

The Times view on Hakainde Hichilema's election: Zambian Democracy

Written by Administrator

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A decisive victory for an economic reformer is good news for sub-Saharan Africa

Wednesday, 18 August 2021

Democracy rests on the willingness of the incumbent to respect constitutional procedures and, if defeated, to relinquish office. Since [Edgar Lungu](#) was elected president of Zambia in 2015, he has shown a disturbing propensity for repression, prompting fears that a further electoral victory would cement him in a state of arbitrary power.

Mr Lungu has indeed sought to hinder and impede his opponents. He has blocked the internet, used Covid as an excuse to restrict opposition rallies and deployed troops throughout the country, allegedly to maintain order. Despite these efforts he has not prevailed. [Hakainde Hichilema](#), a businessman, instead won last week's presidential election by a handsome margin of almost a million votes. The final count and Mr Lungu's speedy concession surprised many who predicted a tight contest and a drawn-out dispute over the validity of the result.

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It is good news for Zambia and Africa. Mr Lungu's illiberal conduct failed to secure him victory, and he appears to have been punished for demonstrable economic mismanagement. During his six years in office, government debt as a share of GDP has risen from 34 per cent to 110 per cent and annual inflation reached 25 per cent in July, slashing the real incomes of Zambians. Mr Hichilema faces a tremendous challenge in embarking on structural [reforms of the economy](#), but gives every indication of understanding the need to promote productive enterprise and market mechanisms to do so.

Since [Kenneth Kaunda](#) stood down in 1991, elections in Zambia have been competitively contested with a peaceful transition of power. Mr Hichilema's willingness to challenge a failed and increasingly authoritarian president instils hope that Africa can realise its economic potential and democracy can improve the lives of its people.