

From a multiparty system to full democracy: the real challenge for Malawi

Following pressure from international donors and local civil society, multiparty democracy was reintroduced in 1994. Ten years later the state of democracy gives rise to concern: patronage, political violence, lack of a credible alternative to the ruling party, not independent media, weak civil society are some of the major obstacles to the achievement of a full democratic system.

The year 1994 marked the end of one of the most repressive and corrupt political systems in Africa. Under the one-party regime of the former “President for Life” Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, no parties except the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) were allowed; freedoms were curtailed; civil society was virtually non-existent; violence was used as a political means; public services were highly inefficient. “Still, that regime was a friend of the West and therefore received large amounts of foreign aid,” says Professor Garton Kamchedzera, Dean of the School of Law at Chancellor College, University of Malawi.

Transition to a multiparty system

With the end of the Cold War, as they no longer needed to use economic assistance to support friendly regimes, international donors withdrew their support to Malawi until human rights were improved and a programme of political liberalisation was announced. For an aid-dependent country like Malawi, that aid freeze was very harmful, as it prevented government from carrying out its development programmes. At the same time, the Catholic Church, through a pastoral letter entitled *Living our Faith*, denounced the corruption, lack of freedom, and violations of human rights. Students at the University of Malawi and workers embarked on a series of riots and demonstrations. Eventually, Banda was forced to call a referendum on the introduction of multiparty politics, which was held in June 1993.

Following the referendum, the first free elections, held in 1994, registered the victory of the United Democratic Front (UDF). However, most of the UDF leaders, including the new President Bakili Muluzi, were former MCP leaders, who had been dismissed from the party. While UDF was the conservative alternative, Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), the other new party which contested the election in 1994, was a more militant party.

In the past ten years, the political system has been dominated by these three parties, but the frequent shifts of alliances demonstrate their ideological flexibility. “In Malawi’s politics, ideology does not play a major role. What parties have to offer are only different personalities”, says Professor Lewis Dzimbiri, Dean of the Faculty of Social Science at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the UDF is a member of Liberal International, AFORD has an association with Socialist International, and MCP in the past had strong relationships with the Conservative Party in the UK. These international affiliations, though, are not used in the public discourse.



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Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite decades of assistance many structural impediments still remain.

Rather than ideology, in the previous two free elections people’s votes followed regional patterns. “The geography of the past two elections can easily be explained with the genesis of the parties in the early 1990s. The UDF was started by President Muluzi in the South, where he was a major figure in the Chamber of Commerce and therefore had a lot of business connections. AFORD grew out of the trade union movement; but most of its members were outside the country and came back once they had organised themselves outside. AFORD’s leader, Mr Chakufwa Chihana, has his roots in the North”, explains Vice President Justin Malewezi.

The state of democracy

UDF has been in power for the past ten years, “Our first concern was how to get rid of the one-party state. We have made substantial progress towards establishing a fully operative democracy. But we should remember

that we come from a background of a very authoritative state, and to dismantle that in the minds of people will take time,” asserts Mr Malewezi.

Public confidence in politics has been eroded: poor economic performance, rising corruption, weak opposition, rising cost of living, general decline of social indicators; political violence, are all clear signals of the fact that the state of democracy is deteriorating. According to John Tembo, President of MCP, “it is true that all the components of a proper democratic society are in place; but when it comes to the applications of those principles I see many weaknesses. For instance, the Constitution establishes the separation of powers. In reality, the executive goes often beyond its power to influence the legislature as well as the judiciary. This may not be formally so, but perceptions of the people about what happens are different.”

Another worrying example comes from the media sector. “The media law is very liberal and gives people the right to say anything, but its application is very different. People operating in the media sector work in a state of fear: they just cannot publish the truth,” states Mr Robert Jamieson, editor of *The Chronicle*, the major independent paper in Malawi. Along the same lines, Dennis Mzembe, a journalist from the *Nation* and Chairman of the National Governing Council of NAMISA, a media institute in charge of raising public awareness on media freedom issues, argues that “the media sector in Malawi, like in any other country in Southern Africa, is constantly under threat. The government has tried to suppress as much as possible freedom of expression. Most of the press is owned by politicians, and therefore there is no freedom to criticise the owner of that paper. The public media, which are controlled by government, only air the views of the ruling party. The opposition has little chance to make their views known to citizens. Actually, I have never seen any opposition leader speaking on TV Malawi or talking on the public radio. Only some private radio stations sometimes try to give the opposition some time. But once they do it, the government threatens them with withdrawing their broadcast licenses.”

Civil society is also weak. “The work of civil society has been impressive over the past ten years, considering that there was not a culture of civil society under the Banda regime. However, the strongest voice came from the Church. I am not sure what we would have done in this country without the Church. The major weakness today is that there is not a uniform voice: a section within civil society is pro-government, one is neutral, and one is pro-opposition. But I think civil society organisations still have to find their way as a unified and coordinating voice. CONGOMA, which is supposed to do this job, is very weak”, argues Professor Kamchedzera.

Democracy within parties

If the relations between parties are not constructive, intra-party politics is also a major concern. In fact, parties have not established a truly democratic process to select their leaders through regular discussions and dialogue. “People have been victimised because either they



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Zomba is the former capital of the country and seat of government. Today it is home to the University of Malawi.

offer a different viewpoint or they do not agree with the party leadership: democratic behaviour is not always part of the mindset of political leaders”, says Professor Dzimbiri. The explanation seems simple: “Most of the leaders of the new political parties are recycled politicians, people who had a role in the previous regime. Thus, they don’t know other tactics than the ones used by the one-party system,” continues Reverend Boniface Tamani, chairman of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), a key civil society organisation which was instrumental in the change in 1992-1994.

The preparation for the next election to be held in 2004 is a good example of the lack of an inclusive democracy within parties. President Muluzi, who had been in power for two terms, wanted to run for a third term. To do so, he had to change the Constitution. Following strong opposition by religious leaders and civil society organisations, he decided to give up. However, without consulting UDF members, he chose as presidential candidate Bingu wa Mutharika, former Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa technocrat. Mutharika’s selection opened up rifts within the ranks of UDF, who did not agree with the choice. Some of the most critical ministers were sacked.

In addition, President Muluzi appointed Mr Chihana and four other AFORD officials as cabinet ministers, forming a government of “national unity”. This is the last of several shifts of alliances which have characterised AFORD’s history: in 1994 it was in a coalition government with UDF, then it ran with MCP in the 1999 elections, and finally joined UDF again. “In the 2004 elections my party will support Bingu wa Mutharika”, said Mr Chihana. But this recent change of alliances was not accepted by some senior party members, who decided to leave AFORD to found a new party. Finally, major internal rivalries caused the main opposition party, MCP, to split into two major factions, which for a long time prevented it from being a credible alternative to the current ruling party. Since summer 2003, though, these two factions have committed to work together and are now finally ready for the next elections. ■ MC