

OBITUARY: PRESIDENT LEVY PATRICK MWANAWASA, SC

3 September 1948 - 19 August 2008

Levy Mwanawasa, President of Zambia since 2001, has died at the age of 59 at the Percy Military Hospital, Paris, where he had been flown for specialist treatment following a serious stroke in June while attending the African Union summit in Egypt. His death was announced on state television by Vice-President Rupiah Banda, who is now Acting President until elections are held within the next ninety days. Twenty-one days of mourning have also been announced.

Born in Mufulira, Levy Patrick Mwanawasa gained a law degree from the University of Zambia and by the age of 30 had founded his own law firm. In 1985 he was appointed Solicitor General but stepped down the following year and returned to private practice. He made his name in 1989 as the defence counsel for Lieutenant General Christon Tembo, charged with treason against the regime of President Kenneth Kaunda. Kaunda was shocked as crowds cheered Tembo, and Mwanawasa became a celebrity. Popular support for Kaunda continued to plummet and he lost power in 1991. Mwanawasa was made vice-president in the new MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) government of Frederick Chiluba.

Mwanawasa was a reluctant politician and retired from office in 1994, only to return and eventually succeed Chiluba as president, winning the controversial 2001 elections. The supreme court judged, in 2005, that those elections had been marred by irregularities, but not enough to overturn the result. Mwanawasa won a second term in 2006, four months after his first stroke. After taking office in 2002, Mwanawasa exposed the financial excesses of his predecessor and supported the charges of corruption brought against him.

In its editorial, *The Post* paid tribute to the "decency and honesty" Mwanawasa brought to Zambia's politics, and saluted his efforts to root out corruption in public life and promote good leadership. "We make a clarion call to all those who care for and appreciate the legacy that Levy has left to unite and make sure that never again should thieves and those who sympathise with thieves rule over us." Kenneth Kaunda, founding president of Zambia also paid tribute: "President Mwanawasa was a true servant of the people who served this country with dignity and honour. He observed the rule of law and he gallantly fought graft in all its forms. ... We have lost a great leader who had a real vision for leadership and the problems that face the country."

Internationally, President Mwanawasa will probably best be remembered for his outspoken criticism - unusual among African leaders - of Robert Mugabe's disastrous regime in neighbouring Zimbabwe and of the conduct of the recent elections there, refusing to recognise the outcome. Last year he accused Mugabe of turning his country into a "sinking Titanic", and had recently expressed sympathy with the plight of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Mwanawasa was also shrewd enough to see how Zambia could benefit from Zimbabwe's implosion, first by developing Livingstone as a thriving and successful tourist destination, and secondly by making clear that white farmers driven off their land by Mugabe would be welcome in Zambia. Several hundred duly relocated across the Zambezi, where they significantly increased domestic food production and revived Zambia's export sector by growing tobacco.

His wife Maureen and their four children survive him, as do two other children from his first marriage.

Sources: Reuters, 19 August; The Post (Lusaka), 20 August; The Daily Telegraph (London), 20 August; The Guardian (London), 20 August.

Note: This obituary appeared in the August issue of 'News from Zambia', a monthly digest of reports on events in Zambia in the national and international press, which is distributed to members of the Zambia Society Trust (UK Registered Charity No. 1008155), 4 Ashurst Way, East Preston, Littlehampton, West Sussex BN16 1AG, UK.