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THE TRAGEDY OF MARXIST ZAMBIA

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## COMMENTARY

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To the Editor:

I would like to respond to J. Milimo's "Multiparty Democracy in Africa: Lessons from Zambia" (*International Journal on World Peace*, March 1993, pp. 35-42).

The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1990 has come to symbolize the moral bankruptcy of an ideology that has done untold harm in the world for over 70 years. Ironically, while communism claimed to serve the interests of the dispossessed, it did much more harm to the world's poor than unbridled capitalism did. Outdoing capitalism at exploitation is no mean achievement, when (according to Marxist doctrine) the capitalist system relies upon the production of surplus value through the exploitation of the dispossessed.

Sub-Saharan Africa has suffered a great deal from this political ideology. In the unstable conditions of postcolonialism, Marxists were able to seize power, and consolidate their authority through nationalization and the centralization of decision-making. Relative prosperity and freedom under late colonialism thus gave way to poverty and repression under dictatorship.

To their shame, many so-called liberals in the West looked at the spread of dictatorship in Sub-Saharan Africa with some approval. The fact that the dictators posed as socialists convinced much of the American and European Left that the experience of colonialism had speeded up the foretold collapse in capitalism, and that these developments ushered in a new African order—one free from colonialism, and from the exploitation of Western multinational companies. Any imperfections in the new regimes were viewed as teething troubles, relatively unimportant mistakes en route to a pan-African socialist utopia. Left wing ideologies thus caused enormous suffering in sub-Saharan Africa: autocracies repressed individual freedoms;

meanwhile, the West inadvertently supported the regimes through “aid” that ended up in the pockets of dictators, and through silence.

The socialist doctrines of nationalization and centralization resulted in the crisis in sub-Saharan Africa today. Performance incentives were undermined, thus encouraging laziness and corruption. The ideologies of interventionism, and the mistrust of Western companies, ensured that inward investment dried up. The monopoly of economic and political life by the state encouraged a culture of inactivity; and the replacement of education by state ideology insulated African citizens from the wider culture of the global economy. The socialist underdevelopment of Africa is one of the great tragedies of the 20th century.

Fortunately, the Marxist policies carried the seeds of their own destruction. This, of course, is one of the great ironies of history, as one of the central articles of faith in Marxist dogma was the teleological belief that the dynamics of capitalism would lead eventually to its own destruction. It is clear now that the economic stagnation and repression endemic in socialist systems mean that they must either collapse, or adopt significant aspects of capitalism. One by one, the last remaining socialist economies are imploding, or adopting alternative economic and social policies.

Professor Milimo’s account of the recent political history of Zambia maps out this process very well. The analysis, however, can be taken further. Zambia’s decline into dictatorship began in the unstable conditions that any fledgling democracy must endure. The withdrawal of a foreign power always leaves something of a political vacuum, even when the administrative structures are left intact. Those who seek power are always ready to exploit instability, and the conditions in Zambia after independence in 1964 were ripe for the rapid rise to power of those whose rhetoric excused their methods.

Unfortunately, since the heyday of the Central African Federation, which administered the country from 1953 to 1963, many of those activists who were pushing for the consolidation of independence were anti-libertarian socialists. The seeds for disaster were sown when the idea of freeing a nation-state from foreign domination was collapsed into the notion of liberating the world’s proletariat from the shackles of capitalism.

The fact that colonial powers were capitalist and exploitative encouraged indigenous activists (and those who listened to them) to see individual foreign powers as constitutive elements in the wider, capitalist global order. This version of events was simple, understandable, and convincing.

It thus enabled demagogues to paint the future in convincing Marxist tones: instead of colonial capitalism, they would have international socialism; instead of colonial pluralism, they would have a command economy, run for the benefit of the people; instead of the colonial educational systems, they would have schools that told the “truth” about their history, and their condition; instead of exploitation by Western powers in the form of multinational companies, they would deter foreign investment, and develop their own self-sufficient institutions.

With the experience of postcolonialism couched in the logic of Marxism, Zambia was set on the path to socialism and impoverishment. Within 10 years of independence, Zambia had a command economy, administered by an autocratic regime.

The development of autocracy in Zambia is wholly understandable when one considers the internal logic of socialist dogma. Socialism is based upon the twin axes of egalitarianism and common ownership of the means of production. Egalitarianism as a socioeconomic agenda requires that entrepreneurialism is suppressed, for successful entrepreneurs become more powerful and more wealthy than their peers. Rather than enabling people to improve the quality of their own lives, the socialist state takes on the role of employer and keeps its citizens at a level of subsistence. The common ownership of the means of production, on the other hand, is an unattainable ideal which has done a great deal of harm to the world economy as a whole. If everybody owns an enterprise, the amount that an individual owns is negligible. Furthermore, if, theoretically, all people have some stake in the control of what they own, then the amount of control they have over the enterprise is equally negligible.

Socialist ideology thus allows the state to take over the ownership and control of the enterprise “for the people.” The logic of socialism, then, leads to suppression, and the command economy. Nationalization, centralization, and the suppression of entrepreneurialism encourage corruption, nepotism,

inefficiency, fatalism, and working to rule, which all contribute to a socioeconomic climate of stagnation and inefficiency.

The influence of socialist ideas on the process of consolidating national independence has cost Zambia and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa dearly. There are lessons to be learned from the experience of the past, and it is to be hoped that the new government will take them to heart. Robust democracy is founded upon private ownership, entrepreneurialism, and free trade. If democracy is to take root, the Third Republic must dismantle the architectonic structures imposed by socialism, and encourage a socioeconomic climate wherein hard work is rewarded. Private ownership of property should be encouraged, not only through privatization of state-run industries, but also through keeping taxation to a minimum, both in terms of income tax and inheritance tax.

Unnecessary barriers to free trade with other nation-states should be dismantled, and inward investment in the form of multinational companies should be encouraged. In this way, Zambia will open itself up to the global economy, and the money and expertise brought in by foreign companies will enhance the efficiency of indigenous enterprises, and increase the incentive to hard work and entrepreneurialism.

This process will involve a great deal of social, political, and economic turmoil. The cultural impact of the inflow of foreign goods and services will be immense. There is a real danger that these far-reaching transitions will be seized upon by conservatives and romantics, and a strong counter-reformation movement may ensue. It is hoped that such opposition can be peacefully accommodated within the democratic system.

If these policies are implemented successfully, then Zambia will emerge from the years of poverty and oppression as a free, proud, and prosperous nation.

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