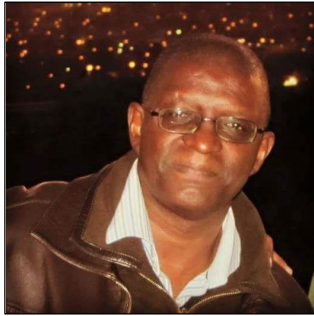


Misinformation and the Barotseland Question

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As this is election season, the Barotseland question is back on the political agenda. On Wednesday 27th April 2016, President of Zambia Edgar Chagwa Lungu was seen on the 19:00 hrs Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation television news bulletin committing himself to discussing and trying to resolve issues around the contentious Barotseland Agreement of 1964. He said the [Barotseland Agreement 1964](#) is an authentic document and he is prepared to discuss it, though only through the Litunga of Barotseland, King Lubosi Imwiko II or the Barotse Royal Establishment. President Lungu in March 2015 promised to find a lasting solution to the Barotseland question, including a referendum. However, like his predecessor late Michael Chilufya Sata, the matter was relegated to insignificance and forgotten. Why the interest in the Barotseland issue now?

The Barotseland issue has been a subject of misinformation, distortion and lies by successive Zambian governments. The [Barotseland Agreement 1964](#) was hidden and classified under Kaunda's presidency and any talk of it was met with repression. In 1993, when the Lozi people took advantage of the democratic dispensation to demand for the restoration of the terms of the [Barotseland Agreement 1964](#), late president Frederick Titus Chiluba outlawed the debate and threatened advocates with arrest for the crime of high treason. Under Rupiah Banda's presidency activism for the recognition of the right of the people of Barotseland to self-determination or a measure of autonomy were met with brutal suppression, massive arrests and deaths. It was against that background, that candidate Michael Sata promised the people of the region that he would restore the [Barotseland Agreement 1964](#) if elected. However, despite releasing all those who had been imprisoned under Banda's presidency and appointing the Roger Chongwe Commission of Inquiry, Sata rejected outright all the recommendations of the Chongwe Commission. Among the recommendations of the Chongwe Commission were: the restoration of the Barotseland Agreement, the re-naming of Western Province to Barotseland and the de-criminalization of organizations campaigning for the autonomy of Barotseland.

Lungu's declaration in Mongu that he is now ready to discuss the issue of Barotseland is ill-informed and fails to take account of historical antecedents. It is a cheap political ploy to show sensitivity to a regional grievance on which the people of the region feel strongly about. It is a matter that the Patriotic Front government had an opportunity to resolve in the last five years, but failed to do so. In fact, Edgar Lungu despite his pronouncements in Addis Ababa, saw to it that advocates for Barotseland autonomy and independence were prosecuted and handed long prison sentences. How sincere is he today to talk about discussing the restoration of the [Barotseland Agreement 1964](#), if he has not applied his mind to the issue in the last one year?

Indeed, President Lungu is deliberately misinforming the Zambian people regarding the Barotseland issue. To suggest for example, as he does, that the matter can only be discussed between him and the Litunga and that any issues should be channeled through the Litunga shows lack of knowledge of the Barotse political system and what has transpired in the last four years. The Litunga is simply a political figurehead and the governance of Barotseland is done through the Sikaalo Kuta, the Barotse government headed by the Ngambela or Prime Minister. To this effect with the full approval of the Litunga Lubosi Imwiko, the Barotse National Council (BNC) was convened at Limulunga on 26 and 27 March 2012, in broad daylight, attended by all the traditional rulers of Barotseland, prominent politicians and government

officials. The council resolved that since the [Barotseland Agreement 1964](#) was unilaterally abrogated, the region did not wish to continue to be part of Zambia. It, therefore, gave notice to the government of Zambia that it wished to revert to the status it held prior to 24th October 1964. This sacred declaration by the people of Barotseland was trivialized by the Zambian government and dismissed as untenable. No efforts were made to negotiate with the representative of the people of Barotseland on available options, including referendum. Instead, a vicious propaganda was launched to get the Nkoya and Mbunda traditional rulers to dissociate themselves from the demand for independence from Zambia. There was a malicious claim that the decision to break away from Zambia was being advocated by Lozis without the support of other ethnic groups. This divide and rule strategy was aimed at creating dissension and division within the region and delegitimizing the claims to statehood.

That the Zambian government (both under Sata and now Lungu) has shown that it has been unwilling or unable to honor its own pledges, let alone implement recommendations of the Chongwe Commission of Inquiry on Barotseland, a bad indictment on its legacy. It is unfortunate that President Lungu can say that the issue of Barotseland is highly sensitive. Highly sensitive in what way? Is it because discussing the restoration of Barotseland is in conflict with the Constitution that calls for a unitary state? If indeed, President Lungu was still concerned about resolving the issue of Barotseland through a referendum or any other means, why were there no efforts to amend provisions of the Constitution of Zambia (Amendment) Act of 2016?

It is important to point out that the issue of Barotseland will haunt successive Zambian governments if no lasting solution is found. History is on the side of the people of Barotseland and no amount of suppression or repression will dampen the aspirations of the people to self-determination. It is an inalienable right of any nation recognized under international law. The conditions for which Barotseland was integrated into Northern Rhodesia to form an independent Zambia are being contested. A party to that [Agreement](#), Barotseland, wishes to opt out. It is imperative that political leaders use democratic means to find a solution. The starting point, being to allow for open and free debate on the options available. There is nothing unique about Barotseland, similar demands have been made and continue to be made elsewhere. South Sudan, Zanzibar, Kosovo, Scotland and Quebec are some of the examples, where demands have been made for self-determination in a democratic context. Criminalizing debate on the Barotseland issue and making it a toxic subject will only drive the demands underground and radicalize them.