

Kenneth Kaunda, 97, Played a Major Role in the African Liberation Struggle

Zambia's co-founder and first president provided political and material support to many independence movements.

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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*A leading light in the campaigns to overthrow white minority rule and to foster African unity, **Dr. Kenneth Kaunda**, has died in Zambia at the age of 97.*

Kaunda was born on April 28, 1924 in Lubwa Mission in Chinsali, an area then known as Northern Rhodesia and controlled by Britain.

This colony along with Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, were established by the capitalist colonizer Cecil Rhodes during the late decades of the 19th century. Rhodes created the British South African Company leading the economic and consequent political seizure of the land and resources of the indigenous African people.

After the land seizures by the settler-colonialists, Africans were forced to work in the mines and plantations of the British corporations. Africans revolted against the encroachment during a series of wars in 1896-1897. Eventually, through the force of superior armory, the British maintained control over Northern and Southern Rhodesia until the mid and late 20th century.

The young Kaunda was the eighth child of a minister father and school teacher mother. His father died while Kaunda was quite young leading to many hardships. Kaunda would continue his education becoming a teacher within the colonial educational system.

By 1949, at the age of 25, Kaunda had become involved in mass politics with the Northern Rhodesian African National Congress. He would later form other more militant organizations such as the Zambian African National Congress and eventually founding the United National Independent Party (UNIP), which played an essential role in the liberation struggle of the 1960s.

Kaunda was imprisoned by the British colonial authorities on several occasions in the 1950s and early 1960s. He would later come to dominate political life in the country under the leadership of UNIP. By 1964, the colony had gained independence and changed its name to Zambia.

Pioneering Stalwart of the Pan-African Movement of the Post World War II Era

Tributes to Kaunda have been articulated throughout the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) as a whole.

The co-founder and longtime president of the mineral-rich nation formerly known as Northern Rhodesia under colonialism, emerged from the national oppressive conditions imposed by British imperialism beginning in the late 19th century. Kaunda at a very early age began to understand the character of institutional racism and state tyranny.

During his tenure as president of Zambia, the country hosted numerous national liberation movements from throughout Southern Africa and other regions. Despite his stated commitment to nonviolent social change during the efforts to win independence in the 1950s and early 1960s, after attaining power Kaunda provided a base for liberation movement organizations which advanced armed struggle as an important means to break the chains of European domination.

Radio Freedom, the Voice of the African National Congress (ANC), was broadcast from Lusaka, the capital of the country. Radio Freedom relayed information to people inside South Africa under apartheid bringing a message of resistance and organizational culture to the masses of people seeking to unleash their fury against the racist system of colonial exploitation and social degradation.

[An article published by Al Jazeera](#) based in Qatar, says of the Kaunda legacy that:

“Leaders across Africa have paid tribute to Zambia’s founding president, Kenneth Kaunda, who died on Thursday at the age of 97, declaring several days of mourning in their respective countries.

While in power, Kaunda hosted many of the movements fighting for independence or Black equality in other countries around the continent, standing up to white minority rule in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.”

The development policy of the UNIP was based upon the nationalization of key economic assets principally in the mining sector which were owned by foreign capital. Zambia under President Kaunda expanded access to primary and secondary education which had been denied in the colonial era.

At the time of independence in October 1964, very few Zambians had acquired secondary education and far less were able to attain post-secondary training. Consequently, in 1966, Kaunda founded the University of Zambia in Lusaka. The University contained numerous faculties along with a medical school. The country became a center for regional education throughout Southern Africa.

Zambia maintained close economic and political ties with the People’s Republic of China during the era of leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. In addition, the UNIP government developed good relations with the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia.

When threatened by the military power of the former South African Defense Forces (SADF) under the apartheid regime, Kaunda had requested to purchase sophisticated military

equipment from the U.S. The request was denied, while soon after Kaunda was supplied with MIG-25 fighter aircraft from the USSR. The Humanism of the UNIP in Zambia resembled other efforts aimed at non-capitalist reconstruction in the post-colonial independence period.

Modern Ghana, founded by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in the 1950s and 1960s, adopted policies aimed at industrialization and the mass education of the population. Nkrumaism, a term given to the thoughts, ideas and organizational work of the former prime minister and president of the First Republic, represented an attempt to apply socialist theory to the concrete conditions as they existed in Africa at the time.

Other post-independence African states such as Guinea-Conakry under President Ahmed Sekou Toure, Egypt (United Arab Republic) during the era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Tanzania as well, while former President Julius Nyerere was in power, among others, all advanced ideological and political policies designed to achieve genuine independence guided by internationalism in alliance with the struggle for world socialism.

The Significance of Kaunda and the Legacy of the Independence Struggle

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has paid tribute to Kaunda acknowledging publicly the Zambian leader's role in the eradication of the racist apartheid system since 1994. Kaunda spoke at the funeral of former President Nelson Mandela in December 2013 conveying the importance of the alliance between the Frontline States and the liberation movements which clinched the defeat of white minority rule in Southern Africa.

Kaunda was a co-founder in 1980 along with the late President of Mozambique, Samora Machel, of the Southern African Development Coordinating Council (SADCC), the predecessor to SADC, founded in 1992. SADC convened a summit beginning on June 23 where tribute was paid to Kaunda.

An article appearing in the state-controlled Zimbabwe Herald on the visit of President Emmerson Mnangagwa to the SADC summit being held in the Mozambican capital of Maputo emphasizes:

“The summit is taking place at a time when the region is mourning the death of Zambian founding father Kenneth Kaunda who died last week at the age of 97. Flags are flying at half mast at this summit in reverence to the late Pan Africanist.” (See [this](#))

President Kaunda was removed from office after the 1991 election in Zambia. The UNIP government had been under pressure by global finance capital through the pressure exerted upon the country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF and World Bank caused tremendous social dislocation during the early independence decades in Africa through the imposition of economic conditionalities which directly sought to remove nationalization policies, free public education and the growth in industrialization projects which sought to build economic independence from imperialism.

Kaunda eventually abandoned the one-party political system which guided the national development strategy based upon his theory of Humanism. After other political parties were allowed to contest national elections with the support of the western powers, UNIP fell from power.

Although the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) led by Frederick Chiluba won the

1991 elections saying their grouping would end corruption and inefficiencies, Chiluba and subsequent administrations over the last three decades have faced the same contradictions as UNIP under Kaunda. In fact, corruption increased within Zambia during the 1990s while the country lost its leading role in African and international political arenas.

The historical trajectory of the post-independence African states should be studied by the current generation of activists and political organizers. Any serious review of the period extending from the late 1940s through the 1990s will clearly conclude that Kaunda earned an important place within the struggle for African emancipation.

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Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of Pan-African News Wire. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: *Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda and President Nelson Mandela*

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