

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

The opening of Malawi society

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Dear Peter:

A society petrified by repression can crack open in an instant when the gesture of an individual is taken up by thousands. Such a spontaneous declaration of public defiance can confirm that a society has changed forever, such as when East and West Germans alike began chipping away at the Berlin Wall. I witnessed an opening in Malawian society, when an impromptu celebration of democracy began. From the joyful honking of a car horn, it grew dramatically as people marched and danced in the streets, singing and shouting slogans that would have prompted arrests, beatings or even deaths only a few months ago.

That far-away horn started to blare when a noon radio newscast confirmed that almost two-thirds of Malawian voters had declared themselves in favor of multi-party democracy in a June 14 referendum. The ballot question asked citizens to reaffirm the political monopoly held by His Excellency The Life President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP) or to open up the system to competing political parties. Unofficially, the polling tested the popularity of Banda and the MCP, which has ruled the country since before independence in 1964. The results of the plebiscite signaled irreversible change in the country and in its people, from fearful docility to outspokenness.

This change could be seen when all normal work halted as long-hidden feelings prompted people to go out into public to laugh and smile at each other in victory. They seemed incredulous to be witnessing a new chapter in their country's history. One or two hesitantly shouted: "We won!" More car horns. More whistles. More excitement in the air. More people gathered, looking amazed. A car drove past with a man leaning out its window waving a lantern. The lantern was the ballot symbol of a democratic choice, while the black cock represents Banda's Malawi Congress Party. Soon, crowds were cheering and flashing the V for victory sign at passing cars full of happy multi-party advocates. Within minutes, thousands more joined them in the streets of Malawi's largest city, Blantyre. They sang: "The cock is cooked!" and "No

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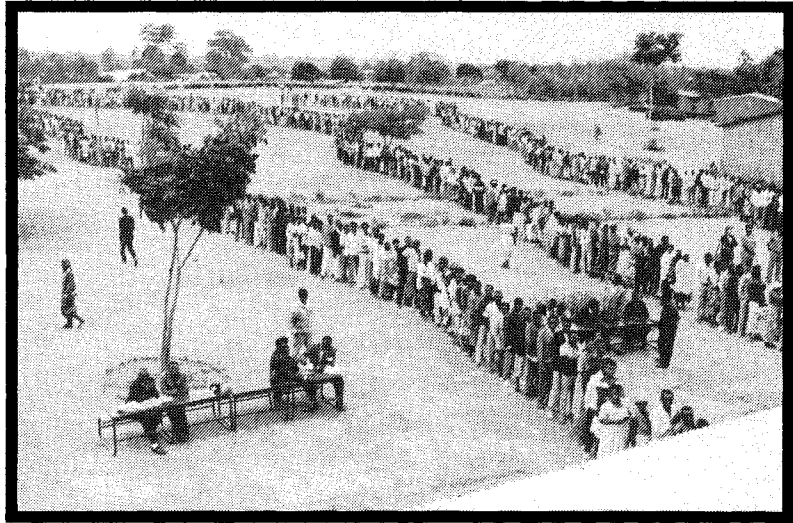
Emotions boiled over when the results were announced

more Banda!" All traffic stopped as a procession of marchers paraded through town. Workmen on a high-rise construction site banged a percussion on sheet metal and waved to the crowd three stories below. Across the country, Malawians lost their reputation for passivity that day.

Two days earlier, hundreds had stood silently in long lines at each of the 2,066 polling centers across Malawi. They started arriving at 5:30 in the chill morning although voting did not begin until 7 a.m. Those standing in the queues kept a tense silence until they reached the table with the ballots. After presenting a registration slip, each person dipped a finger into indelible purple ink, then took an envelope and two slips of paper: the cock and the lantern. Booths had been set up where voters discarded one of the ballots in secret and placed the other inside the envelope. Then they emerged to drop their vote into a locked black metal box in front of the other voters. All this was done solemnly. Most people treasured their chance to vote and feared any provocation would give Banda an opportunity to annul the first fair election in decades. By midnight, as poll officials tallied the results, pro-democracy campaigners monitoring the counting looked tired and grim because, in spite of the clear victory, they doubted whether Banda would consent to his loss. For two days, the government then delayed announcing the final election count, adding to the apprehensive mood. So an air of relief as well as triumph fueled the street celebrations.

Out of the 3,153,448 voters, 1,993,996 opted to dismantle one of Africa's last one-party states. (About 71,000 or 2 percent of the total votes were judged void because of discrepancies.) Single-party politics won only in the central region, Banda's home. And almost 1.1 million voters never turned up at polls, prompting speculation that they never existed at all. A 210-member team of international observers, along with a large contingent from local opposition groups, prevented ballot-box stuffing. Although the observers judged the polling to be free and fair, many involved in the election said the overall process certainly was not. In the run-up to the balloting, the MCP did its best to intimidate voters. In some incidents, the party's

paramilitary youth league beat up those who campaigned for multi-party democracy. One man died from a beating he received shortly before election day. Police initially prevented opposition rallies from taking place and jailed activists on charges of sedition. The government's monopoly on the country's only radio station stifled the pro-democracy campaign. While barely mentioning opposition rallies, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation started a daily program of women singing the praises of Banda. In the end, however, Malawians exercised their right to express themselves through the ballot box. Having tasted such freedom, the people are reluctant to lose it again.



Despite hours of waiting, voters were silent

Small details in Malawi point to larger changes underway in that society. For instance, take the astonishing way a conversation began under the hood of my car in one small town. "A year ago, you could have been arrested for doing that," a mechanic said as I unscrewed the caps off my ailing car battery. I looked at him blankly. "Look at what you are using as a screwdriver," he said, taking the coin out of my hand. It bore the picture of Banda, just as all coins and bills there do. "Using the president's image like that is considered disrespectful; a criminal offense," the mechanic said. "Nowadays, nobody will arrest you. But before, you would have been denounced as a subversive and jailed."

After being disabled by fear for more than a generation, people are making their opinions known. On the street corners, vendors sell more than 15 alternative newspapers that bear headlines like "MCP Rule Crushed" and "Kamuzu Banda must go now." In one hotel, a desk clerk took down the picture of Banda that by law must be

displayed in every business and public building. At a gas station, an attendant declared that he had "voted for freedom." At a travel agency, I found a clerk with her ear to a telephone receiver jotting down unofficial polling results, district by district. A retired primary school headmaster detailed the murder of his son-in-law, who was bundled inside a grain bag by MCP youth league members and tossed in a river. Everywhere I went in Malawi, I listened to people tell stories about Banda's reign of terror. Older village headmen and young urban secretaries alike

told of security agents knocking on doors in the night and how neighbors would find dumped bodies in the morning. Most have friends who disappeared for weeks or months for making an unguarded remark at work or over beers. Some still await news of missing relatives. Sometimes people revealed their own horror stories and were proud to have survived to tell a foreign journalist. That's the tip-off that a fundamental transformation in Malawian society has begun. People are talking. A year ago, few dared to speak their minds, even in privacy, for fear that an informer would report their remarks. Then foreign donors, including the United States, halted all but humanitarian aid. They froze \$74 million, pending "tangible and irreversible evidence of a basic transformation... in the way human rights in Malawi are viewed," a World Bank representative said. The freeze prompted Banda to hold the referendum, but this doesn't mean Malawi became a democracy overnight. Creating a democratic society will be difficult after 30 years of rule by one man who controlled virtually every aspect of Malawi, and still does.

### One-man Banda

Banda looms large in the minds of the Malawian people. The name of the 90-something-old president (no one is certain about his age and any speculation was judged treasonous) is engraved upon almost every major structure. Kamuzu bridges are everywhere. The nation's main thoroughfare? Kamuzu Highway. The principal arena? Kamuzu Stadium. There is Kamuzu Central Hospital, Kamuzu International Airport, and Kamuzu Dam, which is near Kamuzu Military Base. Many schools bear the Kamuzu name but the biggest is in Banda's home village: Kamuzu Academy has a budget one-third larger than the rest of the nation's school system. (See page 5.)

His official biography states that at the age of 13, Banda walked all the way to South Africa where he then

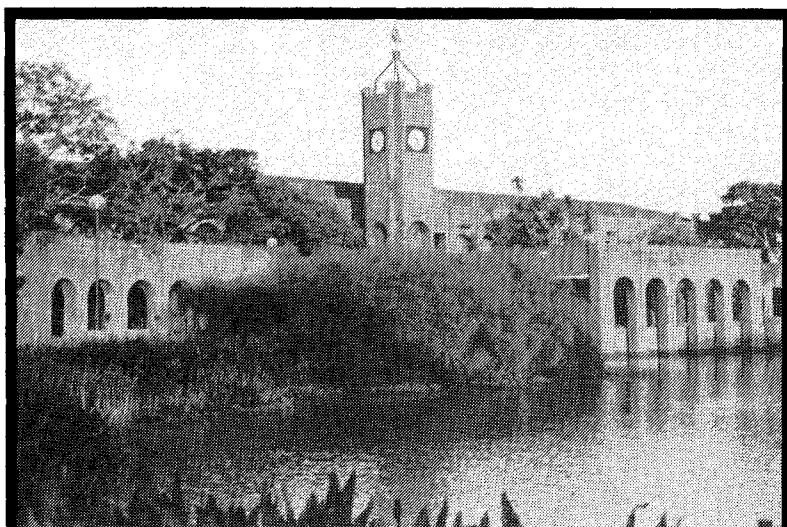
"They say my people love me, and I would be naive to deny it." -- Banda

worked in the mines. After saving his money, Banda traveled to the United States and enrolled in an Ohio academy. He studied at the University of Indiana, and later at the University of Chicago and a medical college in Tennessee. Banda began practice as a doctor in England after finishing his medical studies at Edinburgh University in Scotland. After nearly 40 years abroad, Banda returned to Malawi to campaign vigorously for freedom from colonial rule, although by then he had forgotten his mother tongue of ChiChewa. His Malawi Congress Party won an overwhelming victory in 1961. Two years later, Banda became prime minister of Malawi, then called the self-governing colony of Nyasaland. Six fellow nationalists in his cabinet, disgruntled by Banda's reluctance to pursue stronger policies to "Africanize" the nation's civil service, resigned or were dismissed in the first year of independence. Faced with a rebellion, Banda instituted the now-infamous Preservation of Public Security Act that allows

the indefinite detention of opponents without charge. Banda became the first and only president of Malawi in 1966 when the country became a republic. Armed exiles attempted an uprising a year later, only to be crushed. In later years, Banda ruthlessly lashed out at the slightest hint of disloyalty.

Banda has so cowed the population of 9.2 million that most people are still frightened of even mentioning his name aloud. His autocratic rule corresponds with dictatorships elsewhere in the world. Tyrants need highly visible goons to maintain such fear. Former Haitian "President for Life" Francois Duvalier and later his son, Jean-Claude, both used a private death squad called the **Tonton Macoutes**. Former Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu deployed his personal security forces to massacre anti-

government demonstrators. In Malawi, the network of spies includes the army, police, and MCP Women's League. Under Banda's rule, wives reported husbands for disloyal remarks and children informed on parents. The government routinely tapped telephones and opened mail. But Banda's most feared weapon is the party's paramilitary youth league: The Malawi Young Pioneers.



At the end of a 20-mile dirt road through the heavy brush of Malawi's Central Region lies a monument to the rent in Banda's psyche: Kamuzu Academy. Upon arriving, potholes give way to clean asphalt. Materializing like a figment of someone's opulent imagination, a small version of Europe appears in green lawns, rose gardens and a man-made lake behind high iron gates. When young, Banda was forced to tear himself away from his African roots and become an imitation British schoolboy. Now he forces his cultural schizophrenia on a new generation: Students here study ancient Greek and Latin, English, math and European history. Speaking local languages is forbidden as is the study of African history and agriculture. "The Founder," as school headmaster Anthony Cooke refers to Banda, has stated that no Malawian is fit to teach at Kamuzu Academy. Most of the teachers are British; none are African. "In isolation, it may look incongruous, but we take students beyond immediate local horizons to produce a pool of rounded, well-educated people," Cooke said. Yet a student says her parents forbid her to wear the academy's green blazer when home in her village. It's now dangerous to be a privileged protege of Banda.

There are an estimated 50,000 Young Pioneers who have been taught farming techniques and skills like carpentry and wood-working, as well as military maneuvers, at more than 24 bases. Most finished their training and returned to their communities. An elite cadre of 2,000, however, remain on certain bases to practice far more deadly drills with sophisticated weaponry. This force cannot be arrested by police and is accountable only to Banda. Stories abound of their brutality. Before MCP rallies, they would round citizens up to attend, clubbing people like cattle if they balked. Young Pioneers, wearing their distinctive red shirts and black berets, would stand at the entrance to most market places in Malawi selling MCP membership cards. They turned away citizens lacking cards or savagely beat those who refused to buy; forced pregnant women to purchase memberships for unborn babies; and threw passengers without MCP cards off public buses for disloyalty to the president. Young Pioneers visited schools to enroll students, battering children unable to pay party dues. In a radio address last year, Banda admitted that Young Pioneers harassed Malawians without party cards. However, he claimed that some tormentors were "thieves, hooligans and dissidents" disguised as youth leaguers. After he condemned such extortion, the practice dwindled. But it has yet to cease.

Malawi, in short, is a colonial state now run by an African. To consolidate his power and destroy any threats to his rule, Banda undermined democratic institutions, such as the courts, the legislature and the press, that ordinarily provide checks and balances to ensure human rights. Malawi inherited a European-style court system to hear major cases and a traditional court system to hear minor offenses. Banda elevated traditional courts to hear serious cases, such as capital or political

Late in the evening following the referendum I heard singing and shouting coming from Ndirande, a shantytown lacking street lights and paved roads outside the city of Blantyre. Bobbie Jo and I drove out to get a closer look. We found a rag-tag procession of adolescents marching down the road waving sticks and yelling anti-government slogans. I parked the car on the shoulder of the road to watch. A minute later a Land Rover pulled up with "Malawi Congress Party" stenciled in white on its side. A light went on inside the vehicle, illuminating six or eight young men in ties and suits. One of them leaped out with an AK-47 assault rifle. He drew a bead on the children. They scattered, screaming. He swung the gun in an arc, tracking the fleeing forms, then abruptly froze when he saw us. Bobbie Jo scrunched down in the passenger seat. "He has a gun!" she said. "No shit," I answered. I stared into the gun muzzle as he goggled at me. What was a white guy doing in the middle of a slum? "Good evening, sir! I just wanted to clear the road for you," the gunman said. "Drive safely!" We drove off, then returned past the spot. The street was silent, empty.

offenses. Government selects which court will hear sensitive cases, such as sedition. Banda usually chooses traditional courts to try opposition activists because European judges sitting on the High Court returned "Not Guilty" verdicts too often. Legal counsel in traditional court is allowed only by consent of the minister of justice -- an office Banda holds. Banda once declared what seems to be a guiding principle of Malawian justice: "We must remember that lack of evidence is not proof of innocence."

Under a one-party state, all political activities and interest groups must be sanctioned by the party. The head of a one-party state is responsible for all judicial and legislative appointments. Candidates for parliament are subject to party approval. Although government claimed an 80 percent turn-out in last year's parliamentary elections, foreign diplomats estimated less than half of registered voters turned up to ratify pre-determined winners. And there's no democracy inside the party. During one MCP convention, Banda told delegates to discuss freely whether exiled dissident Wellington Menoah Chirwa could return to Malawi, since he expressed to Banda the wish to do so. Chief of Karonga District Kapote Mwabangula spoke in favor of granting a pardon for the aging rebel, saying Chirwa could still contribute positively to the country's development. The chief and others who backed amnesty unknowingly crucified themselves: Young Pioneers drove them out of the hall with heavy blows. Some were detained and died in jail; others never occupied public office again.

Banda has always been suspicious of the press, though he has kept the media under his thumb. There is no television station. Banda feels television is a corrupting influence. The nation's only radio station broadcasts slavishly flattering news conforming to the president's views. The MCP owns the weekend tabloid, **The Malawi Times**. **The Daily Times**, the nation's only daily newspaper, is a stale recap of government pronouncements, probably because private ownership is retained by Banda. When the governor of the reserve bank of Malawi fell out of favor with Banda, **The Daily Times** reported that the president allowed him to go for further studies in the United States. In fact, the man was under house arrest! In another instance, police interrogated a **Daily Times** editor for writing an editorial about traffic cops who accepted bribes from motorists trying to avoid tickets. He had to print a retraction, an apology, and another story stating that corruption doesn't exist in Malawi. Laws that broadly define the crime of sedition as bringing the president, government or administration of justice "into hatred or contempt" intimidated local reporters. Until last year, a Malawian journalist could be sentenced to life imprisonment for giving "false information" to foreigners. Now, the punishment is five years in jail.

For years, few citizens read or heard anything about Malawi from the outside world that the government didn't approve. All foreign journalists were banned from the country. Foreign



# An abbreviated list of banned Americana

## Books:

Anonymous -- Go Ask Alice  
 Asimov, Isaac -- Lecherous Limericks  
 Baldwin, James -- Another Country  
 Bellow, Saul -- Mr. Sammler's Planet  
 Chomsky, Noam -- For Reasons of State  
 Didion, Joan -- Play It As It Lays  
 Forsyth, Frederick -- The Dogs of War  
 Fortas, Abe -- Concerning Civil Disobedience  
 Greer, Germaine -- The Female Eunuch  
 Heller, Joseph -- Catch 22  
 Hemingway, Ernest -- The Nick Adams Stories  
 Kerouac, Jack -- Desolation Angels  
 Koontz, Dean -- Demon Seed, Night Chill  
 Mailer, Norman -- The Naked and the Dead  
 Michener, James -- The Drifters  
 Miller, Henry -- Sexus  
 Moore, Gerald -- Modern Poetry from Africa  
 Morris, Desmond -- The Naked Ape  
 Puzo, Mario -- The Godfather  
 Robbins, Harold -- The Carpetbaggers  
 Rockefeller, John -- Changing Values on Campus  
 Spillane, Mickey -- Vengeance is Mine  
 Theroux, Paul -- Jungle Lover  
 Thompson, Hunter S. -- Hell's Angels  
 Updike, John -- Rabbit Redoux  
 Uris, Leon -- Topaz  
 Vonnegut, Kurt -- Slaughterhouse Five  
 Williams, Tennessee -- Night of the Iguana

## Movies:

All That Jazz, Barbarella, Body Heat, Bonnie and Clyde, Diary of a Mad Housewife, Equus, Flash Dance, Friday the 13th, Hell Raiser, Hollywood Cop, The Incredible Melting Man, Kiss of the Spider Woman, Looking for Mr. Goodbar, 9½ Weeks, Porky's I & II, Rocky Horror Picture Show, She's Gotta Have It

## Recording artists:

Barry White, Beatles, Commodores, Country Joe MacDonald, Doctor Hook & The Medicine Show, Isaac Hayes, John Mayall, Jackson 5, KC & The Sunshine Band, The Kinks, Marvin Gaye, Olivia Newton-John, Ray Stevens, The Supremes, Tony Orlando and Dawn, The Temptations, Frank Zappa

magazines with articles critical of Banda are still confiscated at the borders or snipped to pieces before they reach news racks. The list of banned books in Malawi is long, from Marx and Che Guevara to D.H. Lawrence and George Orwell.

Not only does Banda retain political control over his country, the power he wields over the livelihoods of Malawians is enormous. Banda has maintained a capitalist system while regimes around him steered a socialist course. He equated the economic success of the Malawian elite with the progress of the nation and so encouraged his ministers to follow his example in buying farms and factories. "We do not repress the acquisitive and possessive instinct here. Instead we encourage it," Banda once said. Among his investments, the president owns 4,999 of the 5,000 shares of Press Holdings, a group of companies that includes the two large newspapers, the state airline, the major banking system, and plantations of coffee and tea. A



confidential World Bank report estimates that Banda-owned enterprises produce approximately one-third of the country's GDP.

The "Ngwazi" or wise one, as Banda is frequently called, also uses African culture to control Malawi. "Much of our present political behavior and practices have deep roots in traditional beliefs and customs," Banda said in reply to foreign donors' insistence on respect for human rights as a precondition for aid. "We must guard against the imposition of foreign political reforms or ideologies, which may disrupt our peaceful traditions violently." By pursuing self-deification like other "big men" in Africa, Banda has tried to legitimize his power. There are certain titles specifically reserved for Banda, among them "The Redeemer," "Lion of Malawi," and "Father of the Nation." In a traditional African household, what youngster dares criticize the father? Banda literally treats the country like his personal household, going on crop inspection tours to lecture rural people in the words of a father talking to dull-witted children.

Banda constantly refers to the time before he took power as the era when people ran around naked and ignorant of civilized practices like agriculture. "All of you know I introduced agriculture, particularly maize (corn), even in districts which did not know about maize before," Banda told one audience. "I want to thank my people for listening to their Kamuzu when their Kamuzu appealed to them to work hard in the fields. The results are now clearly seen. There is evidence of prosperity all over the country." Such claims of achievement are incredible in a country where only 50 percent of Malawians have clean water, less than 50 percent of children have access to schooling, and 70 percent of households can't feed themselves, according to statistics compiled by the United Nations Development Program.

### Opening Up

Yet, with his popularity eroded to just 35 percent of the vote, Banda recognized that he had to allow political pluralism. In a radio address to the nation, a shaky-voiced Banda promised an election within a year, a review of oppressive laws and a change in the constitution to legalize political parties other than the MCP. Within a few days after that speech, Banda further agreed to an amnesty for political exiles and parliament ratified the constitutional amendment. Then, a presidential negotiating committee tentatively assented to disband the Young Pioneers, form two power-sharing commissions with the opposition, and allow a joint committee to oversee equal access to the radio station.

After so many years of repression, can democracy really take root in Malawi? For opposition leader Chakufwa Chihana, it's the most important question in the overhaul of Malawi's society: "Anybody born in the 1960s knows no other system than Dr. Banda's tyranny. He or she knows only one-party state, one-party values."

Chihana, 54, has become the symbol of Malawians' desire for change. When he returned from a meeting with exiles in Zambia last year, he was arrested on the airport tarmac before he could finish his speech calling for democracy. Chihana, the leader of the opposition Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), was later convicted of possessing seditious documents, which included the text of his airport address. The case rested on a 1940 judgement on sedition rendered under British colonial rule. Chihana was sentenced to two years hard labor, a punishment later reduced on appeal to nine months.



Chakufwa Chihana at home

Amnesty International and donors pressed for his release and the government finally conceded, but only two days before the referendum. When Chihana was set free, thousands thronged to see him as he left the prison gates in the town of Zomba. Chihana's lieutenants soon bundled him into his gold Mercedes and a motorcade shot off at 90 miles an hour. I tailed them but never got a chance to talk to Chihana. At one point during the get-away, the entourage stopped and swapped cars because of rumors of an assassination plot. The AFORD leader recognizes that his life is on the line by opposing Banda, but he vows to fight on. "You can't be sure of who might kill you -- a member of your household, a friend, an enemy, it could be someone insane," Chihana later told me. "If I were to fear for my life every day I would not be able to formulate policy for the future. I've put my life on the line for change and I have to complete the task."

We spoke at his home in the capital of Lilongwe, where I finally caught up with him. As a good host, Chihana poured us snifters of brandy. We raised our glasses and I proposed a toast: "To Malawi!" He began to sip, then stopped. "No, to a new Malawi!" he said. Chihana, who won the 1992 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, wants to be Malawi's next president and use the power to transform his nation. He said building a democracy begins with mass education about democratic values. "There are people saying democracy is American, that it's foreign," he said. "I say no, democracy is universal, just like education. We should begin a phase of learning how to be democratic."

Democracy, for the leader of the other major pressure group

in Malawi, is synonymous with political competition. "I'm very mindful that we're fighting for multi-partyism," said Bakili Muluzi, chairman of the United Democratic Front (UDF). "Why should other (opposition) people come and join us instead of forming their own party? We don't want a situation like in Lesotho, where an opposition sweeps all the seats and we go back to a one-party state. We want diversity."

Muluzi also aims for the president's job. An experienced campaigner, he is a strong candidate. Muluzi was a MCP politician for a decade, rising to be party general secretary until he resigned in 1982 after a demotion to transport minister. Muluzi and others who jumped from MCP to UDF deny any role in the MCP's detention, torture or murder of political enemies. "Even in Europe, conservatives are joining the labor movement," Muluzi said. "Gorbachev himself was a communist. In Kenya who stood against Moi? In Zambia, former ministers unseated Kaunda! When I joined the MCP, I never said I would be behind the party for the rest of my life."

Recently, Banda tried to discredit Muluzi by publicly charging him with embezzling from MCP coffers 12 years earlier. Muluzi went into hiding, and nine UDF executive committee members were jailed and interrogated until Muluzi finally surrendered. His brief detention didn't hurt his popularity, but rather helped his credibility as an enemy of Banda's regime. Other UDF members, like those in AFORD, have suffered reprisals as well. A month before the referendum, for example, Young Pioneers kidnapped and whipped three UDF leaders with plastic hoses.

In any future election, the UDF could be handicapped by its image as former perpetrators of Banda's tyranny. Most of its top officials are former MCP stalwarts, including Aleke Banda, no relation to the president, who once headed the Young Pioneers and later became MCP secretary general. He had the misfortune of being seen as a likely successor to President Banda, who then had him detained without trial for 12 years. Now he is UDF campaign chairman. The group's publicity secretary, Edward Bwanali, was education minister until Banda sacked him in 1991. On the eve of the referendum, the MCP-owned Malawi News quoted one of Bwanali's former parliament addresses:

"My point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the dissidents... is to say that while the rumors still go on, I think it is necessary, Sir, not to take them lightly. I am particularly worried about sympathizers who may be within this country. And these are people, Sir, we have to unearth and we have to deal with brutally and ruthlessly, because, Sir, we as politicians cannot sit idle when something happens which we think may have political connotations. It is this, Sir, that we want to warn, and warn very sternly indeed, that sympathisers of rebels within this country, to me are more dangerous than rebels outside the country."

Both Chihana and Muluzi agree that political tolerance will be the cornerstone of democracy in Malawi. (In the case of Muluzi and other UDF leaders, this sentiment could be self-serving.) To seek revenge against the MCP by repaying repression with repression would contradict what the opposition is struggling to create: a peaceful society where citizens feel free to express differing opinions. A British reporter traveling clandestinely in Malawi once called the country "the land of the zombies." One top development official characterized Malawian society as "a culture of control." He told me that he has tried and failed to prompt Malawian counterparts to make critical appraisals of development projects. They are all too scared: criticism implies a dangerous disagreement with government and, by implication, the president.

But in the struggle for a multi-party political system, there was in fact widespread but covert criticism of the status quo. A year ago, people passed photocopied essays among themselves about what is wrong with their country. Each day, a person could receive two or three such tracts passed by hand in the tradition of *samizdat*, the mimeographed anti-state literature circulated by dissidents in the former Soviet Union. Banda promptly declared the possession of all such documents a crime. In a two week period last year, police jailed an estimated 2,000 people after house-to-house searches uncovered anti-government

"Academic freedom is seriously restricted; exposing injustices can be considered a betrayal; revealing some evils of our society is seen as slandering the country; monopoly of the mass media and censorship prevent the expression of dissenting views; some people have paid dearly for their political opinions; access to public places like markets, hospitals, bus depots, etc. is frequently denied to those who cannot produce a party card; forced donations have become a way of life.

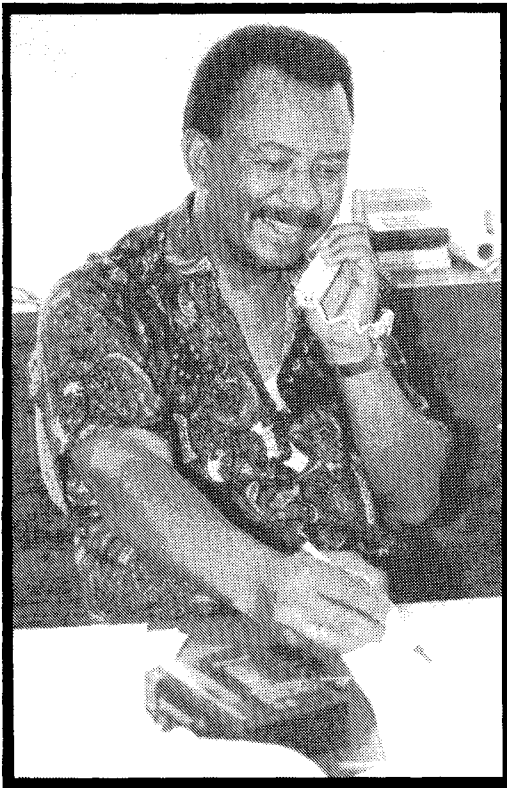
"This is most regrettable. It creates an atmosphere of resentment among the citizens. It breeds a climate of mistrust and fear. This fear of harassment and mutual suspicion generates a society in which the talents of many lie unused and in which there is little room for initiative."

-- Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Malawi for Lent, 1992

literature. At the National Bank of Malawi, the entire staff was arrested simply because police suspected their photocopiers were used to reproduce multi-party literature. These open letters were sent by facsimile machines across the country, and exiled dissidents sent news into Malawi via fax. Such faxes once were posted on a tree outside a hotel in Lilongwe for all to see, until police discovered the practice. Hundreds were arrested on suspicion of circulating treasonous material. The evidence against them? They owned fax machines.

Catholic bishops gave a boost to the cause of free expression when they issued a lengthy pastoral letter calling for "an independent press, open forums of discussion, free association





Alaudin Osman

But most of the new papers had a rocky start. Police seized the first 20,000 copies of **The New Express**, which carried a front-page story on the sedition trial of Chihana. Mponda was detained for 17 days after trying to import that debut edition, which was printed in Zambia. Janet Karim, the publisher of another alternative newspaper, almost lost her son to the cause of press freedom. A group of men attacked his car one night as he was returning from the scheduled pick-up of 10,000 copies of **The Independent**, a bi-weekly newspaper Karim started in April with an UNESCO grant. He outran the attackers wielding rocks and clubs after they forced his car to crash into a tree. Two other new publications, **The Malawi Democrat** and the **UDF News**, were initially banned. Several reporters, even some with the state-run newspapers have been questioned by police. The editor of Malawi's first independent paper, **The Financial Post**, has received death threats from Banda's

agents. Yet he says a genie is out of the bottle, and intimidation tactics can no longer block the new breed of reporters from writing the truth. "We suddenly were given the ability to articulate ourselves loudly, forcefully, in an organized manner," Alaudin Osman said. "The independent press has made a significant impact on society. How do you now say: 'Sorry guys, it's over, go back to silence'?"

In a society where freedom of expression was violently suppressed for so long, an independent and critical press can teach tolerance, fair debate, and critical thinking about issues. "Some letters we receive we turn into articles because they are so long and so wonderfully written," said **The Independent's** Karim. "So much writing talent and so many thinking minds were lost because of the government's suppression. How many university graduates did we lose to other countries because they fled, not simply for money, but for freedom?" Most of these new publications have large "letters to the editor" sections for citizens' contributions. **The Computer Monitor**, a weekly paper that bears the slogan "Moving with the people toward a new Malawi," filled three recent editions with the nation's complete history, from colonial days to the recent referendum.

These iconoclastic journalists are demanding accountability



from the government. Bentry Mndhluli, editor of **The New Voice** in the northern town of Mzuzu, writes critical articles about city authorities. He decried the lack of a local general hospital and crusaded to rehabilitate the dilapidated parking area for the local marketplace. "I expected some shouting," Mndhluli said. "But the town clerk told me privately: 'Keep it up! We need someone to be knocking on the doors of the MCP government.' And I do." Mndhluli had spent 10 years working for the Malawi News Agency, writing sports stories because it was safer than politics. But even in sports, he ran into trouble. Once Mndhluli had to go into hiding after he wrote a story about a police soccer team that arrested a referee for unfavorable calls. Transferred to a remote northern city, he suffered a suspicious hit-and-run accident after writing an exposé about the district commissioner and police chief taking a cut of "donations" extorted from local people ostensibly as an offering to Banda.

How much accountability can be demanded of the opposition groups themselves remains to be seen. Many of the new newspapers are funded by the opposition, so "alternative" better describes the new media explosion than "independent." For example, when police arrested UDF leader Muluzi, the party mouthpiece **UDF News** failed to report that he was charged with embezzlement. The power of the newly emerging alternative press has been noted by politicians. Faced with a plethora of critical articles, the ruling MCP started up their own "alternative" newspaper, **The Guardian**. And UDF Referendum Campaign Chairman Aleke Banda has funded his own newspaper, **The Nation**, along with a monthly magazine, **The New Nation**. His daughter became the newspaper's business manager. Many speculate the acquisition is part of his strategy for the upcoming presidential campaign. **The Malawi Democrat**, which is printed in Zambia and smuggled into the country, operates as the official AFORD mouthpiece. **The New Voice** is owned by the AFORD secretary general, who invested thousands of dollars in new Apple Macintosh computers, scanners and large color monitors. Although Editor Mndhluli wrote a front-page notice declaring his editorial independence from any party, it awaits to be seen how much behind-the-scenes pressure is exerted.

At **The New Express**, there is a struggle under way to remain unconstrained by ties to AFORD, which provided the paper's start-up costs. Although Mponda and Managing Editor Willie Zingani claim to be autonomous, a board of directors comprised of AFORD officials oversees the newspaper's affairs. Zingani himself is an executive member of AFORD, a position he must resign to retain credibility as a newsman. Recently, Chihana gave Mponda a public tongue-lashing for failing to put an article about Chihana above the front-page fold. Only days later, the AFORD leader offered to pump thousands of dollars into the struggling paper, but the duo refused. Other party officials have sharply rebuked Mponda and Zingani for printing critical articles about AFORD, including an exposé of a secret AFORD trip to South Africa. **The New Express**

editors remain adamant about retaining the liberty of conscience to write what they see: "As for **The New Express** writers, we want to say this," Zingani wrote in a recent column. "We have been to jail. We have been tortured. But we shall overcome. We fear nobody when it comes to the power of the pen, and we are ready to die for the freedom of the press."

So many papers means fierce competition for the small reading public in Malawi. Less than 50 percent of the population is literate in English and only 20 percent live in urban areas where publications circulate. Some of the newspapers are already having problems and have lowered print runs and published less often. One attempt at starting an alternative daily newspaper, **The Citizen**, sputtered to a halt after only a few weeks.

The different papers offer identical fare about political events, rallies and opinions. And the steady diet of political jargon will continue. Negotiations are deadlocked on when the election will be held, but already one can sense that AFORD and UDF will be adversaries. As politicians begin campaigning, mud-slinging may displace debate about issues. Survival for papers could depend on raising relevant concerns important to the common reader, such as lack of education in rural areas, underfunding of health programs, and the climbing cost of living. A vigorous democracy needs discussion of policy, if the coming election is to be about more than personalities and promises.

"The man in the street has the misconception that the alternative papers sprang up just because of the referendum, but some of us will still be alive down the road," said Osman of **The Financial Post**. "There is still a whole lot more we need to write about, a lot more serious discussions to have about Malawi's future. That's what democracy is about."

"The three pressure groups in Malawi -- PAC, UDF and AFORD -- should account for the funds and facilities they have been receiving on behalf of the people. ...

"Since their inception, these groups have been receiving financial and material assistance from both local and international sources to facilitate their campaign to oust one party rule in the country.

"What has brought light to this need are rumors of misappropriation and unaccountability of monies and other things belonging to the groups and of the reported squabbles among pressure group leaders as they fight to pocket money or possess items.

"This is sad because it defeats the whole purpose for the quest for democracy which is to have honest individuals and transparent, corrupt-free institutions. It is therefore pointless for pressure group leaders to point fingers at the MCP officials and say they are stealing from people when they themselves too are doing so in a big way.

"Charity, they say, begins at home. So pressure group leaders must start now to show they are trustworthy and can run a nation without stealing from it. Malawians are very grateful to the pressure group leaders for change in this country. But this gratitude should not be a password for illegally grabbing what belongs to the people."

-- Editorial in *The Independent*

Sincerely,

