Subsidiary sovereignty and the constitution of political space in Zambia

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The irony of writing the history of ‘post-Independence’ Zambia is, sadly, the nation’s stark lack of genuine independence. Over the course of her forty-odd years as an internationally recognized state, Zambia – like much of Africa – has had less and less to say about the basic facts determining the welfare of her citizens. A further irony is that Zambia’s vulnerability to forces beyond her control – a condition which can be termed ‘subsidiarity’ – seems to have deepened in the wake of the post-Cold War onslaught of liberalization that promised to revitalize the nation’s economy and her democratic institutions.

Evidence of Zambia’s deeply rooted subsidiarity is extensive. For starters, her constitutional order, and indeed a sizable chunk of her extant legislation, are not of the nation’s own making but a colonial legacy. Zambia’s gross national product – based heavily on copper export revenues – is hostage to strategic commercial, military and technological decisions made in cabinet meetings and

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corporate boardrooms on distant continents. Her state budget, and the policy instruments by which government claims to address the banes of poverty, unemployment, ill-health and illiteracy, are strictly controlled by transnational debt-masters in Washington. Even Zambia’s major religious bodies – and their concomitant items of doctrine and faith – are beholden to unassailable episcopal hierarchies the apices of which reside in Europe and North America. On the whole, Zambians have virtually no say at all on vital questions of life and death – like the price of copper and fossil fuels, the right of Christian clergy to exorcise demons or the affordability of anti-retroviral drugs.

Photo 21 Oasis protestors at the University of Zambia during the final years of President Frederick Chiluba’s rule.

The frailty of Zambia’s sovereignty is well known, yet still we continue to use the vocabulary of ‘independence’. Why is this? Partially, no doubt, out of discretion. Given devastating deterioration of living standards over the past four decades, the benefits of Zambian citizenship have been reduced to little else than a rather empty juridical sovereignty. Etiquette aside, the prevailing conceptual diplomacy is also based on the premise that ‘independence’ is the normal state of affairs for a sovereign nation like Zambia. The endless list of caveats that belie this fundamental truth, for Zambia as for countless of her neighbors, must be aberrations. Whether these anomalies are seen to be struc-