



Zambia Electoral Analysis Project (ZEAP) Briefing paper series

Briefing Paper 9: When is ethnicity a salient feature of Zambian elections and politics?

Findings

- While the influence of ethnicity on voting patterns has been seen as increasing since 2015 and there was a deliberate campaign to deepen the ethnic cleavage for electoral gain, the 2021 election provides evidence of clear cross-ethnic, anti-incumbent voting that demonstrates the limits of ethnic salience in Zambian politics.

Policy Implications

- The new United Party for National Development (UPND) administration must be seen to be fair and balanced in its appointments and governance, in order to avoid entrenching perceptions of ethnic bias.
- Anti-corruption efforts need to be seen as technocratic and independent, rather than as persecution of certain ethnic groups. Two ways that the administration can avoid claims of bias is to 1) strengthen the independence of anti-corruption institutions, and 2) hold a public enquiry or process to air evidence of corruption.

1. Background

Zambia is a multi-ethnic country with over 90% of the population grouped into the four larger socio-cultural or ethno-linguistic groups: Bemba (33.5%), Nyanja (14.8%), Tonga (11.4%) and Lozi (5.5%)¹. The remainder can be categorised along the three smaller ethnic clusters: Kaonde-Lunda-Luvale in the north-west, Tumbuka in the north-east, and Mambwe Namwanga-Nyika-Lambya in the north. While all these linguistic groups are clustered together, it is important to note that internally they are diverse, both culturally and politically. Urbanisation has blurred some of these ethnic cleavages, but two lingua franca have emerged, Bemba on the Copperbelt and Nyanja in Lusaka. Urbanisation has also resulted in high levels of inter-ethnic marriages. Posner estimates that about 46% of all married Zambians in urban districts and 32% of those living in rural areas have spouses from different tribes. (Posner 2005: 92). This is also borne out in recent survey data such as the 2021 Zambia Election Panel Study (ZEPS).

2. What role does ethnicity play in Zambian politics?

The political and urban dominance of Bemba and Nyanja linguistic blocs since Independence has led to perceptions and lived experiences of marginalisation by people from the western and southern regions.

There are two things to note here. First, the ethno-regions that seem to dominate political power in Zambia have remained relatively poor compared to other regions in the country. Ethnic allegiance does not pay off, except at the elite level. This is an important factor to take into account when it comes to elections. Second, ethnic identity cannot be described as a simple primordial force, as it is a relatively modern phenomenon (Posner, 2003) that is often strongly linked to a common ideological ground and material base. Like its historical predecessor the African National Congress (1958-1972), the UNPD has a liberal ideological background based on the political and moral economy of Southern Province - and more generally amongst the south-western region of Zambia. Its perspectives on politics and the expected role of the state are mediated by the rural interests of relatively prosperous small-scale cattle farmers with political preferences for small government and a belief in individual economic achievements. The UPND therefore inherited this tradition and espouses similar liberal-democratic "ruralist" economic and political philosophies (alongside social democratic promises of free education and healthcare) (Beardsworth, 2020, p. 37).

Posner argued that the introduction of multi-party democracy (that is, political competition) is an important underlying factor in the (re-)emergence of ethnic/linguistic cleavages in Zambia (Posner, 2005). But in spite of this, few parties in Zambia have ever truly been mono-ethnic in character, due to the need to knit together different ethnic constituencies to win an election (Scarritt, 2006). With

1. "2010 Census of Population and Housing: National Analytical Report" (Lusaka: Zambia Central Statistical Office, December 2012), https://www.zamstats.gov.zm/phocadownload/2010_Census/2010%20Census%20of%20Population%20National%20Analytical%20Report.pdf.

the demise of Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), and its more national character, ethnic and regional polarisation has been on the increase. Between 2015 and 2021, former ruling Patriotic Front and state-owned or state-affiliated media have repeatedly used discriminatory language in describing certain ethnic groups (Malunga, 2021; “Nkandu Luo Joins in Tribal Rants against Tongas”, 2020). These groups are the Tonga (Southern Province), Lozi (Western Province), and Kaonde, Lunda, Luvale (North-Western Province). The reason for this is that groups from these regions are perceived to be UPND supporters.

This conflation of political divides with ethnic allegiances has meant that ethnic divisions have become increasingly politicised since the 2016 elections. When set against her neighbours, the patterns of social divisions in Zambia are not at such high levels as to be of grave concern for immediate escalation. But in the lead up to the 2021 election, political competition increased and ethnic rhetoric ramped up alongside it, and this remains a cause for concern for reasons outlined below.

3. Ethnic imbalance of institutions

Historical grievances due to regional marginalisation have been exacerbated by the lack of “ethnic balancing” of top government, state-owned enterprises and security forces’ positions. Evidence shows that since 2016, people from the historically marginalised groups are under-represented in government positions and have increasingly been subject to “retirement in the national interest”.

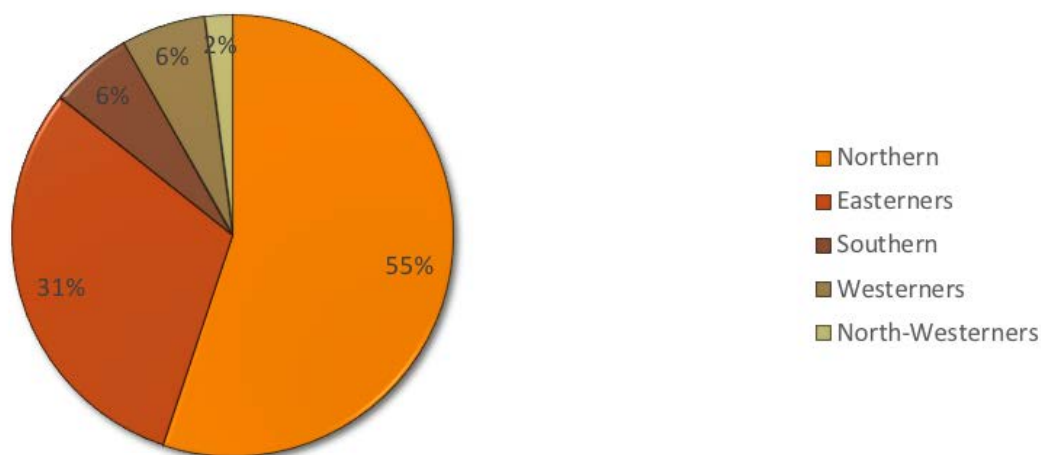


Figure 1: Ethnic breakdown of Patriotic Front (PF) Cabinet, 2021 (compiled by Beardsworth and Mutuna, 2021).

This has had major consequences in recent years:

- Through its use of exclusion channelled by the strategic implementation of nepotism, we saw the PF administration deviated from the tenets that define “elite bargaining” (defined as “the distribution of positions of state power between representatives of contending social groups”).
- Working within this paradigm their sole focus was establishing links and networks focused on those from similar regions, deviating from the normalised mode of appointments based on technocratic ability. The infiltration of the civil service by “cadres” undermined both its capacity and political neutrality.

4. Ethnic salience of the 2021 elections

The growing alignment of political divides with ethnic allegiances has meant that ethnic divisions have become increasingly politicised since the 2016 elections. Incidents of violence that have occurred between supporters of the two main parties have frequently been understood as having an “ethnic” bent. However, outside of the political elite and their clients, ethnic animosity does not yet appear to have widespread appeal.

The PF was increasingly unpopular, due to an economic crisis, a series of corruption scandals and heavy borrowing which left the currency losing 29% of its value in 2020, and inflation topping 24.6% year-on-year in July 2021. This is believed to mean that the ruling party’s tribal rhetoric has even less purchase, as the PF loses popularity and people are less likely to vote along regional or ethnic lines. In order to illustrate these shifts, we present a series of voting maps.

The 2011 elections showed the following regional distribution, showing regionalism of both PF and UPND, but the urban vote was issue-based. It also shows that MMD always had a more national character.

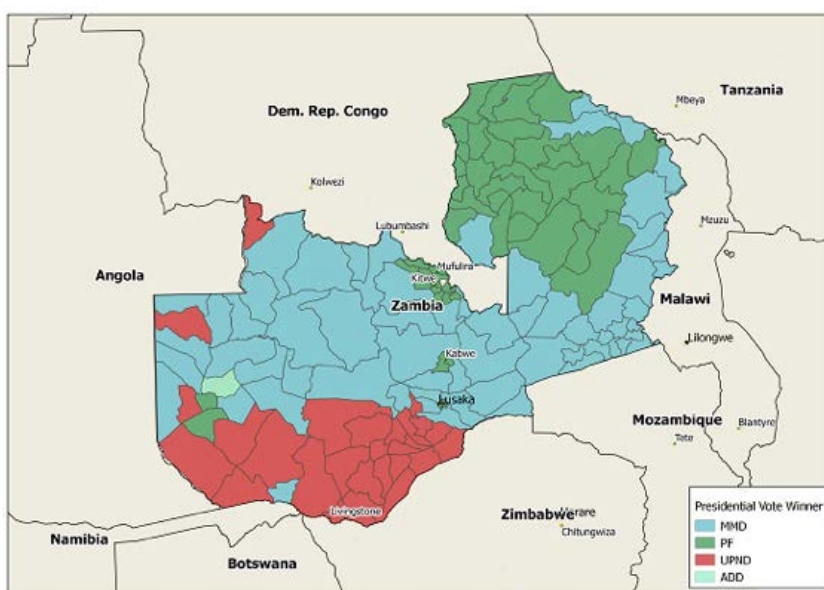


Figure 2: The 2011 presidential election results by constituency (Beardsworth, 2020)

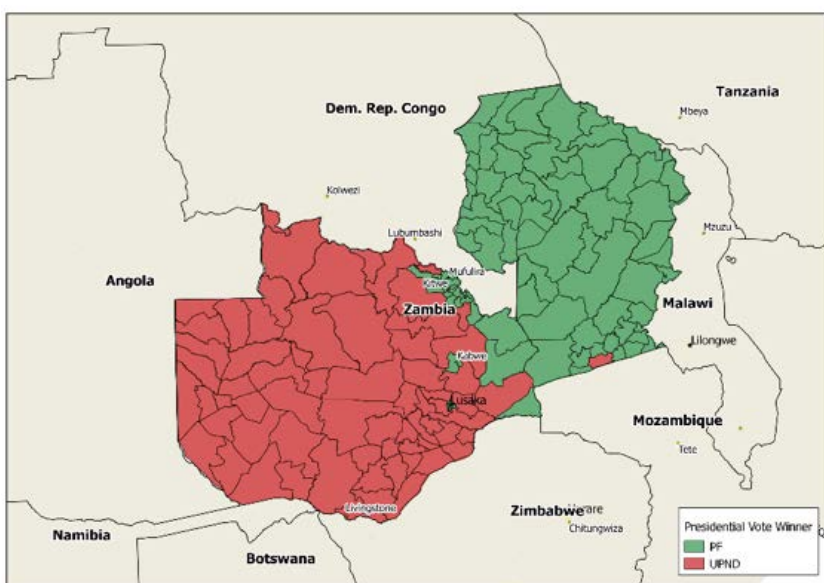


Figure 3: The 2015 presidential by-election results by constituency (Beardsworth, 2020)

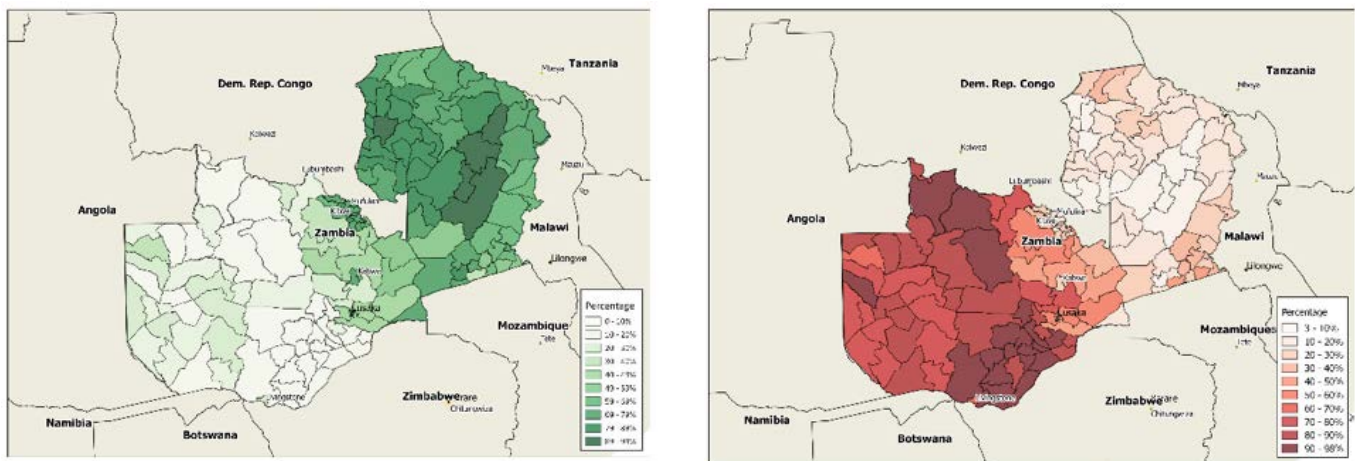


Figure 4: The 2015 presidential by-election results for PF (green) and UPND (red) in order of declining vote share (Beardsworth, 2020)

In the 2015 and 2016 elections, the UPND drew support from members of its core ethnic constituency even when they said that they were not dissatisfied with the PF government's performance, whilst the PF drew support from members of its core ethnic constituency even when they expressed discontent with the PF government's performance (Seekings, 2020, p. 139).

However, in the 2020 Afrobarometer polls and subsequent surveys, dissatisfaction with PF's management of the economy (and the lack of trust in PF's capacity to solve the economic problems) led to a decline in ethnic salience and suggested more widespread discontent. Because of the collapse of the PF's electoral viability, the UPND consolidated the anti-incumbent vote around the country. Alliances with key politicians from other ethnic groups also helped the UPND to appear more "national" in character: Kelvin Bwalya-Fube (Bemba and youth vote), Felix Mutati (Northern), Charles Milupi (Western), Ernest Mwansa (Luapula). The running mates in both PF and UPND were also geared towards cross-ethnic alliances. During the campaign, the PF - through intermediaries such as running mate Nkandu Luo and Chishimba Kambwili - sought to deepen and further politicise the ethnic cleavage, to try to consolidate the vote in the North and East of the country (Mwansa, 2021). The level of ethnic rhetoric deployed against Hichilema and the UPND ramped up dramatically, with accusations from Kambwili and others that if Hichilema and UPND were to be elected, they would only appoint Tongas into government, excluding other tribes, in particular Bembas (Chisenga, 2021).

This strategy appears to ultimately have gained relatively little traction, although internal UPND polling from July suggested that some of the smears had been quite effective - with 27% of those polled saying that it was a good description of Hichilema to say that he "only cares about Tonga people". Ultimately, in the 2021 elections, the attempts to politicise ethnic cleavages appears to have backfired in urban areas while the economic crisis and concerns about cadres, violence and corruption drove substantial anti-incumbent voting. In urban areas, the UPND performed well - as expected, due to high levels of engagement with the cash economy and better information access - with the UPND winning on the Copperbelt with 57 % (an increase of 23%) and in Lusaka with 56% (an increase of 18%). But even in rural areas and PF strongholds the UPND's vote share dramatically increased from its 2016 levels, taking 39% in Eastern (23% increase), 38% in Northern (16% increase), and 32% in both Muchinga and Luapula (19 and 18%, respectively). In 2021, 50% of Hichilema's vote share came from non-stronghold voters in Luapula, Muchinga, Northern, Eastern, Copperbelt and Lusaka Provinces.

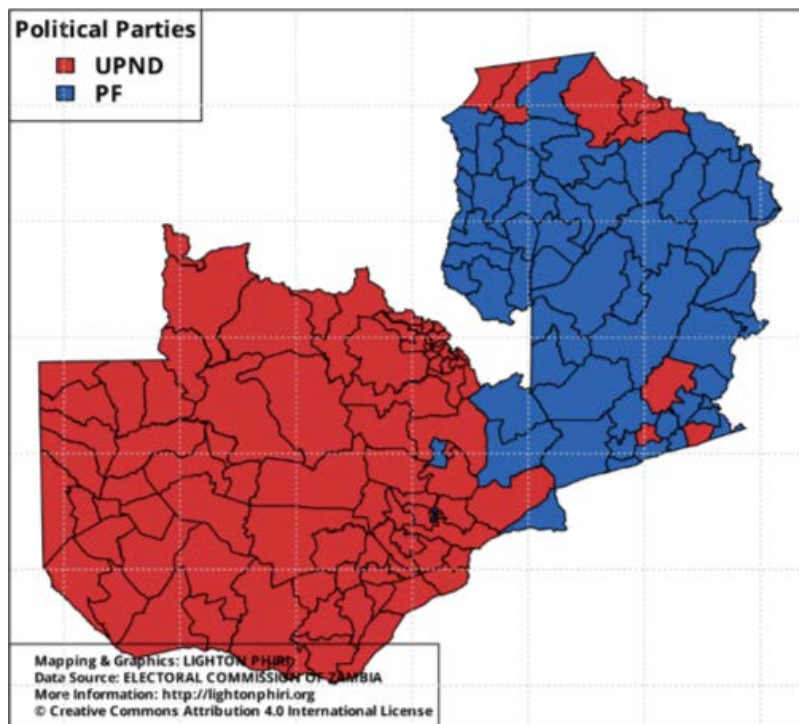


Figure 5: 2021 Presidential election results: winners by constituency

Although the 2021 voting pattern appears similar to the 2015 and 2016 polls (with some notable flipped constituencies in the far north and east), this hides significant pro-UPND gains in non-traditional areas.

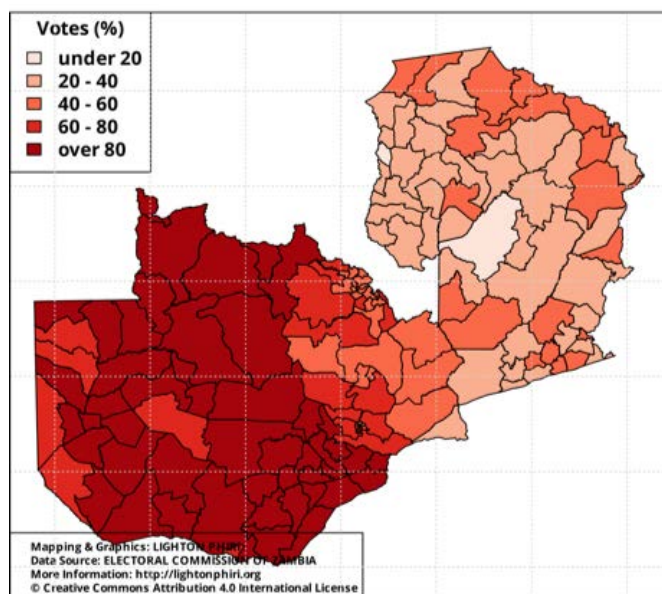


Figure 6: 2021 Zambia Presidential election results: UPND voter proportion

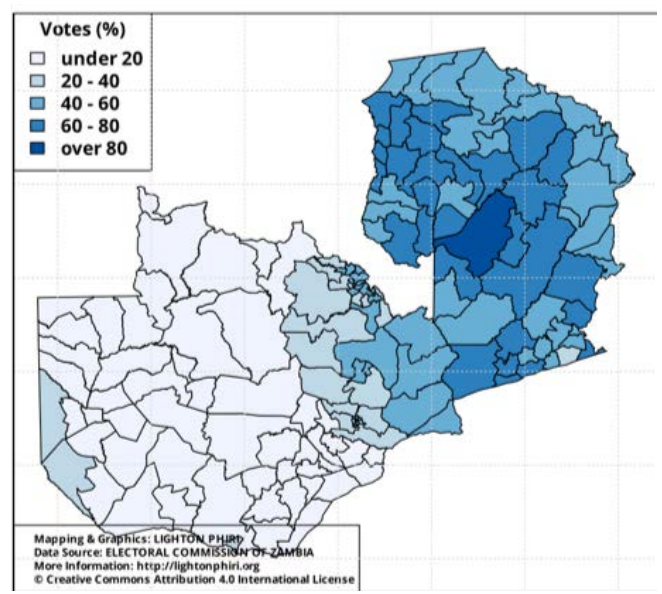


Figure 7: 2021 Zambia Presidential election results: PF voter proportion

While it is clear that the UPND was able to turn out the vote dramatically in its stronghold areas, as well as expanding into PF heartlands, the PF was unable to turn out its base and lost support both in its rural strongholds and in urban areas.

5. Potential challenges for the UPND administration

The results of the election show promising signals that there are limits to the politicisation of ethnic cleavages in Zambia. However, this dynamic will need to be managed carefully by a UPND administration in order to put the tribal tag firmly to bed and restore Zambia's legacy of ethnic balancing.

The UPND administration enters government after 15 years in opposition and is likely to face demands from key supporters and their stronghold provinces for a rebalancing of the deck after six years of significant exclusion from public life. Promisingly, President Hichilema has made several statements promising a more inclusive style of governance. The Cabinet announced on 7 September is also a promising sign of his commitment to more inclusive government, with greater inclusion of ministers from around the country. It will be important for all government appointments to follow this pattern and avoid perceptions of ethnic favouritism.

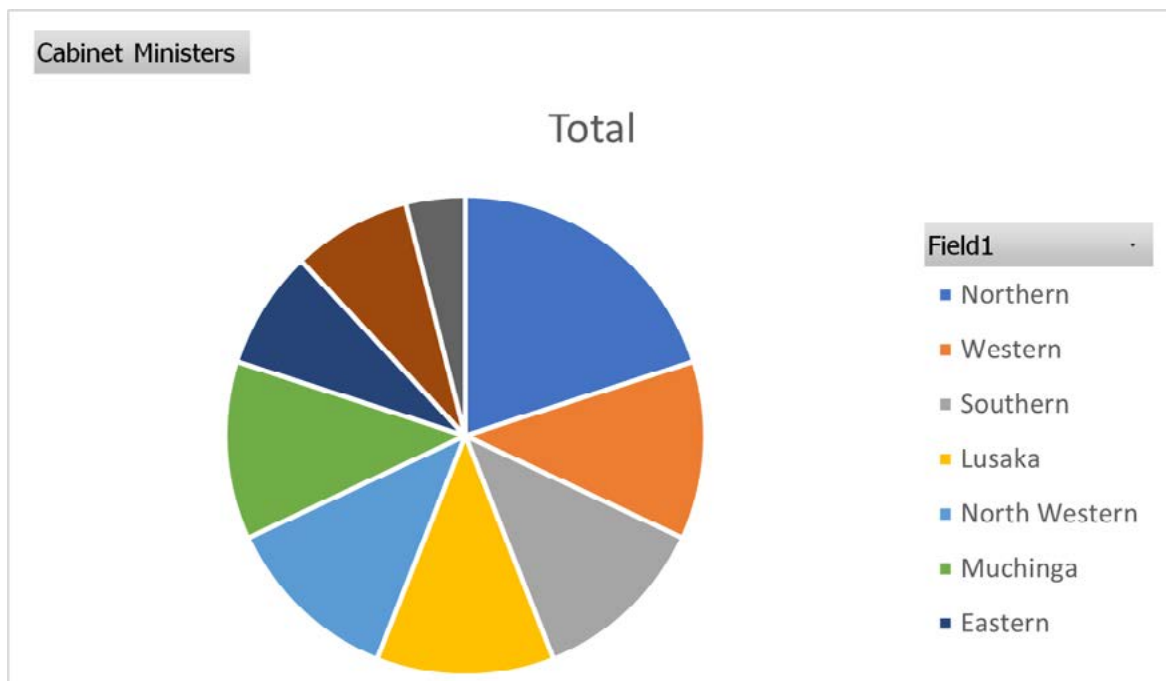


Figure 8: Ethnic breakdown of UPND Cabinet, 2021 (compiled by Beardsworth and Mutuna, 2021)

Another key risk for the new government will come from attempts to prosecute members of the previous administration for corruption. In the media, there have been loud calls to begin to prosecute members of the PF's administration for corrupt activities, but this is something that will need to be managed carefully. Because the previous Cabinet was less inclusive, it is possible that such prosecutions might be seen or politicised as "ethnic" persecution. This was a key factor in the opposition that was mobilised against President Mwanawasa in the early 2000s as he sought to prosecute members of the Chiluba administration (Sishuwa, 2016). Two ways that the administration can avoid claims of bias is to 1) strengthen the independence of anti-corruption institutions, and 2) hold a public enquiry or process to air evidence of corruption.

6. Conclusion

Ethnicity is not always salient in Zambian politics and elections, though it was politicised by the PF administration for electoral purposes. Grievances by the groups that have been subjected to low-level stigmatisation might have long-term implications for unity in Zambia if not managed carefully. The imbalance in ethnic appointments by PF both offended citizens' sense of political fairness and undermined the legitimacy of some of the country's most important institutions: the police force, the army, the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), the Constitutional Court and the Cabinet. The new UPND administration will need to be seen to be fair and balanced in public appointments, and to allow corruption prosecutions to be handled in a way that is seen to be fair and balanced.

Authors: Nicole Beardsworth (Wits University), Marja Hinfelaar (SAIPAR)

Additional resources

Beardsworth, N. (2020). From a "Regional Party" to the Gates of State House: The resurgence of the UPND. In M. Hinfelaar, T. Banda, M. Ndulo, & O. Kaaba (Eds.), *Democracy and Electoral Politics in Zambia* (pp. 34-68). Brill.

Chisenga, O. (2021, August 14). PF's tribal smear campaign is despicable - Kalala. *The Mast*. <https://www.themastonline.com/2021/08/14/pfs-tribal-smear-campaign-is-despicable-kalala/>

Malunga, J. (2021, May 31). If you don't vote accordingly, I'll come and whip you, Luo tells Easterners. *Zambia: News Diggers!* <https://diggers.news/local/2021/05/31/if-you-dont-vote-accordingly-ill-come-and-whip-you-luo-tells-easterners/>

Mwansa, R. (2021, August 9). *Eroding the Unity Legacy: Ethno-regional Rhetoric in Zambia's 2021 Elections | Democracy in Africa*. <http://democracyinafrica.org/eroding-the-unity-legacy-ethno-regional-rhetoric-in-zambias-2021-electoral-contest/>

Nkandu Luo joins in tribal rants against Tongas. (2020, February 6). *Zambian Eye*. <https://zambianeye.com/nkandu-luo-joins-in-tribal-rants-against-tongas/>

Posner, D. N. (2003). The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Cleavages: The Case of Linguistic Divisions in Zambia. *Comparative Politics*, 35(2), 127-146.

Posner, D. N. (2005). *Institutions and ethnic politics in Africa*. Cambridge University Press.

Scarritt, J. R. (2006). The strategic choice of multiethnic parties in Zambia's dominant and personalist party system. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 44(2), 234-256.

Sishuwa, S. (2016). *'I am Zambia's redeemer': Populism and the rise of Michael Sata, 1955-2011* [Unpublished DPhil thesis]. University of Oxford.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating directly in 33 countries, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

 www.wfd.org

 [@WFD_Democracy](https://twitter.com/WFD_Democracy)

 [@WestminsterFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/WestminsterFoundation)