

## Policy Recommendations for Addressing Subnational Tension in Relations between Zambian Citizens and Chinese Migrants

By Emmanuel Matambo, Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar  
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**A**s Africa-China relations continue to grow, including Zambia-China relations, tension amongst Chinese migrants and Zambian citizens is also emerging. This policy brief outlines the nature and sources of tensions between Chinese migrants and Zambian citizens, assesses the Zambian government's response to the tensions, and offers recommendations and options for how the Zambian government could more effectively ameliorate tensions between the two.

### Background of Zambia-China Relations

Official Zambia-China relations remain warm and close, 55 years after their establishment in 1964. China's financial, technical, and labor contribution to the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), which proved a lifeline for landlocked Zambia, enhanced China's reputation in Zambia. During that era of Cold War politics, liberation struggles, and anti-colonial agitation, Zambia-China relations were characterized by state-to-state interaction. In contrast, today, interaction between ordinary Zambians and the burgeoning numbers of Chinese migrants in Zambia is distinctly tense. The reasons include: fear of economic domination and disadvantage at the hands of Chinese immigrants, media reporting, political opportunism, and dissonant views of China and the Chinese.

### Fear of Economic Domination and Disadvantage at the Hands of Chinese Immigrants

Anxiety about economic domination and disadvantage at the hands of Chinese immigrants is inflamed by the fact that aggregate unemployment (unemployed plus potential labor force) in Zambia is alarmingly high, at more than 40 percent. Under such circumstances, Chinese immigrants with start-up capital compound the alienation of unemployed Zambians who are often devoid of the capital necessary to compete in a shrunken market space. This has led to labor disputes as Zambians who are on the verge of economic destitution are often compelled to work for Chinese entrepreneurs, often in unideal conditions. The 2011 Human Rights Watch Report titled "*You will be Fired if you Refuse*"<sup>1</sup> detailed mistreatment of Zambian workers in Chinese-owned mines. The flurry of protests and labor disputes in Chinese-run companies raised concerns about labor-related abuses. In addition, and against this backdrop of a small and shrunken economy, tensions are further exacerbated by the perception of Chinese crowding out Zambians from the economic space.

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This is especially the case as it relates to small and medium enterprises that have traditionally been the economic mainstay of ordinary Zambians. The added competition has raised fears of Chinese economic domination to the forefront.

### **Media Reporting**

Media reporting related to China's role in Zambia has added to tensions between Chinese immigrants and Zambians. The tension has been exacerbated by the increasing use of social media in the country. For example, when the state-owned media, the *Times of Zambia*, ran a story in Chinese,<sup>2</sup> it set in motion a chain of events, most especially on social media, that derided the Zambian government and accused it of having ceded the country's sovereignty to China. Furthermore, inaccurate, and sometimes false, media reports about China seizing Zambia's state-owned enterprises such as state broadcaster Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) and electricity producer Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation (ZESCO), were seminal to attacks on Chinese establishments in the Copperbelt Province in November 2018 during which Chinese shops were raided and Chinese nationals forced to flee.

### **Political Opportunism**

Political propaganda and populism have also stoked anti-Chinese sentiment in Zambia. While campaigning for president in the 2006 elections, Michael Sata inspired the trend of opposition political parties accusing sitting Zambian governments of kowtowing to China. While Sata's fulminations were inspired by real concerns about China's presence in Zambia, his anti-Chinese fears were also exaggerated in order to shore up political support. This was exposed most glaringly when Sata, having acceded to the presidency, actually extended and deepened China's presence in Zambia by awarding Chinese corporations massive infrastructure projects. It is also noteworthy that Sata's then colleagues, most prominently Chishimba Kambwili and Harry Kalaba, who have since left government to form their own political parties, are now staking their political campaigns on anti-Chinese sentiment. China's presence in Zambia seems inexorable and, once in government, China's detractors will most likely be compelled to abandon their anti-Chinese language, thereby exposing both their opportunism and resignation to a continuing relationship.

### **Dissonance Between Government and Citizen Views of China in Zambia**

After the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit in Beijing, Zambia's Minister of Foreign Affairs spoke glowingly about the quality and strength of Sino-Zambian relations. Less than a month later, Chinese businesses were looted and ransacked in the Copperbelt Province, exposing the dissonance between official sentiment and popular feeling about China. While some of these factors are coincidental and not causal, tension and violence are a growing issue with the potential to get even worse. So, how has the Zambian government responded to this growing tension?

## The Zambian Government's Response

### Seeming Befuddlement over the Causes of Tension

Government responses to tensions among Chinese immigrants and Zambian citizens are weakened by the Government's tendency to respond to the symptoms, rather than the real causes of tension such as citizens' concerns about the effect of Chinese employers and entrepreneurs on local level economics in Zambia. There is clear evidence that labor laws have been flouted in some Chinese-run establishments, even though the Zambian government seems helpless in solving them. A good example of this is the violence that happened between 2010 and 2012 at Collum Coal, a Chinese-owned mine in Sinazongwe, southern Zambia. In 2010, Chinese supervisors shot at Zambian workers over wage disputes and safety concerns at the mine. Disagreement over the same issues repeated itself in 2012 and a Chinese supervisor was brutally killed by his Zambian employees. Meanwhile, over the same span of time, the Ministry of Labor feigned ignorance of the ongoing and recurrent tensions and left the problem to fester until it exploded.

### Weak Follow-Up to Shoring up the Rule of Law

While the government has arrested both Zambian and Chinese perpetrators of violence and labor abuse respectively, there has not been clear follow-through or prosecution in the cases. In fact, progress reports on prosecutions are not readily available, if at all, which makes it difficult for citizens to appreciate whether or not the problems are being addressed. Prosecution of perpetrators, on both sides, could reassure Zambians, but also Chinese who have unjustly suffered from attacks by Zambians, while also bolstering the rule of law.

### Adherence to a State-Level Definition and Assessment of Zambia-China Relations

The Government has also responded to tension by focusing on state-level amity between Zambia and China. Unfortunately, this narrative glosses over palpable tension at the subnational level. Placatory remarks about the longevity and stability of Zambia-China relations are out of touch with the emerging and increasing reality of subnational tension in Zambia. The government has the responsibility of responding to this reality in a manner that prevents tensions from escalating. How, then, can the government and other policymakers better address growing subnational tension?

## Policy Options and Recommendations

### 1. For the Zambia Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Industry and Ministry of Labor and Social Security

- a. **Improve regulation of Chinese economic activity:** Zambians' fear of economic domination by China is a real concern and could be ameliorated if Zambia's Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Industry were to develop policy that confines Chinese nationals to large-scale wholesale enterprises, while leaving small and medium scale enterprises, particularly in the retail sector, to Zambians. This would allay fears of Chinese migrants crowding out Zambians from economic participation. In addition, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security could do a better job of ensuring that foreign (and local) employers follow Zambia's

labor laws, including paying employees at or above the minimum wage and ensuring that probationary periods comport with Zambia's threshold of no more than six months. Labor unions could play a pivotal role in monitoring these practices.

## 2. For the Zambia Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services

**a. Monitor the quality of media reportage:** Some media reporting has served to inflame tensions and hate crimes such as xenophobia. Such reporting should be discouraged and perpetrators prosecuted. Zambia's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services bears the responsibility of crafting state communications policy. For example, the aforementioned newspaper publication in Chinese showed the dangerous use of state media to impress China, much to the chagrin of Zambians. The Ministry should offer policies and guidelines for media houses on their ethics, and media houses should provide more training to their staff to enhance the quality of reporting. To guard against state censorship, civil society and international organizations such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), should be actively involved to ensure that state action does not degenerate into the wanton censure of media. MISA could also play a part in advocating professional and ethical media practices by its members.

## 3. For the Government of Zambia Ministry of Home Affairs

**a. Control the tenor of campaign and elections-related parlance:** Political opportunism that dehumanizes Chinese citizens, including through the use of blatant exaggerations and insulting language, should be firmly discouraged and penalized. The Registrar of Societies under the Ministry of Home Affairs should monitor the conduct of political players and punish those that promote hate speech in order to gain political support. As the 2021 Zambian general elections approach, there are already indications that anti-Chinese sentiment, some of it xenophobic, will again be used by various political parties. The Electoral Commission of Zambia and other relevant parties must set conditions that penalize parties that choose to invoke hate speech, including against Chinese immigrants.

## 4. For the Government of Zambia and the Government of China

**a. Demystify views about China and the Chinese:** Some of the Sino-Zambian tension emanates from intangible misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge about each other at the people-to-people level versus at the state-level. This was not a big issue when Zambia-China relations were mostly confined to state-actors. Over the years, and with increased Chinese migration to Zambia, this has evolved and brought to the fore tensions relating to perceptions about differences in cultural practices and approaches. Both the Zambian and Chinese governments have to acknowledge this development in thinking and practice. For example, up until now, Confucius Institutes have been one-directional in transmitting Chinese language and culture to Zambians. The mandates of these institutes could be broadened so that they become avenues through which Chinese and Zambian citizens learn about each other's cultural practices and languages. This is imperative especially for Chinese nationals who work alongside Zambians in corporations and industries. The University of Zambia, where the Confucius

Institute is based, could ensure that those who run the Institute broaden its access to include Zambians outside the university who might have the time and interest to learn about China and its worldview. The benefits of such vision could help Zambians with opportunities to live and work in China. Moreover, such cultural exposure could help to demystify China, the Chinese, and their interests in Zambia.

For an in-depth analysis of Zambia-China relations at the subnational level, see the accompanying Africa Program Research Paper No. 24 by Emmanuel Matambo.

*Emmanuel Matambo was a Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar from August to November 2019. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa.*

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1. Human Rights Watch, "You'll Be Fired if You Refuse" Labor Abuses in Zambia's Chinese State-owned Copper Mines, November 4, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/11/04/youll-be-fired-if-you-refuse/labor-abuses-zambias-chinese-state-owned-copper-mines>.
  2. Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, "Zambia state-owned media publishes article in Chinese," *Africanews*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.africanews.com/2018/10/02/zambia-state-owned-media-publishes-article-in-chinese/>.

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1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
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