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ZAMBIA: CHANGING OF THE GUARD

The resounding defeat of President Kenneth Kaunda – symbol of the first generation of post-independence African leaders – by Frederick Chiluba and his Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), signifies another important step on the road towards more representative and accountable rule in Africa. Zambia too is now feeling the implications of the democratic revolutions which have swept Eastern Europe in the past two years.

The recent free multi-party elections in Zambia – the first since 1968 – will reverberate in such strongholds of personal rule such as Malawi and Kenya. The principal message of this landmark election is political, not economic. The essential tenets of democracy – public accountability, limited government, freedom of choice, and the right to differ – will not be lost on the people of mono-party ruled states. Military governments, too will feel the fallout of this salutary development.

The recent Zambian experience in democracy has also been important for another reason – it emphasized the indivisibility between economic and political change. The former, economic change, while often the most pressing, must be accompanied and augmented by meaningful and legitimate political change. Sustainable political change on its part, needs a strong economic base.

DEMOCRATIC IMPULSE

After 27 years of personal rule, the desire for change was strong. Although President Kenneth Kaunda provided political stability and regional leadership, within the Frontline States, political stability has been accompanied by economic decline and social disintegration. A country which began independent life 27 years ago with a R10 billion in foreign exchange reserves owes foreign creditors almost R25 billion. Despite its considerable agricultural potential, Zambia is having to import maize, the staple food, from South Africa. Average incomes, worth R35 a month at realistic exchange rates, have fallen by a third since the mid-1970s and inflation is 100%. In some respects, the country is reverting to a subsistence economy.

Education, water supply, transport and health services are all in a near desperate state. Health services, in particular, no longer cope with the most basic needs. The potentially devastating spectre of up to half a million urban dwellers estimated to be HIV-positive, adds an additional heavy burden on tottering health services. Lusaka, the capital city, is fast turning into a vast urban slum.

It would be unrealistic to pretend that Mr Chiluba and the MMD have easy answers to Zambia's manifold problems. The MMD itself is a fractious movement united principally in its opposition to Dr Kaunda, and it faces a daunting task in rebuilding the ailing economy. Decades of economic mismanagement is not the whole story. A economy dependent on a single commodity, copper, for 90% of its foreign earnings is constantly at risk to the vagaries of world markets. The copper industry itself faces two additional problems : First, the country's copper mines are now more than 50 years old, and, secondly, copper is becoming more difficult to extract, and ore grades are slowly declining.

Structurally, the Zambian economy is out of kilter. Being a landlocked country imposes high transport costs, while the country will continue to be seriously affected by any rise in global oil prices. Zambia's foreign debt of some R18 billion imposes additional constraints on any government. The country, not unlike most other developing economies, faces a serious skilled manpower shortage. More than 7,000 of the 12,000 post-independence graduates have left the country. The country also has a heavy dependence on foreign assistance, assistance that might not be easily forthcoming, notwithstanding the growing international practice of tying aid to government which is accountable to the people – a condition now fulfilled by Zambia.

President Chiluba has been frank and realistic about the time recovery will take, even under new and inspiring leadership. His government is committed to fiscal discipline and substantial cuts in a bloated and wasteful civil service. He intends to privatise unproductive state enterprises, free markets and abolish state subsidies on basic foods – previously a cause of wide-spread food riots. These stringent fiscal and monetary policies – implemented largely at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – would undoubtedly mean more hardship and may well contain the seed of political and social instability.

RELATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA

Relations between South Africa and Zambia are expected to improve markedly following the election of President Frederick Chiluba. The new MMD government is keen to strengthen and expand relations between the two countries. The Chiluba government will trade openly with South Africa. Diplomatic relations between the two countries may also be established, initially perhaps at the level of a reciprocal trade mission.

Revitalising the Zambian economy is one of the immediate priorities of the new government, and through trade with South Africa it hopes to achieve this goal. Zambia is also expected to make more use of South African ports to export its products, especially copper.

Newly appointed Foreign Minister, Vernon Mwaanga, who served under Dr Kaunda in the same capacity, is widely respected and has extensive contact with the South African business community, and earlier this year paid a visit to the country. Mr Mwaanga made it clear that the new government's foreign policy would be directed at serving the economic interests of Zambia.

The normalisation and strengthening of relations between Zambia and South Africa will also have implications for the Frontline states. Zambia under Dr Kaunda played a pivotal role in policy on South Africa. The warming in relations between the two countries will highlight contradictions that still characterise relations with other Frontline states. The liberation movements, too, may not look approvingly on the prospect of Zambia normalising its relations with South Africa. After all, Lusaka served as a home for many South Africans in exile and in the view of the liberation movements, it is premature to completely end South Africa's international isolation.

Jan Smuts House
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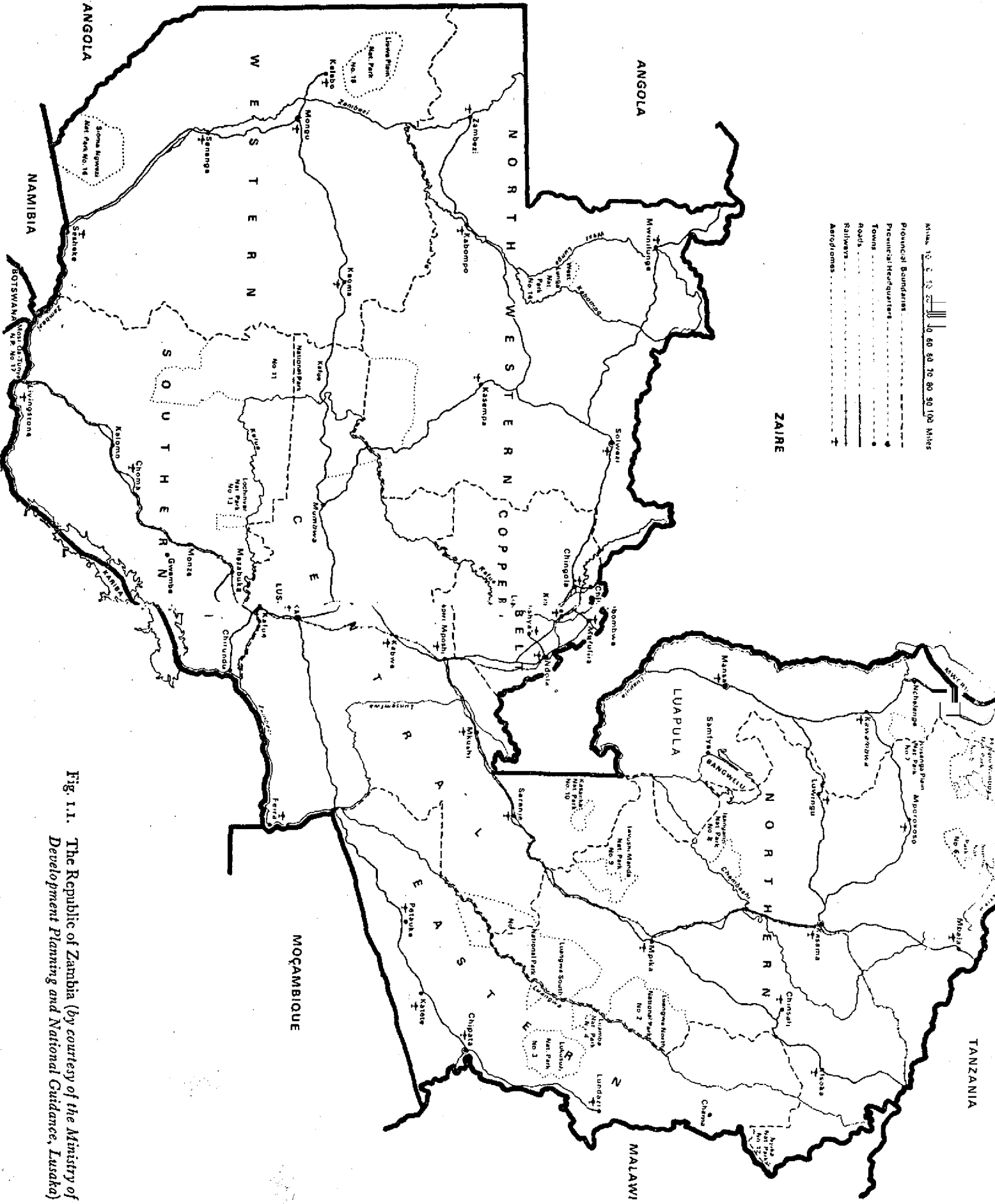


Fig. 1.1. The Republic of Zambia (by courtesy of the Ministry of Development Planning and National Guidance, Lusaka)