

NUMBER ONE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN ISSUE

Peter Henriot

So what's new for the agenda of the coming presidential by-elections? Surely that question is going to have to be addressed by the competing parties and candidates if any real interest is to be generated prior to the 30 October elections and any widespread participation is to be expected on that election day.

Clearly the best agenda cannot simply be, "Continue the legacy." That would mean only more of the same in the direction that President Levy Mwanawasa was leading the country. As appreciated as so much of that legacy might be – manifested in the outpouring of praises from so many quarters that was experienced during the official mourning period – more certainly needs to be said if holding these elections at such great expense is to be justified.

POVERTY QUESTIONS

For many Zambians, there is one clear issue that needs not only stronger attention but also newer responses. That is the issue that affects the daily lives of the vast majority of Zambian citizens, the unacceptable levels of impoverishment in such a richly endowed country.

Now before the reader of this column turns the page with, "No, Henriot, not that poverty theme again!" let's just face an obvious fact. The poverty theme comes up because that's the basic context within which the presidential by-elections are going to be held next month. And to ask questions about it is strictly a non-partisan exercise.

Yes, it is true that macro-economic indicators might look favourable at the moment – though not as favourable as the Government hoped and planned for at the time of its presentation of Budget 2008. Single digit inflation has faded away, projected growth rates of 7% are being re-evaluated, income from the new mine tax regime is lower than hoped for, agricultural targets will not be reached, and the Kwacha is bouncing around in ways that make both foreign investors and ordinary citizens nervous.

While there may be no dispute that there are good things occurring in the economy, the basic question that must be asked is: are there good things occurring in the lives of most of the citizens of this country? And isn't that the central question that should be asked – with some pertinent answers affecting national policies – as the presidential by-election campaign heats up?

The JCTR's *Basic Need Basket* for Lusaka is now around K1.8 million – and that's for "basics" not for "extras"! How many Lusaka residents who head households of six or more, whether they are employed or unemployed, can manage to provide for those basics in the weeks leading up to the elections?

MMD ISSUES?

In what could be termed an opening campaign address for the MMD's candidate, the "State of the Nation" address by Acting President Rupiah Banda last week was surprising in its omission of any mention of this challenge of national poverty. I heard several Zambians comment that they were surprised that issues such as household food security, health and education were passed over in this important address.

It is true that the MMD Manifesto for 2006-2011 highlights many commitments to improving the social sectors. Having looked at this manifesto by going to a google search prior to writing this

column, I can see that the MMD did profess a commitment to bettering the lives of the citizens. Such a commitment could be seen as part of the late President's legacy. So one wonders why it was not highlighted very clearly and prominently in the "State of the Nation" address. Is there some backing off from that commitment?

UPND STANDS?

As I write these words, I don't have in front of me a current UPND Manifesto – if, in fact, an updated one actually does exist. But when driving through Monze a few days ago I noted a very large billboard with the picture of Hakainde Hichilema next to words something like: "Vote for Good Health Care for All Zambians!" I'm sure billboards like that are appearing throughout Zambia and that in this way we are getting some sense of the position on social services being taken in the presidential race by candidate HH.

But Zambians will need to hear more concrete policies and plans, programmes and priorities, if they are to evaluate the stand of UPND's candidate on the issue of dealing with poverty in this country.

PF COMMITMENTS?

The Patriotic Front has recently posted an attractive web page that I'm looking at while writing this column. There one finds a Mission Statement with an explicit commitment to "strengthening the health and education policy to improve fallen standards." And in the Message from the President, some strong (even if a bit over-generalised?) questions are asked about how the Ruling Party can be pushing for massive salary increments when "our people have nothing to eat....our people have no money in their pockets...workers [are] still underpaid"!

Yes, addressing poverty in the country is clearly one of PF's priorities. How realistic are its recommendations, of course, must be subject to extensive examination and critical evaluation during the presidential election campaign. But at least the topic is on the agenda.

QUESTIONS FOR ALL CANDIDATES

So how can we assure that the issue of addressing the impoverishment of the majority of Zambians assumes a more central place in the agenda of the candidates seeking to serve as the next elected president of this country? Let me suggest a set of straightforward questions that should be put to the major presidential candidates in order to hear some straightforward answers:

1. Do you believe that the poverty of the majority of Zambians (63% nationally, 82% in rural areas) should be a central issue in this campaign? Why or why not?
2. Do you accept the development model that says economic growth must come before poverty reduction? Or do you have another view of how to deal with poverty in a way that would promote economic growth?
3. Would you amend any part of the Fifth National Development Plan (FNDP) or the Vision 2030 to better address the challenge of dealing with such widespread poverty in Zambia?
4. Do you accept that the very large proposed salary increments should go to high government officials now or should these be deferred or trimmed down until Budget priorities and implementations address more effectively the problem of poverty and social services?

5. How can we evaluate you about the poverty issue from your past record, present promises and future visions?

Let's ask these questions in the next few weeks and let's get some clear answers from anyone who says they deserve the Zambian citizen's most precious gift, a vote!

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