“The measures we are taking are intended to safeguard the IMF program”

Zambian President Edgar Lungu seizes emergency powers

David Brown
7 July 2017

The Zambian president, Edgar Lungu, invoked article 31 of the constitution granting emergency powers and abridging democratic rights on Thursday. Lungu is trying to secure his grip on the country amid a deepening economic and political crisis.

Under the Preservation of Public Security Act the police can detain anyone without trial, ban public meetings, censor publications, and forcibly move populations. The emergency measures must be ratified by the National Assembly within seven days, and renewed by the assembly regularly thereafter.

These sweeping measures were enacted on the flimsy reason of combating “vandalism of strategic installations bordering on economic sabotage.” The immediate pretext was a fire Wednesday that burned down a city market in the capital, Lusaka. Lungu presented this as part of a string of alleged arson cases over the past year.

In the immediate aftermath of the city market fire, members of the president’s Patriotic Front (PF) accused the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) of being responsible. Although he did not name the UPND, Lungu said the intention of the arsonists was to “make the country ungovernable.”

For their part, members of the UPND accused the PF of setting the fire to justify the emergency measures.

Whatever the actual source of the fire, it is being used by Lungu as a means of cracking down on political opposition and preparing the police to forcibly suppress any mass protests that erupt over new austerity measures being planned as part of a new International Monetary Fund loan. The real target of emergency measures to ban public meetings or close newspapers is not criminal arsonists, or the businessmen leading the UPND, but social opposition in the working class.

The leader of the UPND, Hakainde Hichilema, ran against Lungu in the tightly contested elections in 2015 and again in 2016, and accused Lungu both times of rigging the election.

August 2016 saw violent clashes between the supporters of both parties, particularly after the government suspended *The Post*, one of the few independent newspapers in the country. Hichilema has been seeking to overturn the election result through the courts without success.

In April, Hichilema was arrested on absurd treason charges, a capital offense, after Hichilema’s motorcade failed to pull over and let Lungu’s pass while they were both on their way to a traditional ceremony. According to police, it endangered the president’s life when Lungu’s motorcade passed Hichilema’s, thus justifying the charge of treason.

Refusing to recognize Lungu’s presidency, 48 UPND members of parliament boycotted the president’s address to the National Assembly in June, and were suspended for 30 days. They are set to resume their seats in the 166-member legislature on July 12.

Since the restoration of multi-party democracy in Zambia in 1991, the ruling capitalist parties have generally resolved their disputes within the electoral system. The recent shift to dictatorial, police-state measures points to the deep economic and social crisis within the country.

Since its existence as the British colony of Northern

Rhodesia, Zambia has relied economically on the export of copper to the world market; copper today remains 75 percent of the country’s exports. The collapse of copper prices after the 2008 world economic crisis hit the country hard, and even though prices have rebounded slightly, it continues to trade well below its historic high.

Even when copper prices spiked, that wealth went to enrich a thin layer of international companies and Zambian intermediaries after the entire industry was privatized in 1999. The poverty rate in Zambia remains around 60 percent of the population and hunger, malnutrition, and anemia are widespread.

Health care remains a particularly sharp expression of social inequality. At the peak of the AIDS epidemic in 2003, life expectancy fell to the lowest in the world at just 33 years.

Initial privatizations and austerity measures sparked a wave of strikes among public sector workers and miners. In 2001, 90 percent of the country’s civil servants went on strike. Disputes between heavily exploited miners and international corporations regularly break out into violence.

Zambia has been seeking a $1.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 2014 in order to cover its budget deficit. Final agreement on the loan has been delayed so no candidate would have to be associated with massively unpopular budget cuts. A taste of future measures was given in June when Zambia’s public energy company ZESCO raised rates 75 percent.

Lungu directly connected the emergency measures to the IMF loan, telling reporters: “I don't think the IMF would like to see this country go up into flames. The measures we are taking are intended to safeguard the IMF program, if it comes to be.”

The actual political differences between Lungu and Hichilema are rarely discussed in the press, but under the current crisis have become particularly sharp.

Lungu’s predecessor, Michael Sata, was elected in 2011 by appealing to popular outrage over working conditions in Chinese-run mines. He particularly exploited the shooting of 11 miners by two Chinese managers in October of 2010.

First elected in 2015 to finish out Sata’s term after he died in office, Lungu softened the government’s anti-Chinese posturing and sought increased investment in the country’s mines. Between 2000 and 2016, bilateral trade between Zambia and China has skyrocketed from just $100 million to $4 billion.

During the 2016 campaign, Hichilema picked up the anti-Chinese mantle and included a call for bringing back the hated Anglo-American company to invest in Zambia’s mines. Anglo-American withdrew their investments from Zambia in 2002 claiming they could not make the mines profitable.

Hichilema and Lungu are both in agreement that they need to cut social spending in Zambia in order to secure the IMF loan and attract foreign investment, but they disagree over how much of that investment should come from China and which of them should profit from the deals.