- ONE -

CHAINS TRADED FOR CHAOS

In 1991, Zambia stood on the edge of history. After nearly three decades of one-party rule under Kenneth Kaunda and the United National Independence Party (UNIP), the country embraced multiparty democracy with a spirit brimming with hope and conviction. For many, it felt like the final act in a long struggle for liberation. The chains of colonialism had been broken in 1964, but political repression and economic centralisation soon followed under a one-party system that stifled opposition and concentrated power. By the time Zambia voted in its first multiparty elections in over two decades, the national mood was a volatile mixture of exhaustion, expectation, and unyielding hope.

Celebrated as a victory of liberty when Zambia escaped the clutches of one-party control in 1991, it was a country unshackling itself from political chains in search of democratic promise. Hoping that freedom would bring unity, dignity, and progress, the people celebrated — voices once silenced now echoing ballot boxes. Rising as a lighthouse of this new era, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) embodied the collective choice of the many rather than the preserve of the few, redefining government.

Still, what happened was a slow slide into anarchy rather than the harmony the people imagined. Chaos, born of unguarded freedom, replaced the chains of oppression not with order or justice but with fragmentation. Without a strong democratic base, Zambia's new political scene turned into ideal ground for opportunism. Once thought to be the solution for authoritarianism, multiparty democracy turned into a haven for political fragmentation, ethnic strife, and elite manipulation. The very freedom we fought for turned into the fuel for a new kind of crisis — one veiled in democratic legitimacy but hollow in democratic spirit.

I have painfully come to see over the years that not all freedom liberates. Unchecked and unstructured freedom can split a country more violently than chains could ever accomplish. Though good in intention, Zambia's path towards political pluralism set the path for anarchy masquerading as choice and democracy undermined by design to open the floodgates.

The freedom of Zambia in 1964 inspired hope all around Southern Africa. Under Kaunda's direction, the country supported Pan-African solidarity and provided refuge to liberation movements battling colonial governments in Angola, South Africa, and neighbouring Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). With his doctrine of 'Zambian Humanism', Kaunda stressed group welfare and unity to inspire national pride. Early expenditures in healthcare and education highlighted development; infrastructure grew, and literacy rates climbed. Still, this vision rested dangerously on an economy anchored on copper, which accounted for more than 90% of export earnings. The oil crises and changing markets drove global copper prices down in the middle of the 1970s, ultimately undermining Zambia's economic base.

Desperate to prevent total collapse, the government looked to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), organisations that recommended structural adjustment policies (SAPs). But these changes came with terrible conditions that changed Zambian society and caused great public suffering.

Radical neoliberal changes demanded by the SAPs included the elimination of subsidies on necessities, including fertilisers, petrol, and maize meal. Long shielding people from world price fluctuations, these subsidies had suddenly disappeared in 1986, causing the cost of maize meal to skyrocket by 300%, so rendering millions of people food deprived. Following privatisation of state-owned businesses, entities like the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM) were sold to private investors — typically foreign companies or politically connected elites. Because critical assets were undervalued and workers were laid off en masse, this fire-sale strategy resulted in claims of corruption. Concurrent with this, devaluation of the kwacha saw 60% of its value lost by 1990, rendering imported goods, including machinery and medicine, expensive. Austerity policies

reduced public funding for social services, education, and healthcare, leaving hospitals and schools to fall apart while user fees kept the underprivileged out of basic treatment.

Already reeling from hyperinflation that peaked at 191% in 1990, urban families waited hours at mills only to discover empty shelves. Stripped of fertiliser subsidies, rural smallholders watched their crops fail. Once Zambia's industrial pride, mineworkers suffered unemployment as ZCCM reduced in size. The middle class deteriorated as experts left overseas in a terrible brain drain. From 40% in 1975, 68% of Zambians by 1991 were below the poverty level. Widespread resentment resulted from the IMF's vision of 'economic stabilisation' sharply running counter to daily reality.

Dissension gathered around opposition to the SAPs. Frederick Chiluba led the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which planned demonstrations and strikes framing austerity as a breach of promises made during the era of independence. Students marched under banners saying 'IMF = Hunger', while market vendors parodied President Kaunda's slogan 'One Zambia, One Nation', as 'One Zambia, No Meal'. Even UNIP loyalists grew disappointed; as one miner complained, "We freed ourselves from colonialism only to be colonised by debt." The reforms also revealed systematic inequalities. While neglecting the repatriation of copper profits by multinational companies, Western institutions demanded fiscal discipline, thus strengthening impressions of exploitation.

Once vibrant, urban markets turned chaotic as the staple food, maize meal, vanished from shelves. Inside UNIP, corruption flourished as elites claimed to be resource-grabbing while common people waited for principles.

Originally praised for its diversity, Kaunda's government turned more and more autocratic. The 1972 fall-off of multiparty democracy confirmed UNIP's monopoly on power, labelling opposition as 'un-Zambian'. Security agents harassed critics, while state media promoted a cult of personality around Kaunda. Still, opposition simmered under the surface. Lieutenant Mwamba Luchembe, a young Zambian army officer, led the 1990 coup effort. Declaring that President Kenneth Kaunda's government

had been toppled, Luchembe broke into the state-run Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) radio station on 30 June 1990.

The attempt at a coup took place amid general national turmoil, economic collapse, and mounting political discontent. Luchembe acted alone, and the coup was quickly put down in a few hours, but the event revealed ingrained discontent among the civilian population as well as among the military. Driven by rising prices, poverty, and political repression, the 1990 Lusaka riots broke out around the same time, with protesters and students chanting, "We want change!" — a clear sign of UNIP's growing unpopularity. Trade unions, particularly the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), emerged as a powerful opposition force, rallying workers against financial mismanagement. Although Lieutenant Mwamba Luchembe did not specifically plan the riots, his attempted coup was part of the broader national crisis and widespread public indignation.

Late in the 1980s, domestic and international pressures came together. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Cold War patronage changed global donor focus towards democratisation. Once sheltered by Western friends wary of Soviet influence in Africa, Kaunda now faced political reform demands. Among growing demonstrations in July 1990, he grudgingly announced a referendum on multiparty rule. But public indignation compelled him to ignore the referendum, opening the path for direct elections. Under Frederick Chiluba, a coalition of activists, intellectuals, and labour leaders known as the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) energised a country tired of hardship. Promising 'The Hour Has Come' for responsibility and rebirth, their campaign echoed the cries of market traders, miners, and students. The change started in October 1991 with elections. A rarity in an era of African strongmen, Kaunda's calm compromise guaranteed Zambia's democratic credentials. With 125 of 150 parliamentary seats, the MMD's landslide triumph reflected a general desire for change. Still, the difficulties ahead loomed big: rebuilding an economy from wreckage, healing rifts, and proving democracy could produce real change.