

# Kenneth Kaunda – Obituary

On 17 June 2021, Zambia's founding president, Kenneth Kaunda, died at 97 years of age. Born of Malawian missionaries in modern-day Zambia, Kaunda was trained as a teacher before politics weaned him away from that profession and thrust him into the anti-colonial struggle that was brewing in most of Africa in the 1950s. Kaunda lived a complex life, with a fair share of admirable traits and troubling realities. A deeply devoted Christian, his religious fervour has become more manifest in the time after he left office three decades ago. A time has come for Zambians and those interested in that country's politics to appraise the role KK (as he is affectionately known) played in the making of the Republic of Zambia.

As a youthful militant, Kaunda courted imprisonment by and the rancour of colonial officials due to his refusal to endorse the ill-fated Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He also grew disillusioned with Harry Mwanga Nkumbula, an early Zambian nationalist who had sympathies towards a bogus compromise election that would still leave power with the colonial forces. Kaunda was thus arrested in Salisbury (Harare) in 1959, during which Mainza Chona, his confidante, broke away from Nkumbula and formed the United National Independence Party (UNIP), a party that Kaunda later led for about four decades.

His eventual accession to power as Zambia's president in October 1964 had positive regional consequences in Southern Africa. He was fiercely committed to the total eradication of both imperialist and settlement colonialisms in Africa. Apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) used transport diplomacy to blackmail Kaunda into taming his support for liberation movements fighting apartheid and Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Zambia's geographic situation as one of Africa's 16 landlocked countries made it

dependent on coastal countries such as Angola, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania. Thus, Kaunda had to exercise a delicate brand of diplomacy that would not antagonize the countries providing him with the sea routes through which he could export and import. Due to diplomatic rows between Zambia and Rhodesia (through which the route to South Africa's coast passed), Kaunda and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere implored the international community to fund alternative routes for goods that would not pass through the hostile territories of Rhodesia and South Africa. In spite of the refusal of Western powers, China accepted with alacrity and provided both funds and personnel to build what later became the Tanzania Zambia Railway line (TAZARA). Notwithstanding TAZARA's notorious and persistent underperforming, the successful construction of the line showed the high premium that Kaunda put on his anti-colonial fervour. TAZARA was also a major diplomatic coup for China, a poor country at the time that took on a responsibility at which the more affluent (Western) powers had balked.

TAZARA, much like Kaunda's political legacy, was a noble but flawed attempt to develop Zambia and fortify the country's independence. Out of the 27 years of Kaunda's rule, 18 were under one-party rule, during which political opposition was proscribed. The establishment of a one-party state was couched in noble words. Even some of Kaunda's critics acknowledge that this decision was not primarily because Kaunda wanted to keep power for its sake. For example, in *Adventures in Zambian Politics: A Story in Black and White* (2019), former Zambian Vice President, Guy Scott, admits that "Perhaps the time has come to admit that we unjustly thought KK (Kenneth Kaunda) was just hanging on to power like so many of his dubious pals. It was much to our surprise that, when it became unquestionable that the freedom struggle had ended in South Africa, he readily agreed to sign away the one-party state and hold an election." Indeed, in *A Humanist in Africa*, Kaunda decries the tribalism that informed opposition politics. His concern is

explicable, having been born of foreign stoke.

His peaceful acceptance of an election that he lost in 1991, after almost three decades in power, was exemplary in a continent where longtime leaders are loath to submit to fair elections, let alone accept unfavourable results. In the last three decades since he left power, Kaunda has become an admired elder statesman to whom countless people defer for counsel. It would be fitting that his example is in tandem with a country he laid down his life to found. Alas, that has not been the case, especially under the current government. Zambia today has lost the ground that it had made to entrench democracy. Political repression, the muzzling of the media and violence towards whomever the state and the cadres of the ruling party deem an enemy have befouled the country's standing. Economically, Zambia is equally in dire straits; rampant corruption and spiralling external debt have stymied economic growth. The sovereignty that Kaunda and his comrades fought so valiantly for will be imperilled in a Zambia that is deeply drowning in external debt. If these dire circumstances continue without relief, Zambia will be beholden to the demands of its external creditors, notably China.

Thus, in celebrating Kaunda's long and eventful life, Zambians should also have a sober reflection about the sorry state of their country. A fitting tribute to Kaunda could be a Zambia to which he aspired, even though he failed to attain, during his decades in power: a country thriving on all fronts.

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