the *Kwacha*, has depreciated concurrently with the drop in GDP, while chronic deficit spending has swelled Zambia's external debt. This debt, which has increased an average of 20.7% a year since 2010, stood at \$16.3 billion in 2017, according to the World Bank. Recently, the government took measures to curtail spending, but political pressure to maintain funding flows ahead of the 2021 elections may undercut such efforts.

Despite years of growth, many Zambians have remained poor. The World Bank estimates that 54% of citizens lived in poverty in 2015 (latest data). Nominal per capita incomes have decreased since peaking at \$1,840 in 2013, and stood at \$1,417 in 2018. About 54% of Zambians work in agriculture, mostly as smallholder farmers. Periodic droughts have reduced food security and the rate of agricultural productivity, which already was low due to insufficient access to farming inputs and technology. An ongoing drought has contributed to massive electricity shortages. The tourism industry accounted for just over 4% of imports in 2017. While the value of tourism receipts comprises a small portion of overall economic activity, the sector is a source of local jobs and non-mining sector hard currency. Tourism in Zambia centers on game parks and conservation areas, which cover about 8% of the country, and include Victoria Falls, a world-famous waterfall.

Development challenges include high unemployment, lack of roads and other infrastructure, a weak private sector, and limited access to social services like education and health care. In 2017, the Lungu administration launched a roughly \$27 billion 2017-2021 National Development Plan centering on infrastructure projects, economic diversification, and reductions in poverty and income inequality. The plan also prioritizes public finance reforms, private sector development, and communications reforms.

HIV/AIDS poses socioeconomic burdens, particularly as HIV often affects those at the peak of their productive and reproductive lives. The adult HIV prevalence rate, however, has dropped gradually since peaking at 15.9% in 1998; it stood at 11.5% in 2017 according to UNAIDS. Malaria is another major public health challenge. The government has made improved health care a core development goal, for which it receives substantial U.S. assistance (see below).

Corruption, notably graft related to state expenditures and contracts, is a major challenge; questionable spending has reportedly contributed significantly to high debt levels. A 2019 Transparency International survey found that 66% of Zambians view corruption as having risen over the prior year and 70% view state anticorruption efforts as poor.

China

Chinese firms have invested heavily in mining in Zambia and are involved in the construction and retail sectors, among others. China's government also provides development aid and state-to-state loans. Some Chinese-Zambian credit and commercial transactions have reportedly been opaque, and some loans have appeared to exceed the nominal value of the goods or projects at issue. Questions about these issues and other aspects of commercial ties with China have spurred political controversy and, in some cases, allegations that Chinese loans have contributed to rising public debt and potentially to corruption. Chinese firms' labor practices have also drawn fire, and pejorative views of China have featured in political campaigns and discourse. In 2018, President Lungu publicly referred to Chinese people as "cockroaches"—but met with investors from China a day later. As a candidate, the late President Sata harshly criticized China, but after assuming power, his government cooperated closely with that of China.

U.S. Relations

U.S.-Zambian center primarily on U.S. development aid programs. In FY2018, \$452 million in State Department- and U.S. Agency for International Development-administered aid was appropriated for Zambia. Of this, 92% supported health programs, primarily under the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the President's Malaria Initiative, as well as maternal and child health, family planning, and reproductive health. Another \$36 million supported programs centering on good governance, political competition, and civil society, water and sanitation, basic education, agriculture, and environmental sustainability. An International Military Education and Training program received \$0.4 million.

The State Department requested \$440 million in FY2019 and \$365 million for FY2020. (FY2019 country-level aid allocations are not yet available.) Over 98% of such funding would support health programs in both years. In FY2020, \$5 million would support wildlife anti-trafficking activity, environmental conservation, small business growth, basic education, and democratic governance—including programs to aid the electoral process and reduce restrictions on civil rights ahead of the 2021 elections. A longstanding Peace Corps Program focuses on agriculture, education, the environment, and health. Between 2012 and 2018, Zambia also implemented a \$354.8 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact. The compact supported water supply, sanitation, and drainage projects.

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