

"We are still a young democracy"

After about thirty years of autocracy and a one-party system, the United Democratic Front (UDF) won the first democratic elections in 1994. Mr Justin Malewezi has been Vice President since then. In this interview he discusses issues of democracy, economic diversification, and relations with international donors.

After thirty years of a one-party regime, in 1994 Malawi became a multiparty democracy. How do you assess the state of democracy in Malawi?

When the UDF came to power as the first democratically elected government, the main concern was about building the structures necessary for democracy, starting from the Constitution. We now have a modern Constitution, with a complete Bill of Rights protecting the rights of the citizens and with all the various institutions that are important for democracy. In the previous regime there was not much debate in the Parliament, whereas now there is a vibrant discussion between the different parties. The judiciary is now independent and has ruled several times against the government. Another area of concern is civic education: thirty years of a one-party system is a long time and it will take a long time for people to change and to understand what democracy is, to be educated on issues of tolerance, to accept that people can have different views and still operate together.

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Despite some progress, there are still some challenges to meet: the opposition is weak, civil society is not well organised, the media is not totally independent.

Of course we have not reached the ultimate stage of full democracy. We were coming from a background of a very authoritative state. I think we should be given a lot of credit that in only nine years we have made major strides in putting on the ground the foundations for a full democracy. We have liberalised the media sector. During the previous regime there were only two newspapers, controlled by the government. Since 1994 there have been over 20 newspapers which have come and sometimes gone, but they are free to operate. Anybody can start a television station if they have got the money and respect the rules set up by the Malawi Communications Regulatory organisation. As for radio, there is only one state radio station, but we have seen a mushrooming of other radio stations; some of them are very critical towards the government. As for civil society, we look at them as partners, not adversaries; we have encouraged them to work with us; after

all, they are there because of this government, which allowed their existence. But they also have responsibilities. They cannot talk about transparency in government if they are not transparent. This is the beginning, and there is a long way to go, but as government we must check that people do not unduly misuse their freedom to create tensions or confusion, which can lead to problems, particularly in Africa where there are several ethnic groups. We are not perfect, we have made mistakes and as we go along we will correct them.

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. What lessons have you learned since your party came to power?

Poverty is the result of some neglect in both policies and implementation over the years. If Malawi is to be better off, its economy must grow and for it to grow we must address basic issues: the major one is food security. During the previous regime, agriculture was heavily subsidised, farmers received help to buy fertilisers, the market was controlled by a parastatal. This arrangement was not sustainable. When we came to government, we started to liberalise. But, unfortunately, we went ahead liberalising without a regulatory organisation. We removed the subsidies, fertilisers shot up, the marketing of the basic crops did not respond. We, Malawi, both the previous and our government, have not adequately addressed the issue of food security. We must also look at other cash crops that can bring an income. But we have to look at all aspects, from growing to selling them. Tobacco earnings have gone down. Finally, we must look at donor support, particularly through structural adjustment programmes: some of these policies have not been pro-poor. We have implemented them religiously, but they have hit poor people very badly.

Malawi is an agricultural country, but there is an urgent need to find other sources of income. Can diversification be pursued in the short term?

The first assumption to make is that Malawi is going to be an agricultural country for quite some time. So agriculture is our first priority and we must make sure that it does grow. Then we must look at how to diversify.

One of the major interventions of the UDF government concerns free primary education.

We have traditional crops, tobacco, tea, sugar, and cotton. Tobacco has been so successful because it is well organised. If a smallholder grows tobacco he knows where to go to sell it; if you grow something else you have to wait for someone to come and buy it, and you don't know who is coming, when, how much is going to be offered. There are some positive moves towards economic diversification, but this process would be more successful if we could make sure that it is well designed, from planting the crop to marketing it. If we select some areas and develop them throughout I am very hopeful that we will see a major movement towards diversification, also because tobacco is now facing many problems in terms of prices.

For the private sector to work effectively, the government should borrow less from the banks. What are the intentions of the government in the future?

We must go back to understanding this. The balance of payments programme started in 1981 and it was good at the beginning. But it also meant that the part of our budget that was under the control of donors became bigger and bigger. By the time we came to government, we called for the free primary education policy and we had to increase our budget, then we had to deal with issues of health, HIV/AIDS, infrastructures. It is true that we were getting assistance from donors in the balance of payments, but it was soon unsustainable because if one donor did not like the way we were running our country we were in trouble. In the past three years we had some of those problems again, and because of that, donors have withheld their balance of payment support. But we have schools, hospitals, roads. For this reason, we have to borrow from local banks. When we borrowed for the first time we thought we were doing it for only one year. Then we were hit by the food crisis, which made things even worse. We had to import a lot of maize. So,

as of now, we have a large domestic debt, but we also have a very large external debt, both of which are constraining the growth of the economy. With the IMF decision to provide support again, we can wind down the domestic debt over probably the next six to nine months. But we need to have the understanding of donors that we are a young democracy and that things cannot always work perfectly. There are pressures from many different groups that the government has to cope with and therefore sometimes we cannot move quickly enough. But by withholding balance of payments support we are really punishing the ordinary people

in the villages. I believe that donors are starting to understand that this is the way to go: we have to trust each other, to be real partners.

Many people, including key members of the current government, complain about Malawi's loss of economic sovereignty.

In the field of international development, we must work with other people as partners, and for this reason we can lose a little bit of our sovereignty. It is important for us, and for all developing countries in general, to put across our concerns, our problems, our solutions, and for the donors to respond and trust that we know what is happening in our country. What destroys the relations, sometimes, is the feeling that because somebody has got a large chunk of money, which he can give to others, he feels superior. That is not correct. We must respect each other, we must be partners. Development in Malawi is important to Malawians, but it is also important for people in Europe and America. A disease is here today and the next morning it is in Europe. It must be a win-win situation, so we all benefit from development.

The goal for the future of Malawi is outlined in "Vision 2020". Where will Malawi be by then?

The poverty reduction strategy paper is the strategy to implement "Vision 2020". Some of these targets will be reached but some will be missed because of the constraints that have since come into play; for example HIV/AIDS was not as severe in the beginning; environmental degradation was not as relevant as it is now; human resources development, and so forth. In certain areas we will reach the planned targets, in other areas we will miss them. But what is important, though, is that we have a target, against which to measure our progress. The value of "Vision 2020" is that it forces us to go in a certain direction. ■

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