Enemies within?
Opposition to the Zambian one-party state, 1972–1980

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Introduction

With the establishment of Zambia’s ‘one-party participatory democracy’ in December 1972, political opposition disappeared from public view into a shadowy world of rumour, paranoia, detention and denunciation. This chapter explores the trajectories of leaders, members and sympathisers of the United Progressive Party (UPP), following its breakaway from the ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP) in August 1971, its banning in February 1972 and the subsequent declaration of the UNIP one-party state. It surveys the varying political ideas and tactical approaches of former UPP leaders and activists and the ways in which these differences reflected the heterogeneous basis of the UPP itself. Whilst some sought to further their political objectives within UNIP, others maintained underground opposition, particularly on the Zambian Copperbelt. In the late 1970s, UPP activists were divided over the return of their leader, Simon Kapwepwe, to UNIP. Debates subsequently took place regarding the former party’s relationship with leaders of the trade union movement; whilst Kapwepwe identified the increasingly oppositional Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) as an important ally in defeating UNIP, others found ZCTU National Chairman Frederick Chiluba to be an unreliable partner, unprepared to make the sacrifices necessary to overthrow the one-party state.
The chapter also explores the changing political perspectives of Kapwepwe, primarily through interviews with many of his leading supporters in the UPP. Perceived in the 1960s as a militant anti-western and pro-Chinese nationalist, Kapwepwe’s leadership of the UPP rested in practice on a political ambiguity that generated support from conservative small businessmen, socialist students, and peasants in Northern Province, for whom his attraction was primarily as an ethnic Bemba aristocrat. In the late 1970s, he appears not only to have accepted the ideas of right-wing business-oriented critics of UNIP’s state-led nationalism, but also the initiation of a project to remove Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda from power that culminated, after Kapwepwe’s death, in the coup plot of 1980. The chapter reveals new evidence regarding the political ideas and practical actions behind the coup attempt, based on interviews with some of the participants.