

# The Unholy Matrimony of the Church and Politics in Zambia: The Dilemma of a Christian Nation

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**Abstract:** This study sought to establish the challenges the church faces in its involvement in issues of governance in Zambia. Currently, the country is officially a Christian nation according to the 2016 amended constitution. This study was conducted in Lusaka District. On the primary data front, the research used interviews and focus group discussions. The main participants were Churches, political parties, and government officials. The research study used a descriptive survey research design. Seventy – two (72) participants and four (4) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) formed the sample population. The key finding was that the Church faces the challenge of division and accusations when commenting on national matters. Therefore, this study recommends that the Government should make it a policy for the Church to be accorded its legitimate role with regards to being informed, heard, and consulted on issues of governance. The Church should also be involved in politics because it is the duty of the Church to permeate public life with the spirit of Christ who fought for the dignity of human life and to illustrate in its own life the kind of life which is God's will for society as a whole.

**Key Words:** Church, Governance, Politics, Justice, Christian Nation

## I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

From the onset, it is imperative readers understand that the title does not insinuate that the authors like Zambia being 'a Christian Nation' but they just want to broaden the understanding of it. The Church in this study refers to all Christian denominations that are represented especially by three church mother bodies namely; the Christian Council of Zambia (CCZ) which houses all the mainline protestant Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) for all Pentecostal Churches in Zambia and the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB) representing all the religious orders under the Catholic Church. On the other hand, politics involves activities associated with the governance of a country. From time immemorial, the Church in Zambia has played a vital role in the political life of the people it serves. The Church's involvement in the governance of the country can be traced from colonial times when missionaries witnessed exploitations and injustices of colonialism on the Africans. Ipenburg (1984) observes that the Church in colonial times embarked on offering education to use it as the means of dislodging colonial rule. The outstanding missionary body with this aim was the Free Church of Scotland that aimed at producing an educated elite group with critical minds. Therefore, the Lubwa Mission of the Presbyterian (Church of Scotland) managed to produce very critical young

men. The first President of the Republic of Zambia (Kenneth David Kaunda) acknowledged this when he said these words:

*We were taught by great educationalists such as my father, Reverend and Dr. David Brown, and Reverend Robert Maxwell and Dr. Brown who went round for clerical and teaching work... At the same time, Christ's message made us what we were and what we have been. No matter how little the education was, it helped us to organise ourselves politically (Cited in Ipenburg, 1984).*

Today, the Free Church of Scotland missionaries are recognised as among some of the outstanding political contributors to Zambia's independence. This is because they offered good education intending to use it as the means of dislodging colonial rule. Kenneth Kaunda and Kapasa Makasa note that these missionaries worked tirelessly in addressing local people about political awareness and self-rule (Ipenburg, 1984).

As the Church continued to stand firm as the voice of Africans, it was reprimanded by political officers. For example, in 1943, the Church was reprimanded by the government for involving itself in highly controversial matters affecting native affairs, which were not within the scope of missionary work (Bennett, 2006). Tiberondwa (1978) acknowledges that in post-independence Zambia, the Church continued to be the voice of the voiceless and the voice of the poor. It took the role of a pressure group to check on the activities of the government and their impact on the poor. According to Magasu, Muleya & Mweemba (2020), this could be a way of consolidating democracy through free and open participation in public affairs. However, the Government in Zambia has always challenged the competence and mandate of the Church to comment on political issues. For example, the former Information Minister in the MMD government Ronnie Shikapwasha purported that the government was willing to listen to the Church's concerns, but rejected its interference in political affairs (*Times of Zambia, November 2, 2010*). He accused the Catholic Church of planning genocide in Zambia through a ministerial presentation to Parliament. He said that the Church's role was to promote unity in the country and not allow itself to be drawn into partisan political squabbles. But the question remains 'What is the role of the church in governance?'

From the above discussion, it appears that the Government in Zambia sees the role of the Church only as spiritual and praying for political leaders. Komakoma (2003) observes that those who hold this view fail to understand both the meaning of politics and the role of the Church in society. However, the Church argues that it is sufficiently independent of all political and economic systems but it has to uphold principles and attitudes rather than systems. It sees itself as having a prophetic mandate in speaking on behalf of and for the people, it serves because justice is the aim and intrinsic criterion of all politics (Henriot, 2001). Henriot (2001) adds that to be true to its mission, the Church in Zambia must indeed get actively involved, not merely offering prayers. Against those who call upon the Church to be neutral, Henriot (2001) agrees that the Christian community cannot be neutral in the face of human suffering, of dishonesty, of injustice, or oppression of the poor. This argument gives a call to undertake this study.

Agostoni (2001) opines that if the Church isolated itself from the state, it makes religion a purely private affair without any social dimension and it becomes irrelevant and meaningless. This means that if the government does not uphold human rights, human dignity, human freedom, it has the mandate to pressure it to change its policies or even participate in efforts to reform the political structures. Furthermore, Pope John Paul II stated to the Kenya bishops in 1994 that "your protest against violence, defence of human rights, the reproof of those who seek a personal advantage by exploiting their neighbours, calls to civil authorities to renew their honest dedication to ensuring the common good are signs of your fidelity to the demands of your apostolic ministry (Ruwa, 2001:10)." However, it appears the role the Church plays in Zambian politics has not been recognised and established. Hence, this studies to determine the relationship between the church and politics in Zambia.

#### *Main Objective*

To establish the challenges the Church faces in its involvement in political governance in Zambia.

#### *Research Question*

What challenges does the Church face in its involvement in Zambian political governance?

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Lusaka District and involved different methods including archival research. On the primary data front, the researchers used questionnaires, interviews, and FGDs. The population of the study included representatives from different Churches, Political parties, Government officials, and the public. Twelve (12) church leaders were subjected to interviews, Eight (8) political party leaders were subjected to interviews, Two (2) government officials were interviewed, Twenty eight (28) church members were subjected to Focus Groups (Four (4) each with seven (7) members and Fifty (50) members of the public were subjected to semi-structured questionnaires. Fifty percent (50%) of the

sample size were subjected to semi-structured questionnaires so as to make generalization of the findings easy because of the large sample size. Twenty-two percent (22%) were subjected to interviews to allow the researcher get the participants' views directly. Twenty-eight percent (28%) were subjected to FGDs in order to get group consensus on the subject matter. Thus, a total number of one seventy-two (72) participants and four (4) Focus Groups participated in this study. The research study used a descriptive survey research design. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion is in line with the themes that emerged in the findings on the challenges the church faces in trying to involve itself in governance issues.

#### *Challenges the Church Faces in involving itself in Politics*

When the participants were asked to state the challenges faced by the church when involved in governance issues, the following themes emerged; division within the church and political partisanship.

#### *Division within the Church*

The research findings revealed that the church was divided when it comes to its involvement in governance issues especially when commenting on national affairs. For example, during Chiluba's third term bid, the Church was divided. Some Church members believed that president Chiluba was an anointed president from God and no one had the right to question his presidency. On the other hand, the Church leaders from Mainline Churches were not of that idea, and that brought confusion amongst the Church leaders. By implication, Zambia needs a common shared vision and working together to achieve the desired goals. Unfortunately, some politicians and some clergy believe that praying and fasting is enough to bring about great personal and social change. In as far as the church's challenges were concerned, a participant from the Catholic Church had this to say:

*One of the challenges the Church faces is that the Church seems to be divided sometimes when commenting on national affairs. For example, during Chiluba's third term bid, the Church was divided. Some Church members believed that president Chiluba was an anointed president from God and no one had the right to question his presidency. On the other hand, the Church leaders from the three Church Mother Bodies were not of the view and that brought confusion.*

The above quotation brings into perspective Agostoni (2001) who opines that if the Church isolated itself from the state, it makes religion a purely private affair without any social dimension and it becomes irrelevant and meaningless. In the same vein, Henriot (2001) agrees that the Christian community cannot be neutral in the face of human suffering, of dishonesty, of injustice, or oppression of the poor.

Another example is the building of the national house of prayer. It was discovered during the study that this has created more divisions within the Church. Some members are saying it is not necessary to start building the national house of prayer when we already have a lot of houses of prayer that can and have been accommodating all the national activities conducted in the past. On the other hand, others are suggesting it is a good and right thing to do and the president should be supported on that. They suggest that Zambia as a Christian nation is on the right path to building the Lord's house in line with the command of God to build him a house as King Solomon was commanded in the past. However, Zambia's progress depends on great Civic Education and not on being a Christian Nation. It is not by fasting and praying that can bring about great personal and social change. According to Magasu, Muleya & Mweemba (2020), Civic Education, whenever and however undertaken, prepares people of a country, especially the young, to carry out their roles as citizens.

Further, the current study discovered that the Church was divided on the day of national prayer. Some Church members said that declaring the day of national prayer and forcing people to observe it was unconstitutional and should not be encouraged. On the other hand, the other Church members feel that the declaration of the day of national prayer was a sign that the current president was God sent and needed support from all well-meaning Christians as observed by a participant from the United Church of Zambia who said that:

*Currently, the Church is divided on the day of national prayer. Some Church members are saying that declaring the day of national prayer and forcing people to observe it is unconstitutional and should not be encouraged. On the other hand, the other Church members feel that the declaration of the day of the national prayer is a sign that the current president is God-sent, and that he needs to be supported by all well-meaning Christians.*

Further, respondents revealed that the reason for the division among Church leaders was because of the love of money by some Church leaders. The moment they are given something in form of money they become compromised towards the calling. The study also revealed that the declaration of the National Day of Prayer by the president caused deeper rifts within the political and the Church realms. It is further said to have brought confusion between the Church and the state. Those Church leaders who are against the national day of prayer and fasting are seen as Ant-Christ by those who are supporters of this move and they see themselves as good citizens who support and respect the authorities as commanded by God himself and they see themselves as true Christians. Those who are opposing the need for a day of national prayer assert that prayer to God is an everyday duty for Christians and should not wait for a day of prayer to be announced by a politician. They further argue that the national day of prayer is a drain of the nation's meagre resources that

should be avoided. However, the Church leaders who support the creation of this day are always given preferences by the government to participate in the nation's affairs leaving out those who seem to oppose the move. This has posed a big challenge to the Church because the Church has divided itself on this issue.

In view of the above, it appears that the Government in Zambia sees the role of the Church only as spiritual and praying for political leaders. On this basis, one would agree with Komakoma's (2003) observation that those who hold this view fail to understand both the meaning of politics and the role of the Church in society. It is clear from this perspective that there is too much ecumenism among our Christian churches, and some of our politicians do not want to be challenged by the church. The Government in Zambia has always challenged the competence and mandate of the Church to comment on political issues. For example, the former Information Minister in the MMD government Ronnie Shikapwasha purported that the government was willing to listen to the Church's concerns, but rejected its interference in political affairs (*Times of Zambia, November 2, 2010*). This scenario comes into direct conflict with Tiberondwa's (1978) submission that in post-independence Zambia, the Church continued to be the voice of the voiceless and the voice of the poor. By implication, politicians want the church to pray for them and to consider them as God's chosen ones ignoring the fact that the church and politics cannot be separated. Ipenburg (1984) observes that Kenneth Kaunda and Kapasa Makasa note that these missionaries worked tirelessly in addressing local people about political awareness and self-rule. Therefore, the relationship between the church and politics that bleeds division within the church itself seems unnecessary. The division, as observed by a respondent from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, somehow proves the unholy matrimony that exist between the church and politics in Zambia:

*Another example is the building of the national house of prayer. This has created more divisions within the Church. Some members are saying it is not necessary to start building the national house of prayer when we already have a lot of house of prayers which can and have been accommodating all the national activities we have been conducting in the past. On the other hand, others are saying it is a good and right thing and the president should be supported on that. They are saying, Zambia is a Christian nation and for the president to announce the building of the Lord's house is just fulfilling the command of God where he commanded King Solomon to build his house where he can be able to meet his people.*

In supporting the declaration of the day of the national prayer by the president, Apostle Longwani who is Kingdom Family Ministries Overseer said that —the day of national prayer is meant to reflect on unity, reconciliation, and repentance which should be attended by everyone without fail. He further

commended the head of state for the declaration of this day (*Lusakatimes.com*, 17th October 2018). On the other hand, there was a communication from ZEC concerning the day of national prayer and fasting on the 18th of October every year stating that: —The Catholic Church is not against this day. However, the Church has some issues concerning the organization of this nature; it is more of a political event than a religious one. The position of the Church, especially to all priests, is that you are not to take part in the events of this day (*TheZambianobserver.com*, 17th October 2018). However, according to Phiri (2003), the relationship between the church and government should be understood within the environment where the church was the only independent civil society movement left standing.

#### *Church's political partisanship*

Another issue that was raised by the respondents when asked by the researcher was the issue of the Church's political partisanship. When asked by the researcher about the challenges Church faces, participants also revealed that sometimes the Church is being accused of being partisan when commenting on national issues and this has led to many people losing trust and confidence in the Church. For example, one respondent from the Methodist Church Member said:

*Sometimes the Church is being accused of being partisan when commenting on national issues and this has led to many people losing trust and confidence in the Church. For example, while some citizens are advocating for the Church to lead the dialogue process in Zambia, the other group of citizens does not want the Church to lead. They are accusing the Church of being partisan.*

Commenting on the dialogue being spearheaded by the Church in Zambia, Kelvin BwalyaFube of the PF advised the president to open the door for the Church to lead the dialogue process. He suggested that —Zambia is a Christian nation and it is because of this that the Church is the right institution to lead the process (*www.primetv.com*, 27th August, 2018). On the same program, Mark Simuwe in his daily news analysis says that —the Church is the best institution to lead the dialogue process because of its historical achievements in resolving issues bordering on governance (*www.primetv.com.zm*, 27th August 2018). These findings agree with the observation by Gundani (2018) where the Catholic Church in Malawi through the bishops made it clear that they were not willing to restrict the church's action to the religious field as doing so would give a wrong impression that the church had nothing to do with governance issues. However, Hastings in Cheyeka (2016) contends that African clergy should exhibit political maturity in order to be peace makers and defenders of the poor. Hastings (1995: 37) argued that:

*Nothing is more dangerous than church leaders to take on political responsibilities. They need political*

*maturity at least as much as anyone else does if they are to act as emergency doctors for political ills. It may be wrong to refuse such a challenge, perhaps impossible. However, few bishops have much claim to a mature political culture, and that is hardly a matter of blame.*

By implications, the clergy should not be used by politicians for political expedience.

In public discourse in Zambia, there is reference to members of the clergy of all sorts of churches who are on pay rolls of politicians – both opposition and in power. It is to this end that Bishop Chomba could be appointed Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources

When asked to comment on the challenges the Church faces in involving itself in politics, an EFZ official lamented on how the church was being accused of being partisan and stepping out of its evangelistic role each time the Church spoke out about some bad policies. This is common when the comment goes against those in power. The church is always told to form a political party if it wants to be commenting on politics so that it can also be treated as a political party. This view contradicts Gandhi's argument in Gifford (1993) who contends that those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is. It is further argued that religion has been used as a powerful tool for inspiring nationalist identities, anti-colonialist movements, and violent revolutions not only in Africa but across the globe.

Sometimes the Church is told to maintain its lane that is for preaching and praying for the need. When asked to comment on this statement, the respondent Catholic Church Member said:

*You know what? That is the biggest challenge that the Church faces in trying to involve itself in politics. Each time the Church speaks about some bad policies that are against the citizens, political leaders come out strongly and tell off the Church not to comment on political or state affairs. They urge the Church to maintain its role of evangelizing and not commenting on political issues. Especially if the comment goes against those in power, the Church is always told to form its own political party if it wants to be commenting on politics so that it can also be treated as a political party.*

The statements above show that the Church has been having challenges in trying to engage itself in politics. As stated, most of the respondents gave a lot of examples to prove that there are challenges in trying to participate in political affairs by the Church. This shows that there is a problem with regards the church's involvement in politics. The research findings revealed that the current relationship between the Church and state politics in Zambia is full of challenges. The Church has not been allowed to express itself fully in national matters as an independent institution. Sometimes the people in

politics see the Church as its enemy number one whenever it tries to criticize those in authority. The political leaders want the Church to keep on singing praises every time, even when they are in the wrong direction. Those in authority only congratulate the Church whenever it involves itself in charity and social work, but they always fight the Church whenever it questions them why people remain poor. One participant revealed that according to the principles of religious leaders' calling, it was not right for the Church to keep quiet when things in the country were not going in the right direction. Sim & Chow (2018) observe that the active participation of citizens is crucial to the sustenance of a healthy democratic society.

Supporting the point from the findings that those in political leadership fight the Church whenever it questions them why people remain poor, some studies done by Mitchell (2002) in Malawi suggests that the government of Malawi came out guns blazing against the Catholic bishops who were all called by the Chief of Police, in Blantyre, for questioning. Soon after, the government declared the letter seditious. Henceforth, any person in possession of the letter was required by law to surrender it to the nearest police station. Failure to do so would result in criminal prosecution. Threats from the political party and top aides of Dr. Banda came to naught. This was after the Church leadership in Malawi challenged the governance system by circulating a letter to different Churches in protesting the type of governance system.

The findings of this study contend that the Church should be involved in politics, and it should not be seen as an enemy of those in political leadership. According to Hinchliffe (2018), politics is seen as something which concerns everyone and in which each citizen participates. By implication, the Church plays a big role in making sure that society is stable always by reminding those in power about their shortcomings in governance. The Church plays this role by being the voice of the voiceless, help those marginalised in societies among others. The Church also plays its role by providing the most needed social services to the societies hence very critical in governance system which should not be ruled out. This view is consistent with Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) (2015) who contends that the church should address issues concerning the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people especially the poor and afflicted. By implication, the church has a significant role to play in the social and political life of the people.

These presented challenges save as a benchmark for government and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) for policy formulation in enhancing the Churches' involvement in politics. Ultimately this presents sufficient knowledge on the existing literature regarding the involvement of the Church's involvement in politics.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

After a careful analysis of the findings in light of the study, the study is of the view that the Church's involvement in

Zambian politics cannot be overemphasized. It is clear from the findings of the study that the Church has made several strides in playing a role in Zambian politics. Additionally, the Church has continued to offer social services and goods to the citizens, which were supposed to be provided by the government itself.

The challenges the Church faces among others were that the Church was divided when commenting on national affairs and this has made the church to be labelled as being partisan when commenting on national issues and that has led to many people losing trust and confidence in the Church. The study also concluded that the Church must stand up as one and carry out its spiritual role without any compromise.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the major findings above, the following recommendations are being proposed to ensure a good relationship between the Church and politics. Therefore, the study recommends the following:

1. The Government, Church, and other stakeholders should make deliberate programs for sensitisation of both politicians and Church leaders to have a clear understanding of the social mission of the Church.
2. The government should make it the policy for the Church to be accorded its legitimate role regarding being informed, heard, and consulted in issues that deal with the citizens. This role is a crucial component of democratic participation to build a fair and just country.
3. The Church through the Ministry of Religious Affairs should be involved in politics because it is the duty of the Church to permeate public life with the spirit of Christ who fought for the dignity of human life and to illustrate in its own life the kind of life which is God's will for society as a whole.
4. The Church should formulate a policy that would compel Church leaders, Bishops, Priests, and Pastors to be non-partisan, and not hold political office. They never seek or vie for political positions since they lead congregations with people who belong to different political parties.

The researchers believe that these proposed recommendations would ease the tension which exists between the Church and politics would be minimized.

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