

Book Review: Zambia: The First 50 Years by Andrew Sardanis

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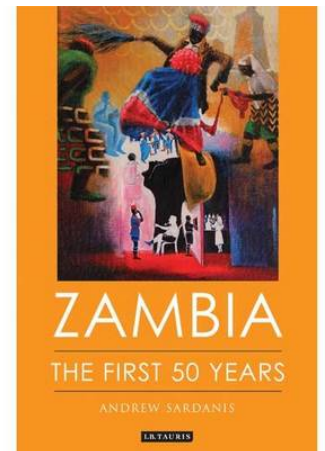
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This book aims to provide a detailed examination of the major events in Zambia's history since independence and their effect on the country's development and progress. Thomas Joassin finds this a rich account.

Zambia: The First 50 Years. Andrew Sardanis. IB Tauris. 2014.

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Zambia: The First 50 Years, in spite of its appearance, is not a book of history, but the memoirs of Andrew Sardanis, an active participant to Zambian politics since the country's independence. It has the drawbacks of its genre (subjectivity, partiality, political bias) but its qualities too (precise descriptions and lively stories, especially when the author is in charge). It will appeal to students interested in the political and economic history of this singular Southern African nation, and to social scientists looking for more than an academic perspective.



Sardanis has previously written two books about Africa and Zambia, and this new one details the political events that shaped these last 50 years, following a chronological structure with 34 short chapters, and tracing back to the independence of Zambia on the 24th of October, 1964. The author was born in colonial Cyprus, and came to 'Northern Rhodesia' (the name of colonial Zambia) in October 1950, when he was 19. A journalist and a businessman, he had important functions in the first Zambian governments after independence, and his views remain pertinent thereafter as he has kept cordial relationships with many important political figures of the regime.

After independence, education was one of the priorities of the new Zambian government, symbolizing its ability to reduce the economic dependency of the country on foreign skills and capabilities. The colonial North Rhodesian government used to consider that only white people were suitable for education, while the liberated nation needed educated Zambians to orientate the economy towards more participation and control of the people. While Sardanis sees the educational policies of the first governments as a success (when he was part of it), enabling the emergence of a Zambian workforce "with the skills of running the operations as efficiently as in any other country", he attributes the final failure of these policies to the Chiluba and Mwanawasa years where the investment in education did not follow the pace of the population growth.

Sardanis reflects that the current state of primary school education in Zambia is worrying (Zambia is ranked 13th and 12th respectively in reading and mathematics in a 2012 Southern African ranking), despite Kaunda's "very large investment in education and training of Zambians" in the first decades after independence. Though Chapter 33, "Many Critics and Many Suitors", shows the necessity of a large education program, it would have been interesting to read more details in the first chapters on the way that this large investment in education was implemented in the early years of the nation, notably at the more elementary levels of school.

The economic independence of the country forms the framework in which the author's national tale is narrated. It is interesting to see how Sardanis can easily go from the economic nationalism of the first mandates (Chapter 6) to the avocation of privatizations until Chiluba's second term (1996-2001) (Chapter 16). He was favorable to the nationalistic Mulungushi reforms (1968) and, quite naively it seems, he did not see them under any ideological light, while President Kaunda and the party probably did (Chapter 6). Reforms took place within the context of the will for

economic independence, and thus cannot explain the turn that the government followed after (the 'One Party' regime and the 'socialist revolution') and that he regrets.

Sardanis' national tale also gives a pertinent account of the economic war in which nations are engaged in a globalized and liberalized world. He implicitly tackles the European Union when he shows how Zambian products would be unable to compete with South African products coming in duty free if there were a 'Southern Africa Development Community' common market (Chapter 33), adding to the fact that subsidized South African agricultural products were already flooding the Zambian market. In the meantime, as he shows, the subsidized European agriculture also prevents African products from entering the European market.

The book shows in these perspectives how peasant agriculture has been neglected under the mandates of Chibula (1991-2001) and Mwanasawa (2001-2008). Along with education, it was a priority under the first Zambian governments, as a symbol of economic independence with food self-sufficiency. Along the years, it became a sociological problem, as the financial gap between rural and urban people increased, when 8 million of 13 million total population live in rural areas, and while agriculture represents 52.2 per cent of total employment (Chapter 31).

Sardanis remains optimistic and trusted the ability of the President since 2011, Michael Sata, "to empower the rural areas to make their own decisions on their development" (Chapter 25), notably because Sata was the only President since Kaunda "to have rural origins and grass roots support". But Sata died recently, the 28th of October, 2014, and left the government and the Patriotic Front in a bad state, with multiple rivalries in the perspective of the anticipated elections of January 2015.

In this respect the micro-political focus of this rich account of Zambian recent history shows the power of all the diplomacy behind the decision-making processes, which seems more important than social scientists generally presume. We might underestimate the politics behind the policies, and it is something crucial to understand for countries where the level of corruption generally affects the relationship between these two processes.

This must not remove the idea that "growth is driven by knowledge at the level of society", as Hausmann puts it in the book, and that most of the economic issues of this young country should be resolved with a strong educational project for the nation, which do not only focus on universities and post high school education, but sets high standards in primary and elementary school for the majority of the population, which is the only basis for a meritocratic and entrepreneurial society.

Anticipated elections were held on the 20th of January and the mandate of the new President will last for 20 months (until the end of Sata's mandate). It will be interesting to see in the following years if and how the next government will respond to the multiple challenges set in this book.

Thomas Joassin is a research student in social anthropology at the LSE, and holds a BA in philosophy, politics and economics. His research focuses on Islam in contemporary Algeria, with a special interest in Sufism.

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