

# MORE QUESTIONS, BUT FEWER ANSWERS?

Peter Henriot

Last week I used this column to raise some questions that are very much in the air these days about the salary and conditions increments for high Government officials. But not too many answers came to these questions! Yet they were non-partisan questions, simply voicing out the concerns about the priorities being demonstrated by the Ruling Party and its Government at this critical moment in Zambia's history.

Why call it a "critical moment"? Well, certainly the condition of President Mwanawasa, even with all the good prayers being offered for him, is profoundly unsettling for the political and economic situation of the nation. While we wait patiently for full disclosure of his condition now and in the future, it is certainly no time to introduce radically divisive measures in ordinary governance. Moreover, with the country's major university closed and our major referral hospital threatened with cessation of activities through a doctors' strike, the moment is too tense to grant massive increments to some in Government service while denying them to others in highly sensitive spots.

## WHOSE PROSPERITY?

A huge rally was held last Saturday in Lusaka to address this issue of increments. Despite its highly partisan character, there were many very serious non-partisan voices raised by civil society groups challenging both the wisdom and the morality of such increments. These voices should not be ignored, ridiculed or dismissed out-of-hand by spokespersons who do not want to forthrightly deal with the issues.

For instance, one speaker stated quite simply: "Zambia is a prosperous country and therefore all Zambians should be prosperous, not simply high Government officials!" Some logic in that statement might require a bit of refinement, but the truthfulness of its sentiment can't be denied. Last week, a distinguished and well-respected Zambian economist and Government advisor, Professor Oliver Saasa, commented on the disparity experienced in the country with economic growth (especially through the mines) not benefiting the majority of Zambians.

I thought about that during a trip I took last week outside Lusaka to visit a rural development project sponsored by a church-affiliated group. This group has assisted many families who had been living in one of the capital's most crowded shanty compounds to take up farming in a rather isolated spot. Isolated, but with very good land and water. This past season, working together and using conservation farming techniques, they had experienced a good maize crop. And when I was visiting, the families were already busily working to prepare the ground for early planting for the coming season.

One of the sponsors told me something that I consider to be a very insightful socio-economic observation: "Some high Government officials tell us that the poor in the shanty compounds are lazy. But I say give these people some land, and you'll see that they certainly are not lazy!" And yet such programmes don't seem to be much on the agenda of the Government.

## WHICH PRIORITIES?

So what has that got to do with the current fuss over increasing the salaries and conditions of high Government officials? Well, it certainly points to a matter of priorities! Evidently the Ruling Party and its Government has decided that it is more important to put priorities on increments for these officials than on rural development expenditures, or on assuring that education and health personnel are adequately remunerated.

The economically dangerous and morally disturbing gap between the rich and the poor in the country has been frequently acknowledged by President Mwanawasa and other Government officials. The human side of the gap was well developed by Laura Miti in her POST column last Saturday. Indeed, the Government's own "Vision 2030" – outlining plans for enabling Zambia to be a "middle income country" – explicitly cites the gross disparity in the country revealed in the very high current Gini Co-efficient of 53. The Government pledges to reduce that figure to less than 40 by 2030.

But certainly we can ask if the current pattern of expenditure priorities being pursued by Government will in reality enable it to fulfill its pledge and its own much-touted plans as explicitly expressed in its Vision 2030 document or in the hopes contained in the Fifth National Development Plan. Surely the Government should be prepared to defend these specific increments in the light of the Visions and Plans for the country that it has very roundly endorsed.

## **UNSATISFACTORY ANSWERS?**

It is perhaps instructive to listen to the defensive answers given by Government spokespersons to the challenges made over the increments. Are such answers really intelligently satisfactory? “You can’t expect MPs and high Government officials to have only slave wages!” But really, how can anyone seriously describe the wages currently being received as slave wages! “Business CEOs get better wages than we do!” Yes, but the few CEOs that do are highly trained specialists with considerable experience and immense responsibilities. Can the same be said of every person now claiming to be eligible for these increments? And “MPs in Kenya earn more than MPs in Zambia!” But this is not Kenya and would you expect that every wage earner in Zambia would be justified to make a similar claim?

Perhaps one of the most disappointing comments to come in defense of the increments in the face of all the questions raised is the simple statement to the effect that it’s now a closed deal – Parliament has approved it – period!! But where was the open debate and democratic discussion on the issue that had been promised by the Vice President when he said that Cabinet’s decision would be submitted to Parliamentary review. Walkouts by a handful of Opposition MPs were precipitated by the refusal of Parliament to allow that review through any open debate and democratic discussion!

## **MORE QUESTIONS?**

So where do we stand now, especially in the face of rising cries for demonstrations (hopefully peaceful) to express citizens’ disappointment, distrust and disgust with this whole matter of extravagant increments? Perhaps we could simply ask for clear, full and honest answers to these four questions:

1. Why are these increments being so strongly pushed now at this very moment of national incertitude?
2. Who will sign the bill that has now passed three readings in the absence of the President, or has some unknown procedure been devised to by-pass President Mwanawasa’s approval?
3. Where will the money come from to meet this very large expenditure, especially since the increments have been back-dated to the start of the year when a Budget did not include such expenditure?
4. Will the increments really benefit the majority of Zambians, those 62% percent (80% in the rural areas) that the Government officially acknowledges are living below the poverty line?

Again, some questions that cry out for answers. Will we get any answers this week?

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