

American Youth Looks at Race and Politics in Zambia, Southern Africa

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Andrew Young and Nicholas Podgorny had just finished tours of southern Africa, pronouncing super-power policy prescribing remedies to the region's problems and posturing for the benefit of the folk back home. It seemed somehow appropriate, therefore, that as representatives of America's "youth" we add our voices to the Africa debate. And so as delegates of a national youth organization, we too were going to southern Africa to pronounce, prescribe and posture in our own little ways.

The sponsoring organization is a confederation of over twenty national youth organizations. It comes about as close as anyone can in this pluralistic society of ours to representing the various interests of American youth, or at least youth groups. It includes such old -- from a 23 year old's perspective -- and venerable organizations as NMCP, the CYO, College Republicans, College Democrats as well as, less well known organizations like the Young People's Socialist League (social democrats), ARROW (American Indians), ABDALA (anti-Castro Cubans) and The Freedom Leadership Foundation (my own).

These organizations represent a variety of interests and opinions. Needless to say, the opinions expressed in this essay on "Race, Politics and American Youth in Southern Africa" are my own only. Many of the delegates on my tour agree on many topics, but I am sure some of them may disagree with me on the course and implications of the developments in Southern Africa which I describe in this article.

It was hard for many of the youth leaders with whom we met, especially in the one-party state of Zambia, to understand that the youth organization did not represent every politically articulate young person in the United States; as their youth organization equivalents did. Since leadership in the Zambian Youth Brigade, the youth wing of the ruling party, usually means eventual leadership in the part and government they assumed that we too were slated for positions in our own government. Being introduced as future Presidents and Ministers caused most of us a moment or two of embarrassed unease; particularly since, in order to cultivate an image of real influence with our hosts, we didn't really discourage the fiction.

Our delegation leader was Gerry Parsh, chairman, at 25, of the Young Peoples Socialist League. YPSL is the youth wing of the center-to-right wing of the Social-Democratic movement. Gerry is for labor, and like every good Marxist, believes in the saving grace of the proletariat. Unlike left Social Democrats who sympathize with revolutionary socialism, even to the extent of justifying totalitarian societies like Cuba or Viet Nam, Gerry and YPSL are democrats as much as they are socialists. They see the central struggle of our times not as capitalism verses socialism but, like laborites from Moynihan to Meany, as revolutionary totalitarianism verses constitutional democracy.

More typical of America's budding young politicians, liberal or conservative, was the chairman of the Maryland College Republicans from John Hopkins University, Steve Sims.

Twenty-one year old Howard University student Darcell Moorfield represented the NAACP on the delegation.

The YMCA's delegate, Jay Fornier, flew into Washington from Los Angeles just a few hours before we

left for Africa. Jay is blond, blue eyed, well-tanned; he wore casuals, a pullover and sandals (his uniform throughout the trip); he owns a house on the beach which doubles as a craft shop; in short he is the quintessential South Californian.

Our other two delegates were Linda Bennett, a USYC staff member, and Charese Jordan from the YWCA.

"Zambia in the Sun." That is how tourist brochures describe it. A land-locked nation of Africa's south-central plateau. Zambia borders every other major country in southern Africa except South Africa. Formally a British Protectorate, then called Northern Rhodesia, Zambia broke from the British imposed Federation of Rhodesia (North and South) and Nyasaland (Malawi) in 1963. Ethnically Zambia is almost completely African, mainly of Bantus speaking descent, although English is the official language.

"Copper and Kaunda" are the keys to understanding contemporary Zambia. Anyway that's what they say in the State Department briefing. Copper is Zambia's chief exchange earner. It pays the bills. Located not far from where U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold died in a plane crash is the Mufilira mine, the second largest copper mine in the world and the largest of any kind in Africa. Given the dominant role of copper in the economy the mine unions of northern Zambia have a great deal to say about government policies.



President of Zambia Dr Kenneth Kaunda arrives at London's Heathrow airport to attend the 1977 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), UK.

The pre-eminent force in Zambian politics is still, however, Kenneth Kaunda. President since independence and undisputed leader of the only legal party in Zambia, the Union Independence party (UNIP), Kaunda is one of the few African leaders still left from the anti-colonial struggles of the 1960's.

Kaunda is also author of "Humanism" -- Zambia's state philosophy. Humanism, is an amalgam of socialist self-help precepts; a homegrown African nationalism. And Africans, as we were to learn, are nationalists above all else. From a morosely gray English afternoon we passed, after a dark night flight down the body of Africa, into the brilliant blue of a Zambian winter morning. A cool, dry breeze blew across the bushy landscape, keeping the temperature at a near perfect 72 degrees. Uninhibited blooms splashed sharp colors against the red-rust soil. Snaking, rolling hills -- rather like one would expect of African hills -- ringed Lusaka's ultra-modern airport -- an airport more than adequate for Zambia's two inter-continental aircraft.

I was rather relieved that poverty is not so starkly obvious in Zambia, as it is in other Third World countries. On my tours of Lusaka I saw no big bellied babies; no out-stretched hands greeted one's every turn.

The unavoidable clash of traditional and modern seemed no more incongruous in Lusaka than it does anywhere in Dixieland, where Old South and New South sit side-by-side. Hunched buildings slouch perfunctorily by the side of the new hard-top highway which runs from the airport into Lusaka. The major buildings in the central city are made of glass and steel; but the people on the streets below, racing to catch up with the rest of humanity, still sway to the rhythms of their ancient villages.

Our host in Zambia was the Lusaka USIS station chief, John Burns. He dressed always in rumpled brown khaki bush clothes -- or when not dressed in them seemed like he ought to have been. Unlike other Americans we met he actually enjoyed his work in Africa. He had been there eight years -- in Nairobi, Johannesburg, and finally Lusaka.

He knew an unusual number of local leaders and middle-echelon managers, and he spent a lot of time touring the country, getting to know every day side of Zambia's problems. He was most eager to share what he had learned with us; indeed he seemed at times to beg for us to ask him questions about Africa.

"I probably know more about Southern Africa than anyone else in our government," he confided one night at the hotel bar.

"Kaunda is interested in political survival," Burns said over a glass of bitter Zambian brew. "It's the same all over Africa. Economic development, political ideology, foreign relations all figure into the same power equation."

So simple and obvious. Policy may serve justice, or it may not. That it occasionally does usually results from its coincidence with the demands of political power. No other interpretation so simply explains the seeming confusion of ideology and issues in southern Africa.

The majority of informed opinion in the United States subscribes to the belief that the outstanding problem in southern Africa is white majority rule and apartheid. And indeed on our tour through Zambia the theme ran through every conversation with youth leaders and government officials.

Translated into practice, however, Zambia's commitment to "majority rule" includes safe haven and arms for guerrillas of the avowedly assessments, anti-democratic "Patriotic Front." The Front is a merger of guerrilla factions supported by the five "front-line" states, committed to a military solution (to be followed by a radical program after the mandatory struggle between the guerrilla factions themselves) in Rhodesia.

However, there are other more moderate, democratic nationalist groups within Rhodesia -- Bishop Abel Muzowero's prominent among them -- whose objectives, more than the guerrilla's, coincide with the feelings of the majority of black Rhodesians, and if I may venture an opinion, with their interests as well.

It's hard to see in what sense, then, the "front-line" states are committed to "Majority rule;" if the term implies, as many Americans take it to imply, some form of democratic rights and social justice. One of the "front-line" states, Mozambique, is a brutal Marxist dictatorship. A "palm fringed Gulag," Mozambique concentration camps contain more political prisoners - "class enemies" instead of the victims of race prejudice -- than Rhodesia and South Africa combined.

Western diplomats cling to the hope that Zambia's president Kaunda will be the peacemaking moderate in Southern Africa. At one time Kaunda publicly favored a quick, negotiated peace. In 1974 for instance, he sponsored the "Victoria Falls" negotiations between Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith and a black nationalist.

At a reception in honor of our delegation we met several officials from Zambia's Foreign Ministry who assured us that Kaunda's switch from moderate to radical was due to the intransigence of the Smith government.

The reason for Kaunda's change of course go deeper than disillusionment over past failures in negotiations, however. He is responding to pressures from the growing radicalization of the region. It has become nearly impossible to steer a "non-aligned" course in southern Africa -- homespun ideological inclinations notwithstanding.

Soviet power has replaced Chinese in Zambia. At one time 13,000 Chinese "volunteers" labored away on the Tan-Zam, the rail-line connecting Lusaka via Tanzania to the sea. The number of "para-military collies" assigned to help run the railway has dwindled along with Chinese influence in Lusaka. The cook in Lusaka's only remaining Chinese restaurant is a Zambian.

The Soviet embassy, a two-minute walk from our hotel, is the command post for guerrilla operations against Rhodesia. The Soviets are deeply involved in the training, supplying and even deployment of the guerrilla army. Soviet influence extends into Zambia as well, which also receives arms from the USSR. At the Soviet's behest, the agent for Angola's anti-communist UNITA guerrillas, initially backed by Kaunda in civil war against the Marxist MAPLA, has been expelled from Zambia. And in the wake of the Rhodesian army's recent incursions into Mozambique, Kaunda has hinted that Zambia might call upon foreign -- Cuban -- troops for protection.

In an eleventh hour attempt to catch up with the Soviets on the majority rule issue the United States has declared its solidarity with the "front-line" cause. President Carter, through the offices of his Vice President and UN Ambassador, served notice on Africa's white governments last May. The de facto government of Rhodesia, said Messrs. Mondale and Young, must be replaced by black majority government or else." And South Africa must give up its policy of apartheid, quickly integrate its blacks as

full citizens and grant them the vote or else.

Recently the Carter Administration braved reaction and retribution by closing down the innocuous Rhodesia Information Office in Washington, D.C. The "front-line" states, including Zambia, expect more than that, however. Almost all of those whom we asked to comment on America's new African policy expressed appreciation for the rhetoric but said they hoped it would be backed by action.

Early in September Kaunda, as well as the other "front-line" heads of state agreed to accept the Anglo-American plan for majority rule in Rhodesia, contingent upon the concurrence of the Popular Front. The plan calls for U.S. supervised elections on the principle of "one-man, one-vote," as well as the establishment of an interim U.S. peace-keeping force and British administrator, but it leaves intact the armies of the Popular Front under their present leadership as part of the new government's security forces. Thus do we again turn to that often employed, never successful diplomatic expedient: the coalition government. Relying upon the Popular Front to safeguard the results of an electoral mandate in Rhodesia is like leaving the Red Army to establish democratic governments in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.

Certainly blacks, "coloreds," and Asiatics in southern Africa have experienced extreme injustices.

Nevertheless the terrible fact of racism does not excuse the U.S. from facing the same realities those of national interest and ideological competition in southern Africa that it must face everywhere else. Whatever the moral imperative of America's "mission" in southern Africa may be, the real issues in Zambian national life are issues of power, ideology and political survival. In contradiction to the advice of my friend John Bums the Carter Africa policy reflects the mistaken belief that race, not ideology or political freedom, is Africa's most important social issue.

Unfortunately the sentiments of the Carter Administration on the "civil rights movement in Southern Africa" shed no light on the real dangers for the United States there -- namely, Soviet penetration of the region and the accession of African governments unfriendly to U.S. strategic, economic and political interests. It's a happy occasion when the demands of power intersect the cause of justice. Admittedly the equation is never exact; nor is it so in this instance.

The same pressures forcing Kaunda's hand in international politics dominate his domestic considerations as well. Zambia's problems have relatively little to do with racism and white minority rule. Power in any one party government rests on one of two props: (1) successful economic, social or political mobilization of its people and/or (2) repression of organized opposition.

President Kaunda walks a very dangerous line in between these two options. Under Kaunda Zambia has been relatively free and relatively prosperous, in comparison to other African countries. Dissatisfaction, on the left and on the right, is growing nevertheless.

Students at the ultra-modern University of Zambia openly mocked Ambassador Young during a talk he gave there last spring. Radicals thought even his rhetoric too benign. They see Kaunda as an old-guard traditionalist who is moving Zambia down the road to socialism far too slowly.

A gulf is growing between these students and the youth leaders of Kaunda's Union National Independence Party. In talks at UNIP's youth headquarters we were told that one hundred percent of Zambia's young people had been mobilized by the Party, including the college students, who for the most part were too busy with their studies to worry about politics anyway. From less self-interested parties we learned that in fact the UNIP recruiting program to the university had failed to attract the interest of the predominantly leftist student body.

On the other hand labor and business -- supported at the polls by a pragmatic peasantry -- are leaning heavily on Kaunda to open the economy up to greater private initiative. Copper prices -- the mainstay of Zambia's economy are depressed; the heady prosperity of three years ago, when copper brought double its present price on the world's market, are over. The copper unions, which dominate northern Zambian politics complain that socialism costs the mineworker more than his fair share. Mine management as well as other Zambian entrepreneurs share the unions' opposition to Kaunda's economic policies. They complain that too high a percentage of their profits have been funneled to support a non-productive party bureaucracy and unprofitable government projects.

Presently criticism is muffled by the constraints of a single company "democracy," as well as by President Kaunda's continuing personal popularity. What happens if these discontents boil over is anyone's guess. As we drove past the presidential palace one afternoon, I was struck by how tangible and precarious political power still is in Zambia. Zambia's army is stationed across the street from the palace; behind it most of Lusaka's police force live in a special compound.