

# **RELIGIOUS POLITICAL FREEDOM CHALLENGES: ZAMBIA'S CASE STUDY.**

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This paper will discuss the challenges which are faced by various religious groups in Zambia in their relationship with the four successive governments in Zambia. In this paper, various religious bodies are sometimes referred to as the church.

The conflict which arises between the church on one hand and the government on the other, happens when the church seeks to exercise the role of criticism on the operations of the government. This is when the church raises issues that the government is not doing enough to raise the living standards of the people especially the poor. As well as when the government is questioned on its failure to fight corruption.

The state of Zambia became independent in 1964, from the British colonial government. Since then, Zambia has had four successive regimes, headed by Presidents Kenneth Kaunda, Fredrick Chiluba, Levy Mwanawasa and Rupiah Banda.

The diagramme below depicts these four governments, showing how tolerant each government was in relation to the criticism by the church.

**Table 1: Government's Tolerance with the Church**

<b>Name of Government</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>How Tolerant?</b>
Kaunda's Government	1964 – 1991	Dictatorial
Chiluba's Government	1991 – 2001	Intolerant
Mwanawasa's Government	2001 – 2008	Tolerant but Stubborn
Banda's Government	2008 – 2011	Intolerant

**Source:** My own perception from my own experience of 39 years in public life.

As can be seen from Table 1 above, the relationship between the church and the governments in Zambia has been tense. Although I am using the collective name of government, it is actually the Head of state and government, the President who comes out in the name of government to disagree with or to throw back mud and criticism made by the church.

In Kaunda's government, the church (mostly the three mother bodies of Catholic, United Church of Zambia and Evangelical Churches) stood up to speak against the President Kaunda's dictatorship of running the one-party state government, arguing that it was undermining democracy and much needed development. Kaunda retorted, by linking the church to subversive elements, working to destabilize the government. However, the church maintained that, it was not subversive but talking on behalf of the suffering masses of Zambia. Due to this role of the church and to the dischantment of the people, Kaunda was voted out of power in 1991 by a party headed by Chiluba, the diminutive former trade union leader.

During the Chiluba's government, again Chiluba after two years of good governance, he also departed from running a democratic governance. He turned to corruption, where by he used the country's intelligence to syphon money out of government ministries for his personal use and that of his close friends. The end result was that the poor had to suffer more. He also started to entrench himself in power by wanting to change the Constitution to provide for extended term of office of the President from two, five year term to three five year term. This was resisted by the church and many other Zambians followed, leading to his losing elections after his two year term of office.

Mwanawasa's government was characterised by stubbornness and failure to listen from the church's advice on many major national issues such as choosing the modalities and road map for the Constitutional Review Commission, appointment of Ministers outside Parliament and so on. To his credit, however, Mwanawasa fought against corruption. It is him who secured a parliamentary vote to strip his predecessor out of presidential immunities, to prepare for taking him to face prosecution in courts of law for embezzlement of public funds. Mwanawasa's legal training helped him very much to run an honest government, but his lack of experience in public life made him make a lot of administrative blunders which exposed him to criticism by the church.

Rupiah Banda's government on the other hand like Chiluba's is characterised by rampant corruption at both political and civil service levels. He does not listen to church advice. He has come under heavy criticism by the church, especially the Roman Catholic and United Church of Zambia and particularly the Anglican Church. He is terribly intolerant, to the extent that he and his female Minister of Education, had to refer to the Catholic Priests as fathers without wives. His cynical Minister of Education told a meeting which she addressed, which was also attended by Catholic Priests that they ought to be uncomfortable in their seats because of her beautiful bums. There has been more running battles by Banda with the Roman Catholic Church more than in other former governments. This is probably because he feels very insecure, because of late,

there has been revelation that both his father and mother originated from Malawi and Zimbabwe respectively. A factor that could disenfranchise him constitutionally from standing for President of Zambia. This misunderstanding and clashes have led to the two church bodies to covertly work against his government. Unless the coming presidential and parliamentary elections of 20 September 2011 are rigged, there is likelihood that his government could be out voted from power.

The trend of the churches role in Zambia's pluralistic age is changing rapidly from the traditional spiritual role to the human oriented role. It looks like the church is awakening to the reality that a human being is both spiritual and human and that human wellness play a vital role to the spiritual wellness of a person.

In Africa the obstacle to religious political freedom lies in the structures of governments. Most of these governments in Africa have systems where constitutions give excessive presidential powers to the President, who is at the same time Head of State, Head of government and Head of the Ruling Party. This combination tend to turn Presidents into dictators. They tend to think that governing is about themselves. Hence they go to State House not for service but to serve themselves and their families.

And indeed, it is like so, because their constitutions put a lot of powers into their hands. We have just seen how in Zambia, religious political freedoms have been detested and usually ignored by the four Presidents of successive governments. There is therefore a need in Zambia and in other similar African countries to adopt a system where the president will be divorced from being the head of government with executive powers, to simply being head of state with no or very limited executive powers. African politicians must know that it is not by accident that such countries like Britain, Germany and India are democratically stable, they are so, because of the separation of powers between the head of state and the head of government. In America the President appears to be very powerful, but in this country other institutions of government, namely, the Senate, the House of Representatives the Judiciary and public opinion are so strong and do provide the required checks and balances to the institution of the presidency.

What promotes this misunderstanding between the two forces is that the churches in Zambia get agitated when they see that the have-nots and the general public are not benefitting from their government, when the politicians are corrupt and when the system is completely autocratic.

The answer lies in creating a system that would be responsive to the public demand and plight. Doing away with excessive presidential powers reduces about 80% of maladministration and ensures that the priests and pastors are kept at the altar in their churches, instead of worrying about public affairs. Otherwise men and women of God will always try to fill the void created by lack of justice, because there is no contradiction between the struggle for justice and the fulfilment of God's will. One demands the other.