

LESSONS FOR ZAMBIA FROM OBAMA'S VICTORY

Peter Henriot

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Yes, I will readily admit that there were some tears in my eyes early Wednesday morning, 05 November, as I watched on TV the acceptance speech of President-elect Barack Obama in Grant's Park, Chicago. I had been there forty years ago in that same Park, participating in a civil rights demonstration led by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Now I was there via TV, with the one hundred thousand supporters of Obama who were cheering and crying at the event that has changed USA history.

A few years later, I was teaching in an African-American university (that is, all black) in the recently de-segregated state of Virginia. The course was the constitutional law of slavery – a really painful historical analysis of a disgraceful period of inhumanity in the USA, a period then followed by another disgraceful period of a hundred years of legalised apartheid.

Like so many of my fellow citizens at that time – black or white – I never thought I would see in my lifetime the scene that brought the tears to my eyes a few days ago. Thank God that some change has been possible, and pray to God that the change opens up new paths for the USA and the globe!

So what does the Obama victory mean to Zambia? Let me suggest three things we can learn from that election that should help us in recovering from the recent election here and moving forward to future elections that would strengthen our democracy.

OPPENENTS NOT ENEMIES

One very obvious lesson is that if I want to build a true and stable multi-party democracy I don't label someone who belongs to another party as my "enemy" and want to treat that person as a dangerous adversary. That person is an "opponent" who has just as much right as I do to freely enter into the political realm and solicit votes based on her or his political manifesto.

On the basis of my intelligent analysis, I may judge that other person's manifesto to be deeply flawed and not deserving of any thinking person's support. OK, let me share my intelligent analysis and call for the defeat of an opponent who proposes such foolishness. But I should remember that that person is an "opponent" and not an "enemy"!

Isn't that the way we saw most of the Obama-McCain race develop? McClain analysed Obama's tax proposals and his medical insurance plans and criticised them as not worthy of support. Obama analysed McCain's Iraq War policies and his responses to the current economic crisis and rejected them as unacceptable. Both candidates had sharp words about the other's records and proposals – but in the exchange they treated each other as "opponent" and not as "enemy."

But unfortunately that wasn't the way the recent political campaign unfolded here in Zambia. At least I didn't get a sense that the major candidates seriously analysed the policy positions put forth in the manifestoes of each Party. Rather, the tradition – something which is seen even outside of election periods -- was now all-too-evident: if someone disagrees with me, don't treat her or him as a rational opponent but as a dangerous enemy.

The very serious problem arises, of course, that it's easier, almost more justified, to insult and injure someone I consider an enemy rather than an opponent. And if I can, it will even be my right and duty to rig the elections so that enemies don't come into office!

Unfortunately, this practice of identifying people as enemies not only to my Party but also, most especially, to the nation at large was intensified during the recent Zambian campaign by the very unprofessional diatribes, invectives and harangues practiced by our print media, both government and private. The statement last week from the Law Association of Zambia (LAZ) points out this serious electoral failing of the media.

ELECTORAL PROCESS REFORM

A second lesson for Zambia to follow if we want to get more equitable election results is to reform any serious flaws in the electoral process. Many Zambians have told me how amazed they are that results in the recent USA elections could come so quickly and apparently without any hints or rigging or big mistakes.

But such a smooth electoral process hasn't always been the case in the USA. I remember the serious accusations that the 1960 elections that put John F. Kennedy into the White House had serious flaws – especially in the windfall votes his Democratic Party received in the State of Illinois. And we can recall the scandals of vote counting in the State of Florida in the 2000 elections, when even a petition to the US Supreme Court could not set right the defeat of Al Gore by George W. Bush (with all the consequent tragedies of putting that man in the White House!).

Yet government authorities in the USA, both national and State, worked hard to assure a smoother and more problem-free electoral process. They made the necessary changes to improve the system. And so you could get a clear count and final decision without difficulties.

Now that's a lesson for Zambian authorities to learn! The independent reviews of elections since 1991 and the specific proposals for electoral reform coming from court decisions, recommendations from high-level commissions and advocacy efforts by churches and NGO have – let's be honest! – repeatedly urged addressing the shame of electoral malpractices. Yes, some minor tinkering has been done. But so much more must be done, especially prior to the 2011 tri-partite elections.

NO TRIBALISM

Finally, a word can be said about how the Obama campaign worked hard to overcome ethnic and religious differences and build a united Party that could appeal even to Republicans. The newly elected President is most often referred to as the "Black," but his attractiveness clearly crossed racial, ethnic, tribal and regional lines. Whites, Blacks, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, Protestants, Catholics, rich, middle class and poor, etc. – all different shades of the USA citizenry voted to put this son of a Kenyan and a Kansan into the White House.

I believe that Zambia needs to learn from that USA experience. "One Zambia, One Nation" is still this country's proudest claim – making Zambia the envy of its neighbours!

But voting patterns on 30 October reveal a real threat to the continuation of that claim. Northern, Southern and Eastern voters all-too-often followed tribal lines in choosing their candidate. And this was all-too-often in response to very narrow Party claims and promises. National political instability is a real potential if this pattern persists.

Yes, the Obama victory can mean much to Zambia, if these three lessons are taken seriously: respect opponents, reform electoral systems and diminish tribalism.

Let's hear the leaders of our political parties talk about that!

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