

HONOUR THE DEAD WITH AN HONOURABLE SUCCESSOR

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When President Levy Patrick Mwanawasa is buried tomorrow, amidst both great sorrow and wonderful remembrances, what will not be buried are his deeds and desires, his accomplishments and aspirations. This is what is called his “legacy” – something we have been hearing a lot about during this mourning period.

The focus, of course, has been on his “positive legacy.” Surely no one claims that President Mwanawasa was a saint, an “anointed” who never made any mistakes, a genius who always did exactly the right thing at the right moment for the right reason. But as we have been correctly and repeatedly reminded during recent weeks, he was a leader whose vision for Zambia contained many notes of justice and peace and development and unity and integrity and reconciliation.

A major reason for calling to mind his positive legacy, of course, is the desire of Zambians to assure that his successor, whoever he or she might be, must not substantially depart from those notes in his vision. And that is why choosing candidates and electing one to the highest office in the land is such a very, very important task in the next few weeks.

IS IT WORTH ALL THE EXPENSE?

A budget of 240 billion kwacha or about 68.57 million US dollars! That figure, announced last week by the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), is a lot of money needed to be spent on the presidential by-election to be held in the next few weeks. Is it worth all the expense?

That’s the question many Zambians might be asking these days as the election is being prepared. I personally believe that it is of course worth it, even with the sad flaw that fewer than 3.9 million Zambians will be on the approved voters’ list and many of these won’t vote because they are either dead or have moved, lost their cards, or lost interest.

Many groups will be offering roll-calls of the qualities for the next President. It is especially important to examine those qualities, especially as the major political parties choose – or have already chosen – their candidate. Let me suggest here three obvious qualities. I choose these three without direct reference to our late President’s legacy or to any particular candidate. These are simply non-partisan qualities that clearly must be found in a potential candidate if she or he is to be considered worthy of the high office.

CONCERN FOR THE IMPOVERISHED

First, it is certainly necessary that the candidate has the reputation – based both on words and on deeds – of a profound love and concern for the majority of Zambians, those who are classified by Government statistics as the “poor.” Our Government tells us that two-thirds of all Zambians, more than 80% of those in rural areas, live below a poverty line that indicates whether or not they eat regularly each day, have access to decent shelter, water and sanitation, health and education services, employment and recreation.

This majority of Zambians are the “impoverished,” those whose status is the consequence of political, economic, social and cultural structures that have marginalised them, making them vulnerable and often powerless. Surely there are some few exceptions among that majority

number, e.g., those who are able to move decently even with the little they have, or those whose lazy habits prevent them from moving at all.

But the point to make here is that any person who would want to lead Zambia as President in the future must be known and respected as one who acknowledges the complete unacceptability of such great numbers of poor people in a country so very rich in resources and socio-economic potential as Zambia and is committed to effectively and equitably changing that unacceptable situation.

Secular support for such a call can be found in the examples of countries that have come out of poverty by focusing on improving the educational and health potential of the majority of citizens, examples such as the Asian “tigers” of South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The World Bank’s 2006 Development Report highlights the necessity of “equity” – which calls for advancing the poor if the rich are to be sustained.

But Christian support for the call to focus on the poor – something people who want to lead a so-called “Christian nation” surely should pay close attention to! – can be found in what the Church’s social teaching calls the “preferential option for the poor.” This biblical emphasis is found in God’s special concern for the “anawim,” the “little ones” (e.g., widows, orphans, landless, refugees) in the Old Testament and Jesus’ clear identification with the “least” (e.g., hungry, thirsty, homeless, imprisoned – see Matthew 25: 31-46). And don’t give us any of that line about “The poor you have always with you”! Jesus said that as an empirical observation and not as a policy mandate!

NO TAIN OF CORRUPTION

The second necessary trait is that the candidate seeking the office of the President comes forward without the slightest taint of corruption. This point has been made again and again because of the immense suffering of the people of Zambia, especially the poor, caused by major corruption (plunder of the national economy by key leaders), middle corruption (misuse of public resources by government officers) and petty corruption (minor “nchekeleko,” e.g., bribes to obtain administrative favours).

It should be obvious that a reputation for corruption should immediately and strongly disqualify any potential candidate. Zambia simply is not going to move forward unless it makes much greater strides in reducing the incidence of corruption and changing its international reputation. One doesn’t have to be perfect, but one surely should not be known as a person who has taken, or would take, advantage of her or his position to unjustly gain political power or economic success.

Surely it is important as one major political party in Zambia chooses its candidate from among many aspirants that recent rumours of corruption are clearly put to rest. When the National Secretary of that party, and a well-respected anti-corruption watchdog in civil society, have both raised serious concerns about possible corrupt practices being utilised to secure nomination, then immediate, full-scale, public and fearless investigation should be made to clarify the picture. Let’s hear about that in the next few days ahead!

UNIFIER FOR ALL ZAMBIANS

Finally, to pinpoint a third trait is simply to repeat the sacred motto, “One Zambia, One Nation!” A potential candidate for the President of all Zambians must not be chosen because of tribal or regional considerations. Is that person good for every Zambian, a

servant of all the people regardless of family connections, tribal identifications, or regional considerations? Admittedly, that's a tough order to fulfill, but it is an essential one!

I'm not so politically naïve as to think that some tribal and regional considerations would not enter into the discussions. But in the final analysis, such considerations certainly are not the most important reasons for choosing a candidate. Otherwise, a political party openly announces to all the people that it simply doesn't believe in democracy!

So, as we put to rest President Mwanawasa tomorrow, let's not put to rest the search for a successor who has the poor at heart, no corruption in hand, and a unifying vision in head. That's surely the best way to honour our departed President! M.H.S.R.I.P.

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