

The military, civil society and democracy in Zambia: Prospects for the future

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Introduction

There is a growing tradition of civil society activism in Zambia. The interest shown by foreign donors in strengthening non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have contributed to this. However, the role of civil society in contributing to the deepening of civil–military relations remains unclear. Despite the existence of many organisations concerned with issues such as human rights, election monitoring, women’s rights, peace or policy advocacy, these groups have tended to lack a clear agenda for intervention in matters that affect the military establishment.

Perhaps the most important task that civil society in Zambia has taken for granted in the process of consolidating democracy is the building of relations that ensure the subordination of the military to civilian control. There are clear indicators that either civil society has not come to grips with the role of the military in a democracy or it has merely decided to ‘let sleeping dogs lie’. Although there is interaction between civil society and the military at certain levels, the nature of armed forces dictates that they be engaged on substantive matters in a manner different from traditional methods of civil society advocacy. Consequently, the executive and legislature become important avenues to articulate matters of defence and security.

The involvement of civil society is seen increasingly as an important resource in balancing civil–military relations. In exploring the civil society partnership in building better civil–military relations, it is important to note that civil society is a complex concept that can perhaps best be understood from the perspective of its functions, relationships, location and association.

In this paper, civil society will generally refer to those groups and institutions involved in education and advocacy for building a high political culture. These are mainly human rights and governance based organisations. They include the Inter-African Network for Human Rights (AFRONET), the Foundation for Democratic Process (FODEP), the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), Women for Change (WFC), the Legal Resource Foundation (LRF), the Zambia Civic Education Association (ZCEA), the Non-governmental Organisation Co-ordinating Committee (NGOCC), the Southern African Centre for Constructive Resolution of Disputes (SACCORD), the Zambia National Women Lobby Group (ZNWLG), the Law Association of Zambia (LAZ), the Anti-Voter Apathy Project (AVAP), the Zambia Independent Monitoring Team

(ZIMT), Women in Law and Development in Zambia (WILDAF) and the Zambia Association for Research and Development (ZARD).

These groups vary in strength and size as well as in their financial means. Though they have a common goal in enhancing democracy in Zambia, these groups focus on different aspects of the democratic process. They complement each other, with their activities sometimes overlapping on certain governance issues. What they have failed to do, however, is take a leading role in the democratisation of the military.

This paper will examine and explore the potential and opportunities that exist for civil society to help build a basis for stable civil–military relations as democratisation unfolds in Zambia. The paper also discusses the potential for engaging government at various levels in order to create a working relationship with parliament and civilian members of the defence establishment to deal with matters of defence policy, budgeting and professionalism in the military.

Despite the democratisation process of recent years, discussion of the foiled coup attempt in 1997, is restricted. Furthermore, defence matters and especially expenditure in Zambia is still largely an in-house affair. Citizens and other institutions of democratic governance have limited ways of participating in matters within the realm of defence and security. However, as the democratic process consolidates and practises of openness spread, there is an increasing realisation that matters of security and defence cannot be left to the military alone. This is the challenge facing Zambian civil and political society.

Defence and democracy

As with the consolidation of democracy, a single institution cannot enhance civil–military relations on its own. It requires a partnership to identify new horizons, manage risks and facilitate processes. It is the responsibility of civil society to develop and facilitate partnerships that explore traditionally entrenched stereotypes about military and civil society.

In Zambia, the civil and military establishments are perceived as distinct entities with little or no common elements. But a closer examination of the position of the military within the structural changes during the Zambian civilian transition, shows that the military also faces demands that will invariably require new partnerships. One such demand is how the military should deal with its culture of secrecy about military affairs. The independent media and the expanding civil and political liberties make it possible to question such secrecy. The issue of HIV/AIDS in the military can no longer be hidden using military secrecy as an excuse.¹

For example, in November 1999, 13 journalists from the independent daily newspaper, *The Post*, appeared before the High Court in Lusaka on charges of espionage for publishing a story about Zambia's military preparedness (or

lack thereof) against attacks from Angola. The publication prompted arrests of the journalists concerned. The information had been posted on a website and was already in the public domain. The court decision to acquit the journalists shows that the military faces a new era of openness. It is important that the armed forces become part of the democratic state by respecting human rights, political liberties and sensible economic competition.

Until recently, the Zambian military was the only major public institution whose role in the reform processes was not publicly discussed despite it being a major recipient of public funds. Not even the powerful international multi-lateral institutions have ventured to scrutinize the military.

The 1990s, for instance, witnessed two attempted coups in Zambia. The first, in 1990, was widely regarded at the time as a protest by the pro-democracy movement. Generally, the civil society groups welcomed the protest despite its methods. This was probably due to fatigue in their struggle with the paternalistic control of the well-established one-party system. The perception today is that, although the 1990 coup did not succeed, it was a catalyst for the reintroduction of multiparty politics that had been consigned to political oblivion for 17 years, and is now associated with the return of democracy to Zambia.

The second coup attempt in the past decade occurred in 1997 under a multiparty regime. The junior officers who had temporarily seized the national radio station cited economic decadence and poverty as reasons for their action.² They outlined what they thought were failures of the government as a justification for its dethronement. One day after the coup attempt, a state of emergency was declared.

Interestingly, civil society groups were divided over this action. Some, including the labour movement, supported it while most of the human rights NGOs described it as an affront to the rights of citizens. This incident showed that the political institutions built by the civilian government were still weak and had failed to build adequate civil-military relations.

The lesson to be learned from this incident is that as the processes of globalisation and democracy unfold, the concepts of defence and security need to be discussed within Zambia, and new definitions agreed upon by all groups involved.

Traditional ideas about security should be updated to take account of the evolving culture of military professionalism and openness. Civil society groups, the judiciary, parliament and the executive, through the ministry of defence, will need to collaborate if any meaningful reforms are to be achieved by the new democratic dispensation.

This is supported by Jakkie Cilliers' (1995) postulate that where securely institutionalised civilian control exists, it is typically the product of long-standing national tradition and a complex set of formal and informal measures that affect the government, civil society and the military itself.

Cilliers concludes that three elements define the parameters within which the military operates:

- Measures that are contained in or derived from international law, the constitution or legislation;
- elements that fall outside the formal ambit of the state and so pertain to civil society; and
- those elements related to the military itself, its culture, the nature of a military disciplinary system, including the doctrines governing the roles and tasks of the military.

It is clear from the above that civilian supremacy is a collective result of many elements and the absence or weakness of even one of them is problematic for stable civil–military relations. The following section will briefly look at the military establishment in Zambia.

The principal goal of the defence forces is to protect national interest, including democracy, by deterring attacks on those interests. The military is a powerful institution because it has statutory authority over the means of violence, and how it relates to civil society groups in general cannot be ignored in the democratisation process. To a large extent the defence force has carried out its traditional mandate. In meeting the above objectives it has carried out a range of activities such as construction projects, production activities, disaster management, de-mining, HIV/AIDS programmes, chaplainry, peacekeeping, military co-operation and, recently, efforts are being made at media relations.

During both the 1991 and 1996 multiparty elections, the military remained in the barracks and supported the country's transition from one party state to democracy and did not interfere during the second round of elections. However, it would appear that the intervention by junior officers who attempted to overthrow the government in 1997 resulted from the disagreements that preceded the 1996 elections. The elections were mired in controversy following constitutional amendments that were seen as discriminatory and that led the main opposition party to boycott the electoral process. Democratic behaviour is a fundamental factor in stable civil–military relations in this context. It is probable that if the politicians had acted in an atmosphere of consensus and compromise, the armed forces would not have found a pretext for intervention. Civil society groups therefore have a mandate to take up their position to promote the democratic process, thereby avoiding similar controversies.

Civil society

Civil society organisations in Zambia are registered under the Societies Act CAP 105 Section (2) of the Laws of Zambia. These are organisations established to:

- actively address the varied and complex needs of society;
- establish mechanisms by which governments, markets and for profit organisations are held accountable to the public;
- promote pluralism and diversity; and
- protect and strengthen cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic and other identities.

In this discussion, civil society will refer to the groups mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The role of these civil society groups is to organise and contribute to the exchange and sharing of ideas on a range of issues as they relate to governance. These groups have sometimes challenged and at other times co-operated with the state. More often than not, they create space for dialogue through civic education, policy advocacy, lobbying or any such mechanisms to bridge the gaps through which individuals and communities can fulfil their goals in life.

In Zambia, these organisations have carried out activities around factors that:³

- encourage the effective participation of citizens in various political, social, economic or other processes;
- make people aware of their human rights and responsibilities, and take up their role in a democracy;
- encourage the involvement of people in decision-making processes, as well as in the implementation and management of programmes that affect their welfare; and
- allow the people to be actors and beneficiaries of any initiatives that impact on their lives.

These values are viewed as essential to the consolidation and sustainability of both civil-military relations and democracy itself. This is supported by Huntington who argues that preventing military intervention in society depends on the ability of a state to build a strong civilian institution.⁴ This process has begun in Zambia but has not progressed far. It is more concerned with citizen awareness and values, rather than the restructuring of actual institutions.

The number of NGOs involved in inculcating the above values is a step in the right direction as far as strengthening political institutions is concerned, although policy makers have not been properly lobbied. The efforts of civil society organisations are bearing fruit in helping to establish new values, and enable citizens to face the challenges of a multiparty political system, including appreciating peaceful transfers of power from one regime to another.

It is therefore imperative that political leadership allows, and even encourages, other sections of society (business, labour, professional associations, trade unions, women, youth, farmers' co-operatives, NGO bodies and community

organisations) to act independently to help sustain Zambia's growing democracy and harmonious civil-military relations since 'without a vigorous civil society the state is narrowly based and susceptible to capture by political or economic interests'.⁵ Civil society therefore represents a countervailing force to government in managing public affairs, including defence and security.

A basis for bridging the gap

An analysis of the work of non-governmental actors in the field of democracy in Zambia shows that there is still little acceptance of the need to include the military as a partner (even indirectly) in the state and responsibility for protecting and enhancing democracy in the country.

NGOs seem to be content with the status quo whereby the military is a remote, distinct entity whose affairs they can seldom talk about. This detachment of civil society may be explained by the structural arrangements that do not permit them to intervene effectively.

As Hutchful observes, 'the uniform is seen as a badge of separation and intimidation; joining the military is the equivalent of self-expulsion from civil life'.⁶ There is also a feeling that civilians have no business with, or expertise in, military affairs. The intimidation accompanying efforts to research military issues is extremely frustrating.⁷ The division in Zambia between the military and civil society is deep, and unlike the case in African traditional society where defence was a community responsibility, the specialisation and bureaucratisation of the modern military has separated civilians from the defence functions. At the same time it has created the problem of mutual suspicion.

However, global security trends and the growth of civil and political societies will almost inevitably shape the future of democracy and civil-military relations, even in Zambia. Zambian military personnel are beginning to attend seminars, albeit suspiciously, with ordinary citizens. Following the executive decision in 1993 that the Ministry of Defence estimates of expenditure should be subject to parliamentary debate, the Zambian parliament introduced the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, National Security and Defence in 1998. It appears, however, that there is a void in engaging elected representatives regarding this matter and, indeed, military policy and other affairs. Little work has been accomplished, as both parliament and civil society groups are apparently unsure of the military's role in a democracy and of how to effectively relate on policy issues.

For example, the Auditor General's reports indicate abuse of funds in the Ministry of Defence between 1994 and 1999.⁸ Neither Parliament nor civil society has pursued this matter as aggressively as they do with other public sector abuses. This should explain something about the dilemma of relations between military and society.

It is evident that comments on military conduct in Zambia by citizens or politicians are not made openly. This is true even when they may not approve of what the military has done. In a few cases soldiers or military personnel have beaten up civilians and burnt down villages because of social differences with the communities. Well-known incidents have occurred in the Kaoma, Ndola Rural and Mumbwa districts in the last decade. Public condemnation of these acts was limited and the incidents were treated as a 'passing phase in relations', as one government official explained.

The lack of understanding can be traced to problems on both sides of the divide. On the one hand, many civil society groups view government merely as a source of political authority rather than as a partner that can be influenced. On the other hand, elected representatives do not appreciate the value of input from civil society groups. The result has been a lack of proper articulation of military matters as they affect citizens. The problem can be seen in terms of political culture. Vibrancy of the civil society is necessarily a function of the political culture, which largely takes its cue from elected representatives.

Elected representatives appear to have assumed that they do not need other civil sectors to take part in their debates and yet it seems that no clear military policy has been debated, despite attempts by the military to remove them from power. For its part, civil society has not been aggressive enough in advocating clear and unchallenged civilian responsibility of the defence establishment, especially through the National Assembly or the Ministry of Defence. This should have been their part in the campaign.

Future prospects

It is vital that civil society and research institutions venture into the terrain of defence in a democracy. Possible topics of research include how democratic transitions affect the structure of military operations; defence policy; budgeting; respect for human rights; accountability; and subordination of the military to the civilian regime. Once there is accurate information and a body of literature, it will be easier to lobby both the executive and the legislature to address the issues in a more positive manner. It would be backed by public pressure, which arises from the public availability of information.

The need for collaboration

Good political leadership can promote stability in a state by engaging with those officers who have political ambitions and keeping the military separate from civilian political power. This is why civil society groups must play an important role in building relationships and institutions that minimise tension among the civilian leadership, citizens and the military.

However, during this transitional stage, interventions by civil society must involve careful planning and calculated strategy. Careful thought must be given to shaping institutional roles and relationships. Although the executive is responsible for the day-to-day control of military forces, the oversight role must be exercised by parliament.

However, due to the near dominance of the ruling party in the legislature, scrutinising the executive's arrangements on matters of defence and then offering criticism yields no positive response or results. The Ministry of Defence does not seem to have performed well in accounting for its budgetary allocation but public comment on this is unlikely.⁹

Military issues deserve the same transparency as other forms of institutional restructuring. Public exposure of the workings and disposition of military funding could be of interest not only to ordinary citizens but also to many in the military itself, who have no control over or insight into how institutional funds are managed within the military establishment.

Two main areas where collaborative efforts could bear fruit are defence policy and budgeting. As explained earlier, NGOs and other civil society groups have not yet engaged their elected representatives or the executive arm of government.

Defence policy

Civil-military collaboration in this area will result in a policy that is better understood, and widely supported. Without collaboration, the policy is a hit-and-miss affair. One example relates to Zambia's position in the pan-African war in the Great Lakes region. The neutral or mediator stance was neither discussed in parliament nor tabled for consultation with the Zambian population. A few civil society voices did appeal to the executive not to engage in the war. These may, or may not, have played a part in the decision not to go to war.

Nevertheless, with regard to the decision taken by the executive to mediate, concerns of accountability still arise. Millions of Kwacha have been spent by the executive shuttling between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Lusaka to attend meetings. Although there was no engagement in war, Zambians still deserved to know how much money was spent by the executive on these peace errands, as it has budgetary implications for other sectors of the economy.

Another example is the lack of consultation when military personnel are sent on UN peacekeeping missions. Although this is one of the roles of the military, citizens must be allowed to discuss the consequences of changes in the defence budget and the impact this has on the economy in general. It also has implications if military personnel are killed in these missions. Replacing personnel is costly and requires careful planning and consultation.

During 2000, over 400 Zambian troops were captured, and later released, by rebel forces in Sierra Leone while on a UN mission. The negative effects were not only felt by those in government, but by the citizens who had not been afforded the opportunity to take part in discussing the participation of Zambian military personnel. It was an executive decision, which was not necessarily wrong, but required wider consultation within the democratic framework where defence and security must be a community concern for every citizen. With the increasing dominance of economic security and welfare, and indeed the protection of civil and political rights, leaving such matters to the executive alone is becoming a risky affair.

Contemporary discourse on defence demands that resource management and transparency of defence planning and budgeting must be the basic tools for building confidence in defence policy during democratisation. This is essential for improving the quality of policy formulation and implementation regarding democratic processes. It leads to better policy targeting, thereby enhancing a closer fit between the needs and demands of both the civilian population and the military. It further allows for better conformity between policy intent and outcomes, thus harmonising civil–military relations.

The defence budget

Spending on defence must be seen within the context of the broader economy. Ordinary citizens and their associations should be involved in, and informed of, the defence spending process. They can then make informed decisions on what sort of defence budget is needed.

In Zambia, the factors they would need to consider would most likely include the assessment of the political and military situation, the geopolitical position of the country and the overall economic conditions that prevail. However, as already observed, efforts in this direction are limited because military matters are not considered to be in the public domain, and therefore subject to public discussion, especially by ordinary citizens and non-technocrats.

Defence budgeting and expenditure should be a public process because it involves the optimal allocation of resources. Defence economists argue that the choice of the level of military expenditure is a political decision which reflects the preferences of the government in power, and consequently needs the ordinary people's support to work effectively judged against other needs.

Military expenditure is one area where civil society intervention and academic scholarship could provide support to Parliament and other bureaucratic structures such as the Ministry of Defence. Collaboration on such issues will definitely strengthen the military in subtle but important ways.

This is especially important in Zambia where the economy is in decline. By extension, defence economics is faced with the real alternative of welfare secu-

rity. What this means is that the inept and incompetent management of defence resources turns into a major mechanism not only for internal welfare but also for external security.¹⁰

The Ministry of Finance provides an opportunity to outside stakeholders when it draws up the budget for each year. Civil society has certainly not exploited this opportunity although the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace has tried to comment on those issues on which it has information and can argue effectively. Generally, therefore civil society still needs to utilise this avenue. The budget is not only a legally standardised basic public financial tool but also a means of ensuring accountability. The opportunity to influence the budget process should be taken if any positive development is to be achieved in the transformation of the views of the military establishment. This is because the process needs to be transparent, efficient and effective.

This process is also important because it will focus on how the resources are allocated and how those resources, once allocated will be managed. This process is improved by the presence of watchdog bodies from civil societies. However, due to lack of reliable information on defence spending in Zambia (although aggregates are available), it is impossible to assess trends and developments in military spending with any accuracy.

Whistle blowing

One of the traditional roles of civil society is to expose acts that are incompatible with professional conduct in the public sector. In Zambia, democracy activists play an important role in highlighting the importance of political participation and freedom in human life; they help keep government responsible and accountable, including helping to educate citizens.

However, they have not filled this role in the military sector. For example, rumours of recruitment and promotion on the basis of ethnic group; nepotism; allegiance to the ruling party; and the infiltration of military ranks by political cadres continue to make the rounds. Civil society has not dared to venture into this terrain to help the military uphold its professionalism.

The independent media has, however, endeavoured to expose some of the malpractices and human rights violations related to the military and defence establishment. An example of human rights violation was the denial of accommodation to soldiers whom the court acquitted after the attempted coup of 1997¹¹, despite the ruling that the soldiers be granted their former conditions of service.

Sustained pressure on the elected leadership to enquire about such matters would no doubt aid professionalism in the military. This is the envisaged role of civil society in the 21st century.

In addition, civil society groups involved in democracy could help design curricula and, from time to time, be visiting lecturers at the Staff Defence College to discuss community issues, the promotion of democracy, and share their experience of civic matters. Conversely, military personnel could be invited to seminars organised by civil society to discuss issues of common interest, especially military subordination to civil control.

Conclusion

It is vital that the relationships between the military, elected representatives and civil society are redefined according to democratic principles. The challenge for the three sets of actors is to create, nourish and perpetuate dialogue among the different components of society in order to avoid violent confrontations. This will enhance cross-sectoral collaboration, the purpose of which is to achieve convergent objectives through combined efforts, but where the respective roles and responsibilities of all the actors involved remain distinct. The rationale is that these interactions will generate synergistic effects on the democratic process.

One workable proposal is the formation of liaison teams that report to parliament or are convened under the Ministry of Defence. These teams could assist in a variety of initiatives such as managing partnerships between defence personnel and civilians, defining the role of armed forces in democratic processes, the rule of law and respect for human rights. In such a way, the military would be seen as an integral part of the democratic process and would give citizens the courage to discuss matters affecting them.

Sustainable success will depend on the ability to make progress in tackling the issues of economic development and government institutions, and how they affect the military during the transition to democracy. Results will only be seen when all three parties interact and communicate with each other in non-violent ways.

The Zambian government launched an initiative in 2000 known as the National Capacity Building Programme (NCBP) for good governance in Zambia.¹² The document does not, however, mention anything about how the democratisation programmes will affect or involve the military establishment. Neither Parliament nor civil society made an effort to draw attention to this glaring omission. Again, it is up to civil society and Parliament, if they see fit, to find points of intervention when the programme is implemented, since they missed the opportunity at its conception.

Currently, the biggest challenge for civil society is to build appropriate coalitions, which must as far as possible include allies from the military, Parliament, the judiciary and executive branches of government. These coalitions can begin to address the problems highlighted in this paper. Scholars,

researchers and policy makers have a serious responsibility to take the opportunities that present themselves. It is high time that civil society develop the autonomous means and ability to challenge and, if necessary, help restructure the prevailing security doctrine. It has been glossed over often enough. As an institution that uses public funds, the military needs to become part of the democratic process through the active involvement of civil society.

Endnotes

1. The Ministry of Defence has set up a unit for HIV/AIDS under its medical services. It has also appointed a public relations officer.
2. Refer to Captain Solo alias Lungu's speech during the coup of 1997, *The Post*, Wednesday 29 October, 1997.
3. A Yezi, *Democracy and youth leadership: The challenge and beyond*, Research Book Publishers, p 12.
4. SE Finer, *The man on Horseback*, Praeger, New York, 1962, p18.
5. M Kalungu-Banda, The role of civil society in democratisation and good governance, a paper presented to the 1999 MS Zambia General Assembly, February 1999, p 7.
6. E Hutchful, Military issues in the transition to democracy, in E Hutchful & A Bathily (eds), *The military and militarism in Africa*, 1998, p 611.
7. During the research, the author was referred from one military officer to another without any of them addressing his concerns and referring him to a higher authority or permanent secretary.
8. See Auditor General's reports covering those years.
9. Ibid.
10. A Rafiu, *Military in politics*, Heinemann Educational Books, Nigeria, 1999, p 30.
11. Torment of acquitted coup suspects, *Monitor*, Lusaka, Afronet, 115, July 14–20, 2000.
12. This is Zambia's blueprint for governance in the next ten years. It outlines steps to generate and galvanise political will and capacity to implement reforms.