



Zambia

Why Africa needs more cabbage

The death of a decent president, Zambia's Levy Mwanawasa, raises questions about the state of leadership elsewhere in the continent

ON PAPER, Levy Mwanawasa should never have been president. He lacked charisma, wit or style—the sort of qualities that propel populists to high office in much of Africa. At rallies even his own supporters were fast bored by the former lawyer's monotone drawl. His ill-health and slurred speech, the results of a car crash, led to nasty jibes about his mental capacity. When he narrowly won his first, disputed, presidential election in 2001, opponents dubbed him "the cabbage", deriding him as a stooge for others more powerful.

But Mr Mwanawasa, who died this week in France after suffering in June the latest of several strokes, deserves to be remembered more fondly than the showmen who have begged much of the continent. In the past seven years he made a serious effort to clean up Zambia's pervasive corruption. At some political risk, he turned against his predecessor and one-time patron, the diminutive Frederick Chiluba, who was charged with 168 counts of theft. Mr Chiluba was convicted of graft in a civil court in London last year. It was a rare success: few African leaders have been held to such account.

Partly because of his anti-corruption drive, investors liked President Mwanawasa. In "the past few years, capital has poured in. Zambia's mineral-rich economy, like others in Africa, has soared and crashed according to the vagaries of world commodity prices. But its recent growth, at

a perky 6% or so a year, driven by copper exports, has at least been married to decent policies that kept inflation lowish and helped spread some benefits to the poor. The economy was lifted, too, by tourists and white farmers diverted from Zimbabwe. Thanks to liberalisation and his own stolid efforts, Mr Mwanawasa got unusually large dollops of aid and debt relief.

In 1991 Zambia was among the first in Africa to bring back multiparty elections; it peacefully ditched its liberation leader, Kenneth Kaunda, after nearly three decades. That generally gracious transition (Mr Kaunda was later accused of skulduggery) was followed by Mr Chiluba's decision to step down reluctantly in 2002 after the two terms limited by the constitution.

Zambia's plodding progress could hardly be in greater contrast to the mess next door in Zimbabwe—once Southern Rhodesia to Zambia's Northern Rhodesia. In the old days, Zambians flocked to Zimbabwe to seek work; now it is vice versa. Robert Mugabe, reliant on his army's muscle, seems bent on staying on, having smashed his economy. He returned himself to office in June after a violent one-man run-off election. Though he has been holding power-sharing talks with the opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, who won the first round of the presidential poll in March, he is loth to lose executive power.

Zimbabwe's crisis may well have been resolved by now if regional leaders had

dared to stand up together against the repressive Mr Mugabe. On August 16th, at an annual meeting in Johannesburg of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the 14-country club's leaders, most of whom also head liberation-movements-turned-ruling-parties, muted their public disquiet at the presence of the 84-year-old despot.

An exception was Botswana's new president, Ian Khama, who boycotted the event. Mr Mwanawasa, aged 59, was also a rare voice among Africa's leaders who damned Mr Mugabe's misrule. Last year he likened Zimbabwe to a "sinking Titanic" and called for the region to demand a change of course. Had he been well, he would have sought to toughen SADC'S stance against Mr Mugabe. Mr Tsvangirai was among the first publicly to lament the Zambian leader's death.

The China question

A new leader, possibly the vice-president, Rupiah Banda, should be elected within 90 days. Afro-optimists hope that Zambia, certainly not Zimbabwe, proves to be a bellwether for the continent. In one respect it is. Though not an oil-producer, Zambia is one of Africa's biggest recipients of Chinese investment, as the resource-hungry Asian giant pours capital into mining and agriculture. China's president, Hu Jintao, inaugurated a massive mining-investment zone in the north of Zambia last year. However, among ordinary Zambians anti-Chinese feeling has been growing.

Mr Mwanawasa crowed last year that Zambia, and Africa as a whole, was increasingly taking advantage of Asian interest and investment and called on the West to match it. Seven years of Mr Mwanawasa's rule has seen some change for the better in Zambia. It is remarkable what a dull diet of cabbage can do. •

Also in this section

38 Liberia's so-far-successful president

38 How good are Nigeria's banks?

39 Saudi Arabia looks for farms abroad

39 Iraqi law and foreign contractors

40 A spate of bombs in Algeria