

“We should subsidise production, not consumption”

John Tembo is the President of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the major opposition party. In this interview, he presents the proposals of his party in view of the 2004 elections, arguing that more emphasis should be placed on the agriculture sector: subsidies should indeed be available for farmers to improve production.

The MCP was the only party allowed for about 30 years during a very controversial time in Malawi's history. What is your party's link with that past?

MCP has a long history. It was established in 1958, actually even much earlier, but was only formalised in 1958. It was the first political party established to fight colonialism and to fight the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. That same party exists today. There have been some changes in policies, but it is still the same party. If you look at what progress has been made since 1994, it is true that all the components to strengthen the multiparty democracy have been put in place and democratic institutions have been established. But when it comes to issues, there are major weaknesses. There is supposed to be separation of power, but often the executive goes beyond its power to influence the legislature as well as the judiciary.

What are the major differences between the MCP and the current government?

To a certain extent, regional preferences still play a role, but no party would agree to say that they are a regional party: we all claim to be national parties. It is true, though, that the MCP gained the majority of its seats in the centre of Malawi. I think that the major difference is how we handle issues which affect the people. Our party believes that the top priority is the welfare of all the people, whereas the party in government wants to protect the interests of a few people. That is why our country is in such poor shape. Also, we believe that the government should not borrow so much from the domestic market, crowding out business people from borrowing at reasonable rates. There is too much internal and external debt. If you combine the debt portfolio, we are in an impossible position. We really fight on these issues.

The opposition is believed to be weak. In the past years the MCP has been internally fragmented. Has this changed? Do you have any relationship with the other small opposition parties?

The last MCP Convention was intended to unite the party. We made an agreement to stop the internal divisions. Previously there were two main factions, one led

by Gwanda Chakuamba, and the other one by me. But at the Convention I was elected as the President of the MCP. Therefore I lead the opposition, but not in Parliament; because of a Court decision, at the moment I am not a Member of the Parliament. I have appealed the ruling of the Court. Until the final decision is made, I believe it would be wrong to talk about it. On the contrary, the party in government continues to discuss this issue in public, trying to interfere and influence the final decision.

As for the relationship with the other opposition parties, the bottom line is that we all oppose the current government. But we don't work with those parties, we operate separately and differently. We are trying to talk to each other, but it's not easy.

Some recent studies have shown that Malawi's economic situation has worsened since 1994. Does Malawi rely too much on agriculture?

If you go to the marketplace, the countryside, the villages, you get a fair picture of the real condition of the people. I can only say that in our judgment the life of the people is worse than it used to be, except for a few individuals. The party in government is making sure that a few people become rich. It may be true that we rely too much on agriculture, but unlike other countries we don't have diamonds or oil. The greatest resources we have are land and people, and the best way to use them is to grow crops. The only problem is that, from whatever we grow, we don't get a fair price when we export it to other countries. This depends on the fact that there is not a structure in the world trade system which protects the interests of developing countries. We got some access to international markets with some initiatives. For example, AGOA should allow us to export goods to America. But who are the people involved in the exporting of the clothes? Only a few people may benefit, and they are not even indigenous Malawians. Our own national textile factory has closed. AGOA is a good initiative but it does not benefit Malawians. It is up to the government to change this, but they are not putting enough emphasis on it.

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It seems that there has not been much progress on economic diversification. Do you think that tobacco is sufficient to guarantee a better future for Malawians?

From a growing point of view, there is no problem for Malawi to maintain or even to increase its tobacco production, in spite of the negative propaganda against smoking. Since this campaign started, world consumption has not been affected very much. We can produce more. All we need to do is to put the proper policies in place. For instance, we are not taking advantage of the problems that Zimbabwe, one of the most important producers of tobacco, is experiencing. Actually, I found out that in Mozambique they are building a factory attempting to make up for the low production in Malawi. Diversification is a good thing, but it takes time. Finding a viable alternative crop, which is as highly profitable as tobacco, is not easy: for example, people talk about cassava, paprika. These crops cannot be as dominant as tobacco. Malawi should diversify, but diversification cannot take place quickly and cannot bring in, at least in the short term, the same value as tobacco.

International donors have helped Malawi in its development efforts, but they have increasingly expressed concerns about good governance. Do you think that the conditions they place on aid are too strict?

As Malawians, we are very grateful for the assistance we get from international donors. But I must admit that sometimes we have misused generosity from donors. We must use the assistance we receive for projects, and not for travelling. I believe that donors should want us to use money more stringently than they do now. If you read the papers in Malawi, you see many people complaining about the use of resources. If we used the resources properly I don't think donors would interfere. But there is a major difference between the UDF and the MCP about how to use the money we receive. We believe that there

should be a slightly different orientation on aid and agriculture. Spending a lot of money to bring in maize when there is a food crisis does not make sense: that money should be used at an early stage to help the farmers have access to cheaper inputs. Subsidies is a bad word, we cannot mention it! But how can we encourage farmers to grow more unless there are some subsidies going into inputs? The money that is spent when there is a famine should be used during the growing season. We should subsidize production, not consumption. I don't see enough resources designed for developing the agricultural sector. We must first encourage agriculture. We must also have a government free of corruption, with proper management of Malawi and its economy.

The elections will take place in May 2004, but you have had some problems in selecting a presidential candidate. Do you have hopes to win?

The MCP is a credible alternative to the current government. The issue in the 2004 election is not about candidates, it is about people. If the government does not interfere in the elections, I think we will have a chance. People are very tired of what is happening in Malawi. There is a limit. For example, when President Muluzi wanted to run for a third term, the country refused. Now, he decided to get somebody else, who was not even a member of the UDF. It is not up to me to tell if people in the UDF have accepted him, but I would doubt very much that he is going to win. They are very confident about winning because they have got the money. Some people are financing them. The law says that they are supposed to declare where they get the money from, but in practice it does not happen. The MCP has no money. We fund our campaign by internal mobilisation; we also get a small amount from Parliament, based on the number of seats we have, but it is not much. It is true we don't have a candidate, but you must understand that the MCP is not an issue of an individual, it is a movement. ■ MC

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its human development indicators trail below most countries in Africa.