DIA
DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA
www.democracyinafrica.org

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA
- SEMINAR SERIES -

EPISODE 1

Michael Sata, Party Branding and the Politics of Historical Memory in Zambia c. 2001-2011

SISHUWA SISHUWA
University of Cape Town/University of Zambia

18 NOVEMBER 2020
1:00pm Eastern Time/5:00pm UK/7:00pm South Africa & Zambia
VIA ZOOM

TO REGISTER EMAIL: editorsdia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The dramatic rise of the opposition Patriotic Front (PF), led by Michael Sata, was one of the main political developments in Zambia during the 2000s. Studies on this subject have attributed the PF's success to Sata's ability to employ a populist message in urban areas – built around the promise of job creation, lower taxes and improved housing – and an ethnic mobilisation strategy in rural areas, centred on sentiments of marginalisation among Bemba-speaking communities. A common limitation of this literature is its failure to explain *why* Sata was more successful than others in deploying these strategies. Drawing on newspaper accounts, party documents and interviews with key political actors, I demonstrate that Sata was able to make these claims convincing through appeals to historical memory. Key in this regard was his past record. As Minister of Local Government and Housing in the 1990s, he built public housing units for Lusaka's burgeoning urban population, earning himself the moniker 'Man of Action'. As a senior figure in the Movement for Multiparty Democracy in the 1990s, he exploited ethnic-language identities to mobilise support for the party in several constituency-level elections in Bemba-speaking Northern Province, crafting a public image of himself as the 'Bemba leader'. In the 2000s, Sata's successive presidential bids were underpinned by constant references to this legacy. In so doing, he was able to push more credible populist and ethnic messages, which allowed him to develop a brand that he later implanted onto the PF. More broadly, I demonstrate the importance of the politics of historical memory in understanding successful electoral campaigns and how political actors distinguish themselves from their competitors in African democracies. While the literature on party branding in Latin America emphasises institutional structures, I show the importance of individual leadership in the African context.