

A high point for the pro-democracy movement, but Zambia's recovery will be tough. ALLISTER SPARKS reports.

CHILLING VICTORY

THE TV election commercial told it all; a shot of a car driving down a street cratered with a moonscape of potholes, and as it thumps along a hubcap flies off. A voice intones the party slogan: "The hour has come."

The hour, that is, of accountability. After 18 years of one-party stateism, which saw Zambia go from one of the most prosperous countries in Africa to one whose crumbling roads epitomise its collapsed economy, 2.9-million voters had their opportunity on October 31 to call their rulers to account for the mess they had made of it.

They did so in no uncertain way. When the votes were counted before 2,000 local and international monitors, President Kenneth Kaunda and his United National Independence Party (UNIP), who had ruled the country since independence in 1964, were swept from power. Kaunda got less than 25 percent of the national vote and UNIP only 24 of the 150 parliamentary seats.

It was the most decisive and important election ever held in Africa, a high point of the pro-democracy movement now stirring throughout the continent.

In the past year nine African leaders have been removed from office by elections or by coups stemming from pro-democracy movements. More than a dozen others have been forced to loosen their grip on power to accommodate demands for pluralism and accountability, and several more are on the brink of being ousted.

But the defeat of President Kaunda, who with the Ivory Coast's Felix Houphouet-Boigny and Malawi's Kamuzu Banda are the last of the founding fathers of African independence still in office, is by far the most spectacular.

It will give a huge boost to the pro-democracy movement, particularly in neighbouring Zaire where President Mobutu Sese Seko is trying desperately to resist it, and in fellow Commonwealth countries like Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe where one-party philosophy is still in vogue.

It will also mean a dramatic reversal of policy, away from the African socialism which Kaunda pursued towards a free enterprise economy.

Relations with South Africa will change too. The new President, Frederick Chiluba, who heads an unlikely coalition of trade unionists, businessmen and intellectuals called the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), will be looking south for business contacts as he makes the change to private enterprise. Even the pretence of sanctions will collapse. So will the alliance of Frontline states that Kaunda headed to maintain solidarity on the South African issue.

There will also be grave problems. The elections have raised popular expectations that the change of government will bring relief from the burdens of economic collapse, but the road to recovery will be a painful one and as Chiluba travels it he will face a backlash which may either deter or demolish him.

The good news is that the election was peaceful and the transition a model of orderliness. Though the campaigning was robust there were no violent incidents and the police never once had to intervene. All the monitors pronounced the process "free and fair".

Kaunda telephoned Chiluba to concede defeat hours before the final results were announced, and next morning gave him a conducted tour of State House. Contrast that with Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan cancelling Lesotho's 1974 election and seizing power when he found the count was going against him. It suggests that African politics has come of age and is now indeed capable of handling multi-party democracy.

Kaunda's defeat was just retribution for his long pursuit of ruinous economic policies. Yet it was also sad to see such an eminently decent man go. In his 27 years as Zambia's leader Kaunda built up a considerable reputation as a humanist and a man of peace.

His role in the region was heroic. He committed his country, at huge self-sacrifice, to supporting the liberation movements in Rhodesia, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa which was crucial to the eventual transformation of them all.

All this earned him international respect. But his domestic policies became a case study in disaster economics, and it was for this that he was finally held accountable by his people.

The folly began with Kaunda's nationalisation of the copper mines. That and the takeover of all the country's major industries, grouped together under the umbrella of the Zambian Industrial and Mining Corporation, required a massive borrowing that saddled the country with a debt burden from which it has never recovered.

As the world's fifth largest copper producer Zambia prospered for a time, but in 1975 the copper price slumped by nearly half and Zambia went into the red.

Hoping the slump was temporary, Kaunda's government borrowed heavily to offset its losses. But the price stayed low and Zambia's debt rose to the highest per capita in the world. Today it needs 150 percent of its annual export earnings to service its debt and arrears.

Kaunda's other mistake was to control agricultural prices, holding them down to provide cheap food for the cities. This drove farmers off the land, destroying the basis of a potentially rich agricultural country and swelling the number of urban unemployed as destitute peasants flocked to the towns.

The Commercial Farmers Bureau has warned that this year's maize harvest will be only 3.5-million bags — for a country that consumes 10-million bags a year.

In September the World Bank suspended its structural adjustment programme and stopped all aid when Zambia defaulted on a R58-million debt repayment and, fearing more food riots such as those that shook the country last year, refused to end mealie-meal subsidies said to be costing R1,400,000 a day.

With a collapsed structural adjustment programme, no foreign exchange, disintegrating social services, 100 percent inflation and a severe food shortage, the country is in crisis.

How would an MMD government deal with this? By privatising the mines and the nationalised industries, according to Vernon Mwaanga, the MDM's incoming Foreign Minister.

It would also open the door to trade with South Africa. "I have been there

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divesting themselves of some of their titles, and allow ownership to pass to other interests who will, unashamedly, be more friendly towards once-banned groups.

The Anglo-owned press could take a page from the annals of enlightened self-interest in 44 Main Street, notably the move by the Oppenheimers a generation ago to allow control of General Mining to pass to Nationalist Afrikaners as part of a long-term insurance policy against state nationalization or undue interference in the mining industry.

If the Argus group could so readily agree to sell Ilanga to Chief Buthelezi, why not sell other titles to ANC-orientated interests? The Argus Group, according to Finance Week, recently turned down an ANC approach to buy the Sowetan, now ranked with the Star as the country's biggest daily. Will Argus, on principle, refuse to sell *any* titles to friends of the ANC?

If so, why?

It is, of course, always possible for the ANC and other formerly banned groups to start a daily paper, but party papers generally fail dismally just because they are party papers. And, the sad experience last year of the Weekly Mail's daily effort sent a salutary chill down the spines of would-be newspaper launchers.

The fact remains that it is essential that all the major players in an election be given access to air time and to print space if we are to have a successful transition to a new order. This is, therefore, the time for the monopolies and near-monopolies to start breaking their own hold on the media, in the country's and their own very real long-term interests. This way they will exercise some control over the process.

The SABC — wonders never cease! — seems poised to concede the principle of a truly independent broadcasting authority; shimmering irony after all the years of its being government's Chief Poodle. Someone there has obviously seen the writing on the wall, as power begins to shift.

In the realm of the establishment press, the basis for an arrangement is there. The ANC wants and needs daily newspapers. The newspaper companies want insurance against nationalization or bruising anti-monopoly action.

Newspapers these days tend to share plant and equipment and even advertising and distribution arrangements, with editorial effort separate and competing.

It would be a disaster if the ANC were either to lose or win an election without a friendly press. Either way there would be bitterness — the former amid frustration and the latter amid triumph.

The "joint operating agreement" principle has gained widespread favour internationally, because of rising costs.

Presses and distribution are neutral factors and can be shared by all. There is no reason why current joint operating agreements should not continue more or less as now, but with ownership of certain titles passing to other hands.

The future media order should be marked by maximum press and broadcasting diversity, and a fair spread of outlets for competing philosophies. It would be a disaster if the ANC were either to lose or win an election without a friendly press. Either way there would be bitterness — the former amid frustration and the latter amid triumph. ●

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Chiluba's victory

three times in the 1st four months to address businessmen and I have found them very eager to invest in many of our projects," Mwaanga said in an interview.

The MMD would have no inhibitions about selling its copper mines back to the Anglo American Corporation, from whom it originally nationalised them, Mwaanga said. The government might retain a small shareholding, but not more than 20 percent.

"We don't mind the South Africans coming in here because we believe South Africa is changing," he added.

This approach, Mwaanga believes, would induce a more sympathetic attitude on the part of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and enable the new government to negotiate a less stringent structural adjustment programme.

Even if it does, the road to recovery will still be tough. Privatising the mines and para-statal companies will inevitably lead to retrenchments.

Any structural adjustment programmes will also demand heavy cuts in the civil service, the merging of government departments and a slashing of the military budget.

It will require the removal of subsidies, including the food subsidies. And the producer price of maize and other staples will have to go up to boost production and cut imports. That means food prices will rocket.

The kwacha currency will have to be further devalued, which will turn inflation to superinflation.

All this is the same kind of painful medicine that Eastern Europe is having to take, but the worst of it is that the Zambian electorate has not been conditioned to expect it.

When I asked the ecstatic voters on election day what they hoped for from a new government, they answered without exception: "Lower food prices and more jobs."

They are going to get the opposite on both counts. How they react, and how Chiluba copes with their reaction, are the key questions that will determine Zambia's future over the next two years.

He is an enigmatic figure: a tiny man, only 1.5m (5 ft) tall, who has spent his life as a trade union leader and is now in league with businessmen leading a free enterprise party.

He is not highly educated. He dropped out of high school and went to work on a sisal plantation in Tanzania, where he was a personnel clerk.

Chiluba is a fluent public speaker who whipped up the crowds more effectively than Kaunda at the election rallies, but with his diminutive stature — emphasised by a penchant for double-breasted suits — and mild manner he does not strike one as a forceful personality.

He is a born-again Christian and, like Kaunda, quotes freely from the Bible and can wax emotional and weep in public. He frequently calls on Zambians to work harder, show greater enterprise and undergo "moral rearmament".

Most of all I worry about the fact that as a trade unionist he will be particularly vulnerable to charges of betrayal as the retrenchments and higher prices begin. Will he have the force of personality to withstand such charges, will he wilt and back away from his stringent programme, or will he be thrown out even more ignominiously than Kaunda was?

But at least Zambians have learned how to dispose of him peacefully if he fails. ●