

# ARE DEMONSTRATIONS THE ANSWER?

Peter Henriot

To demonstrate or not - that is the question! But is it really the question, or is there something deeper we should all be looking at?

It seems to me - and to many Zambians that I've recently spoken to – that all the fuss about planning demonstrations about the rising price of food, or preventing demonstrations by threats of massive repression, is really missing the point. What is at stake is whether or not people are believing that Government is doing its best to meet a very serious crisis affecting the majority of people in the country. And people are wondering about how most effectively to voice out their concerns and get some immediate actions.

In a dramatic announcement last Friday, Government withdrew sponsorship of the 2011 All-African Games. It was a move justified by rising costs amidst the global financial crisis and accompanied by a decision to put the anticipated cost of billions of kwacha to higher priority areas of expenditure. I believe most Zambians would agree with the wisdom of the decision and would commend the Government for such action.

So why can't the Government get the same consensus of agreement about its talk over its efforts to address the food crisis in the country? To discover why, we need to ask some questions.

## REAL CRISIS?

First, is there really a food crisis? Well, at this very moment, it is clear that mealie meal costs are simply too high for the majority of households to afford decent meals. The JCTR Basic Needs Basket (BNB) research in cities across the country at the end of November revealed costs ranging from mid-K50,000 to mid-K60,000. Coupled with increases in other food and non-food essentials, the BNB for Lusaka is approaching close to K2 million!

Stories are appearing in the media daily of people surviving on mangoes and roots. Politicians of all parties are reporting difficult situations across the country.

Moreover, projections for a good harvest this season are sorely troubled by late rains in some areas, predictions of coming floods in other areas, and the mixed-up issue of fertiliser prices and distribution. To add to the problem is the fact that some of Zambia's food production is still being exported (albeit secretly, e.g., along the DRC border) while additional food is being purchased for import (always a tricky area, as history shows!).

Yes, there is a food crisis, and that is enough to bring out many people to demonstrate if they feel the Government is not acting quickly and responsibly. Whether or not demonstrations are a wise response raises the second question.

## EFFECTIVE DEMONSTRATIONS?

Second, can demonstrations prod Government to be more effective in getting Zambia out of the current food crisis? As shown in the recent past, pro-Government demonstrations are highly lauded and encouraged (even without permits!), but demonstrations challenging Government policies are usually condemned and prevented. Let's be candid and acknowledge that fact and not hide behind expressions of "permits," "regulations," "dangers," "unnecessary," "risky," "unbiblical," etc.

"Unbiblical" - that's a strange criticism voiced by a high-ranking Government official a few days ago! My Bible shows me plenty of instances of good people challenging leaders. To cite a few well-known examples: Moses leading a massive Exodus demonstration against Pharaoh (Exodus 12 and 13), Jesus confronting Pilate (Luke 23:2-5), Peter defying authorities (Acts 4:19, 5:29). But maybe that's the subject of another column....

Yes, there is always the chance that a peacefully-designed demonstration could turn violent if unruly persons join the crowd. But isn't that why the police (not necessarily the army!) are called upon to protect the demonstrators so that their rightful voice can be heard?

Personally, I've participated in many demonstrations in the USA over the years - anti-war demonstrations, political rallies, racial justice marches, "Free Nelson Mandela" actions of civil disobedience, etc. The police were always there to protect us as we exercised our civic rights to protest and to call out for justice. If and when any violence was threatened, the police acted dutifully and impartially. They were not used to defend Government interests but citizens' rights!

And so the next question to ask is, are demonstrations - albeit legal and democratically supportable - the best and most effective approach at this moment to meet the food crisis? Is there another way that might be more effective?

## **IMMEDIATE INDABA?**

Let me suggest the obvious. The President has acknowledged difficulties and has stated he is open to dialogue. He has spoken of setting up a taskforce to look at the rising food prices. But isn't something much more creative needed and expected of elected leadership? Something pro-active in the best interests of all, not reactive in the face of rising complaints and growing unrest.

For example, immediately call an "indaba" of heads of all political parties, key Government ministries, farmers and millers and retailers, three church mother bodies, major civil society groups, cooperating partners, etc. Immediately - by the end of this week!

What would be the purpose of such an indaba? To discuss the crisis situation together in an intelligent and non-partisan fashion, in order to specifically come up with short-range solutions (e.g., wider distribution of emergency food stocks, introduction of hammer mills, etc.) and long-term solutions (e.g., encouragement of diversification of crops, greater irrigation facilities, etc.). Don't put blames first but solutions first.

Something like this, creating consensus on how to move forward and then investing in sensible programmes, will of course cost money. Clearly, the agricultural sector and overall rural development should be receiving much higher budgetary priority than it currently receives. And aren't we told that money is not available - global economic crisis, you know, falling copper prices, closing mines, depreciating Kwacha, etc., etc.

## **MORE MONEY?**

But let's be honest. Just recently a special dinner could be held in Lusaka to raise money for the Ruling Party. Hundreds purchased tickets at one million Kwacha a plate! Dozens of para-statal and business houses and well-to-do individuals publicly pledged millions of Kwacha for the "good cause" of supporting the Ruling Party. Certainly many, many millions of Kwacha were raised. This showed that money is available if called for!

And during this Christmas season, stores are filled with some people who seem to have plenty of Kwacha to spend. Going to shops for purposes of consumption seems to be promoted even more than going to churches for purposes of worship! Again, doesn't this show that money is available if called for!

So, my suggestion is straightforward: Government officials and their friends shouldn't condemn demonstrations without offering an immediate and positive alternative to address a very serious crisis. Demonstrate to the people where Government's priorities are.

Surely Zambians deserve better from their elected officials.

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