

Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's charismatic first president, is dead at 97

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Kenneth Kaunda speaks during the funeral ceremony of Nelson Mandela in Qunu on December 15, 2013.

(CNN) — Former Zambian President and independence leader [Kenneth Kaunda](#) has died at the age of 97.

His death was confirmed by Zambia's current President Edgar Chagwa Lungu, who said [in a Facebook post](#) Thursday: "I learnt of your passing this afternoon with great sadness.

"On behalf of the entire nation and on my own behalf I pray that the entire Kaunda family is comforted as we mourn our First President and true African icon," the President added.

Kaunda was being treated for an undisclosed illness at a military hospital in the capital Lusaka, Lungu's office said in a press statement on Monday. His office told Reuters on Tuesday he was being treated for pneumonia.

Kaunda was Zambia's first president following the southern African country's independence from Britain. He ruled from 1964 until 1991 and is known as one of the giants in the continent's fight against colonialism.

[Watch CNN's interview with Kaunda in 2010](#)

Kaunda is revered for his struggle for Zambia's independence, which sought freedom from white minority rule in the 1950s.

His agitation to liberate Northern Rhodesia — which would later become independent as the Republic of Zambia — from what he described as the "worst form of segregation" from a repressive colonial regime, spurred independence movements across Africa.

Kaunda was imprisoned in the late 1950s for his troubles. Speaking to CNN in 2010, Kaunda said his imprisonment was rewarding. "I think I succeeded in the end but it meant going into prison defying unjust laws, being arrested by the police, beaten up, thrown into prison," he said.

Criticized for one-party rule

Following Zambia's independence in 1964, Kaunda emerged as the country's first president and kept his grip on power for 27 years under a one-party rule.

Kaunda was widely criticized and accused of championing a dictatorship regime over his preference for a one-party system. He told CNN his decision to uphold a single-party arrangement was justified and not borne out of a dictatorship.

"...I have never been a dictator. It (a one-party system) was a bargain with the people. But even then I knew it was not the best thing to do. But in that situation it was the only way out," he explained, stating that Zambia's liberation from colonialism could not have been achieved with a multi-party system.

"My colleagues and I decided we're going to go into one party. The reason for that, there was no way, no way at all in which we could have fought and defeated colonialism all around us, with so many parties in Zambia at that time. No way at all," Kaunda told CNN.

Kaunda was one of the first African leaders to hand over power peacefully in 1991 after popular protests forced him to allow multi-party elections, which he lost to Fredrick Chiluba.

He was a charismatic politician whose popular beginnings after Zambia's independence gradually lost public support as his 27-year rule wound down.

He became a beloved African statesman in his post-presidency, dedicating much of his time to the fight against HIV/AIDS, after the disease claimed the life of one of his children. He was among the last living leaders of Africa's independence struggle.

During his term, he supported Black majority rule in South Africa and present-day Zimbabwe and hosted anti-apartheid leaders in Zambia. His signature safari jacket paired with a formal trouser is still known as a Kaunda suit in many parts of Africa.

A 21-day period of national mourning has been declared, Simon Miti, Secretary to the Cabinet and Principal Private Secretary to the President, announced on state TV.

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