

CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS IN ZAMBIA: A VIEW FROM THE MILITARY

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Introduction

Historically, a general element of strain and suspicion has fuelled civil–military relations in Zambia. This has arisen from the fact that as a nation, Zambia has never experienced a calamity whereby the military could have been called upon to fully identify with civil society to confront and resolve a common threat to the nation. The two have essentially remained apart and therefore have never really bonded.

For the other nations in the region which fought liberation wars, there has been an inevitable bonding between the military and civil society. This has been because the latter were, or actively identified with, the combatants in the field and, upon attaining independence, ended up holding senior political and government positions. They therefore remained conscious of and understanding towards their comrades who had been reintegrated into the demobilised civil society or remained in the military.

From the scenario above, civil–military relations in Zambia will be examined following the four broad eras that have existed for the military:

- *The period 1914–1945:* This was the period of the Great Wars. The Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) military was a contingent of the British Army.
- *The period 1945–1964:* Zambians fought for independence, which was attained on 24 October 1964. The military remained a part of the British Army.
- *The period 1964–1991:* This was a period of ‘Zambianisation’ of the military and the execution of the liberation wars in Southern Africa.
- *The period 1991–2004:* In 1991 there was a change of government from the United National Independence Party (UNIP) to that of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). The first post-independence generation of generals serving in various civil and military appointments in the outgoing government, were suddenly retired or demobilised.

The period 1914–1945: World wars

This period covers the First and Second world wars in which Zambian soldiers participated as part of the British land forces, and fought with great distinction. As a permanent reminder to the future military, several of the army barracks have been named after the campaigns in which the Zambian soldiers participated. Sadly, when they returned from these campaigns, the soldiers received no heroes' welcome or recognition from the civil populace. To the contrary, negative perceptions amongst the populace were created with regard to the soldiers, and these perceptions have persisted to the present day, as reflected below.

Education

During this period, schools were exceptionally rare in the country, to the extent that the majority of Zambians available for any regular employment to the colonial administration could neither read nor write. Those in the military were, however, taught to write their names, with Nyanja as the official language. As a result of this poor education and a general colonial policy of segregation in terms of the indigenous locals, commissioned officers were only British. While the rest of the nation essentially remained illiterate, a myth was, however, created within the populace that soldiers were an 'illiterate lot' who could only write their names.

Brutality and lawlessness

Upon their return from the wars, demobilised soldiers exhibited a propensity for violence, especially when they discovered that their wives had betrayed them in their absence. The colonial administration took no exemplary punishment in this regard against the offenders with whom they sympathised, and who they viewed as having fought for and not directly offended the interests of His Majesty's Government. It was a common feature that whenever soldiers lost a football match to a civilian team, there would be a night raid of beatings and burning of houses 'to teach the civilians a lesson'. A second myth was therefore created to the effect that soldiers were brutal and thrived on drugs, making them indifferent to the treatment of civilians.

Fighting irrelevant wars

The world wars were an Allied effort to contain the threat posed to the world by the Germans. Zambian soldiers of the British Expeditionary Forces made their due contribution to this effort. However, to the ordinary Zambian with little exposure to international developments of the day, these were foreign

wars being fought in far off and unheard of countries. These wars had no direct bearing on the people's daily way of life, except for those whose sons never returned but were buried in distant lands. The Zambian military thus gained no respect or understanding from the locals, who could not identify with their foreign adventures.

Tool of colonial repression

During the 1940s, after the wars, initial political agitation for self-rule started amongst the Zambians. In fact, the soldiers returning from the wars unwittingly made a political input into this development because of their exposure to self-governing foreign countries in which they had served. On the local scene, however, they were effectively used by the British to suppress any agitation from the locals. For instance, politically driven strikes on the Copperbelt were ruthlessly put down by the military. Hence, up to independence the military was perceived as an insensitive tool of the colonialists, which carried out repressive action against the just objectives of civil society. In this way they came to be considered as enemies of the people. This feeling did not in any way help civil-military relations and persisted long after independence.

Demobilisation

Upon their return from the wars the soldiers were demobilised. They quietly returned to their villages, receiving one-off or monthly pensions until they died. During this period, no problems related to demobilisation were encountered as it was common practice for the retirees, including those from the mines, to return to their villages to settle and integrate with their relatives. There was no prospect for redeployment into other colonial administrative areas and no treatment was provided for any cases of psychological trauma.

The period 1945–1964: Pre-independence period

The main feature of this period was the creation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which was imposed on the locals by the white settler community. The prime objective of the federation was to consolidate and perpetuate white rule over the locals of the three countries who vigorously agitated for its breakup. It was finally broken up in 1963 and Zambia attained independence in 1964.

Tool of colonial oppression

During this period, the perception of the military as a tool of repression for the

British continued. In fact, to make the military indifferent to the locals, the British introduced a programme of rotation of troops from their respective stations and, indeed, countries of deployment. For instance, a battalion in Zambia would move complete with their families to Malawi, and the one in Malawi to Zambia. The idea was that the troops should not develop any sentimental affinity with the locals. It is for this reason, for instance, that after independence the Lusaka (Zambia)-based battalion ended up with Malawians who had to be repatriated to Malawi, while others took up Zambian citizenship.

The period 1964–1991: Post independence

This period was characterised by the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. Initially, as the most southerly independent state in the region, Zambia played a critical strategic role in the hosting of liberation movements and refugees, and in facilitating their transit to their target areas in Mozambique, Rhodesia, North West Africa, Angola and South Africa. The outcome of this effort was that by 1993, all countries in Southern Africa had attained independence.

The Zambian government and its military performed well during this period, albeit with significantly limited resources compared to the combined military of its hostile surrounding neighbours. The Zambian military was able to make its due contribution to keeping the colonial forces at bay while the liberation forces accomplished their objective of attaining independence through armed struggle. Hence, for the first time since the First World War of 1914–1918, the Zambian military fought on the side of an indigenous Zambian elected government for an African-supported cause. The military was supported by the general populace, though some had misgivings about their country's sacrifice on behalf of Africa. This notwithstanding, some myths and perceptions of the past continued, as illustrated below.

Foreign wars

While Zambians generally embraced the nation's contribution to the liberation wars, a view persisted that the military was essentially engaged in foreign wars across its borders. Hence, with no fully fledged war engulfing the country which would have forced Zambians to fight off the invader together with the military, no local civil–military bonding resulted from this experience.

Waste of resources

Due to the enduring prejudice that the military was fighting foreign wars, the general populace held the military accountable for the raids made against Zambia by its hostile neighbours. While resources remained stretched, the average Zambian who did not comprehend the high cost of wars, considered

the country's resources allotted to the military as too high and wasteful, especially considering that the military did not have the capacity to ward off all enemy attacks on refugee camps and economic infrastructure. Further, the general populace did not fully understand and embrace the government's long-term political objectives, as did the military.

Education

During this period, the military was progressively taken over by educated Zambian officers, many of whom had been trained abroad. Furthermore, graduates (engineers, lawyers, doctors, etc.) were being enlisted for specialist fields. For junior ranks, the entry qualification was raised to Grade 10. They were also routinely sent to both local and overseas establishments for training and upgrading. Despite these developments, the myth of the uneducated soldier persists to this day. This has in many ways remained a hurdle for the civil economic integration of ex-servicemen/women when they are demobilised.

The legislature

From time to time, even members of parliament have considered the military as pampered, with little to show in return for the scarce national resources invested in it. For instance, there have been several debates on why the military in peacetime should not sustain itself by, for example, growing its own food. The provision of duty-free drinks and free maize meal to the barracks has been regularly questioned. Of note, however, is that the conditions which are misunderstood as generous, are in fact basic to militaries the world over. As the old adage goes: a soldier, like a serpent, cannot march on an empty stomach. This attitude by some members of the legislature highlights the fact that the military remains misunderstood even in the highest circles of civil society.

The period 1991–2004: Demobilisation and integration

The year 1991 saw a change of government from UNIP to the MMD. In reality, this brought with it the retirement or demobilisation of several first-generation generals who had hitherto been appointed to serve in various positions in the civil sector by the outgoing government. These developments impacted in three ways, reflecting, to an extent, what the retired or demobilised military has been experiencing over the years.

Social integration

While the demobilised soldiers found themselves divorced from their larger family in the barracks, they merged fairly reasonably with the civil populace.

Past suspicions and resentments against the military have more or less subsided, although these have not completely disappeared.

Economic factor

A problem soon arose in terms of the ex-servicemen's ability to sustain themselves and their families economically. This was due to the unpreparedness for their demobilisation from the sheltered life they had enjoyed in the barracks, and the narrow employment base to which they were now exposed. Their survival became a hand-to-mouth existence and many were traumatised from the experience of being outside the barracks.

What has been done and possible solutions

Over the years, much has been done to reduce misunderstanding and to harmonise civil–military relations. A summary of these efforts and proposed solutions for the future is given below.

Understanding the military

From the late 1960s, the military embarked upon a deliberate programme of improving interaction with civil society. To win the hearts and minds of the civil population, the military has routinely undertaken the following:

- The military has formed teams which have joined leagues in several sporting activities. They have built a following outside the barracks, especially where they have contributed to national sports teams.
- School leavers in the 1970s served in the Zambia National Service Programme, which gave them an insight into the psychology of the military. Unfortunately, limited funds meant that the programme had to be discontinued. However, the exercise has borne fruit in that several of the ex-servicemen and women, who now have a better understanding of the military, have risen to senior appointments in the civil sector.
- The military has always engaged in relief tasks, such as the transportation and distribution of grain, whenever called upon by the civil authorities.
- When on operations, the military has offered free medical services to civilians in the areas of deployment as a public relations effort and for humanitarian reasons.
- In times of need or emergencies, the military has used its specialist units to build bridges and roads, or to undertake casualty evacuations.

These activities have greatly improved civil–military relations and have helped to break down some of the old myths, which viewed the military as being

heartless and indifferent to civil society. Their skills have come to be appreciated.

Illiteracy

Academically, illiteracy no longer exists in the military as the minimum entry qualification is Grade 10. Once demobilised, however, re-training and upgrading of skills is essential for their successful integration into the challenging and competitive civil employment sector. To this effect, there is a need for the civil sector to accept and recognise the military qualifications and certificates of demobilised soldiers, which are generally of a very high standard.

Broadening the employment base

There is a need for government to broaden the employment base in order to absorb the ex-servicemen/women who can effectively contribute to some areas of national development, as relate to their varied military qualifications and skills.

The British Overseas Military Administration – BOMA

This is an addition to broadening the employment base of the military. After the wars the British appointed several demobilised military men in the ranks of captain to lieutenant colonel to run the districts in the then Northern Rhodesia. The officers there used military skills of command, administration and management to good effect. After independence, a similar effort was made for serving officers, but this was limited to identified problematic border districts where hostile cross-border, refugee and freedom fighter activity was rife. The officers performed well but were subsequently replaced by civilians after the liberation wars and the change of government. This remains one area where the military has a proven record of performance and can be accommodated, instead of confining such appointments to the civil sector alone.

Pension scheme

The current scheme needs to be economically meaningful for the demobilised servicemen/women to sustain their families. It is also critically important to reduce the lengthy and frustrating delays that often exist before payments are finally made.

Professionalism and politicisation

The military should continue to operate professionally and thus remain

shielded from any partisan politics. This is especially important in multiparty politics where the military must always maintain its loyalty to the government of the day.

The military – a tribe

The military commands a certain amount of loyalty within its ranks, which predominates even after demobilisation. In fact, there is a form of affinity that is akin to a tribal group or clan. As a result, whenever national appointments have to be undertaken, the military should continue to be considered and be ‘tribally’ balanced in the civil employment sector.

Policy

As far as is known, there is no policy to deal with servicemen/women when they are demobilised. It is important that such a policy be established in order to avoid having too many angry and frustrated men and women roaming the streets. The ever-growing ranks of highly trained but frustrated demobilised soldiers could be a source of tension and instability to Zambia’s peaceful and fledgling democratic process if the issue is not addressed. An initiation of ideas by the serving military, in liaison with those already demobilised who have tested life outside the barracks, could be useful.

Conclusion

A consideration of the above proposals – which are by no means exhaustive – will help to harness many members of the military who would otherwise be lost. These are highly trained individuals. The nation has invested much money in them and they should continue to be fully utilised as long as they remain available and useful for national development.

A greater effort by all parties in improving interaction and understanding between the civil and the military will inevitably reduce tension and lead to a harmonious relationship. An accommodation of the varied interest groups is what constitutes and consolidates the democratic process and forms a nation. Examples of failed former models of democracy where this aspect has been overlooked abound on the African continent and, indeed, elsewhere.