

Populist Politics amidst Mining Booms and Busts in Post-colonial Zambia

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The October 2011 election victory of the new Zambian president Michael Sata demonstrated that the populist politics of the Copperbelt, the country's mining region, are alive and well. The Zambian Copperbelt, long recognised as one of Africa's most economically and politically important mining areas, provided from the 1940s evidence of a politicised African working-class. Aspiring politicians - Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party to Simon Kapwepwe's breakaway United Progressive Party in the early 1970s, the Movement for Multi-party Democracy in the early 1990s (led by former trade union leader Frederick Chiluba) and now Sata's Patriotic Front party – sought to represent the Copperbelt politically, by attacking the region's mining companies and their relationship with incumbent politicians, and articulating the Copperbelt consensus that mining corporations have moral responsibilities to their workforce, the communities and nations in which they operate. Once in power however, elected politicians' perceived failure to keep their promises to the Copperbelt population led to industrial and political unrest, which successive governments struggled to contain.

During the long period of Zambia's economic decline, closely linked to low mineral prices, between the mid-1970s and mid-2000s, the potency of this message appeared somewhat reduced. With the rise in international mineral prices since the mid-2000s, and the arrival of new international investors (particularly China) in the Copperbelt, popular anger at the mining companies' behaviour towards their workers, the environment and their attitude towards taxation has provided the basis for a renewed populist electoralism that has aided Sata's accession to power. This paper analyses the extent to which Sata's success can be explained by (on the one hand) material factors arising from the region's political economy, and (on the other hand) popular memory of the Copperbelt's distinctive political culture.