

## **“Born-Again Politicians Hijacked our Revolution!”: Reassessing Malawi’s Transition to Democracy**

Stephen Brown  
School of Political Studies  
University of Ottawa  
brown@uottawa.ca

This is a pre-final version

To cite, please consult the final version in  
*Canadian Journal of African Studies*,  
vol. 38, no. 3 (2004), pp. 705-722

### **Abstract**

This article revisits the causes of Malawi’s “model” transition to multipartyism (1992-94) and examines how the process subsequently influenced the country’s political life. It argues that foreign aid donors played a crucial role in the timing and relative smoothness of the transition, but that their centrality at that key moment undermined the subsequent ability of domestic actors to defend the gains made, let alone press for further democratisation. Democratic governance visibly deteriorated between 1994 and 2004. The presidency remained overly powerful and insufficiently accountable and no other actors — other branches of government, opposition political parties, or civil society organisations — were able to check the executive’s abuses, other than in rare instances of church-led political mobilisation. Though external donors were reluctant to assume that role, they are essential players to defend and promote democratisation in Malawi.

### **Précis**

Cet article fait un retour sur les causes de la transition « modèle » au multipartisme du Malawi (1992-94) et considère comment ce processus a par la suite influencé la vie politique nationale. Il soutient que les donateurs d’aide au développement ont joué un rôle déterminant du moment et de la nature relativement pacifique de la transition, mais que leur centralité à ce moment-clé a miné la capacité des acteurs domestiques de défendre les avancées qui ont été faites, sans parler de faire avancer la démocratisation. La gouvernance démocratique a visiblement détérioré entre 1994 et 2004 et la présidence est demeurée trop puissante et insuffisamment imputable. Aucun autre acteur, que ce soit les autres branches du gouvernement, les partis politiques d’opposition ou les organisations de la société civile, a pu servir de contrepoids aux abus du pouvoir exécutif, à part de rares cas de mobilisation politique menée par les églises. Même s’ils hésitent à assumer ce rôle, les donateurs externes sont des acteurs essentiels pour la défense et la promotion de la démocratisation au Malawi.

I wish to thank Diana Cammack for her helpful suggestions. I am also grateful for support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Academic Council on the United Nations System, the Institute for the Study of World Politics and the University of Ottawa.

## Introduction

Few people anticipated the wave of democratic transitions that swept Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s. Democratisation appeared especially unlikely in Malawi, one of the continent's most brutal and firmly entrenched dictatorships. Yet in 1994, the unthinkable occurred: "Life President" Hastings Kamuzu Banda, in power for thirty years, was peacefully removed from office through democratic elections. Malawi is thus often heralded as a model of democratisation under harsh circumstances. A decade later, the time is now opportune to reassess the outcome.<sup>1</sup>

This article revisits the causes of the transition and examines how the process subsequently influenced Malawian political life. The first section asks what combination of factors caused the dictatorship to be quickly and smoothly replaced through multiparty elections. The literature on democratic transitions generally ends its analysis with the transfer of power after free-and-fair elections. Since what happened during the transition had a direct effect on politics in the post-transition phase, the second section asks how the dynamics of Malawi's "model transition" shaped later political life. The answers could be of interest to pro-democratic forces around the world.

Drawing in large part on some sixty-five interviews conducted in Malawi in 1997-98 and 2003, this article revisits the Malawi "model" from a longer-term perspective. It argues that foreign aid donors played a crucial role in the timing and relative smoothness of the transition, but that their centrality at that key moment undermined the subsequent ability of domestic actors to defend the gains made, let alone press for further democratisation. Democratic governance visibly deteriorated from 1994 to 2004. The presidency remained overly powerful and insufficiently accountable. No other actors -- other branches of government, opposition political parties, or civil society organisations -- were able to check the executive's abuses, other than in rare instances of church-led political mobilisation. Although external donors were reluctant to assume that role, they are essential players to defend and promote democratisation.

## The End of the Banda Era

While various countries across Africa democratised after the end of the Cold War, Banda argued, and apparently believed, that Malawi had developed its own unique form of government, a one-party system led by the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) that was efficient and popular and therefore did not require liberalising. Yet in October 1992, Banda announced a referendum on the future of the one-party state. The old order collapsed quite rapidly. In June 1993, voters expressed a preference for multipartyism. Banda and his party were subsequently defeated in the May 1994 presidential and parliamentary elections. They conceded gracefully to Bakili Muluzi of the United Democratic Front (UDF), who was to rule for the next ten years.

Why did Banda suddenly decide to let Malawians vote on their political future? Why did he subsequently yield power? Most accounts describe democratisation as a mainly domestic process, initiated by religious authorities (CIIR 1993; Mchombo 1998; Newell 1995; Nzunda and Ross 1995b; Ross 1995ab, 1996). A few authors accord more weight to the international factors, arguing that when Western countries suspended foreign aid, Banda had little choice but to accede quickly to their demands (Clapham 1996, 202; Decalo 1998, 96; van Donge 1995, 231). The dynamics are

actually more complicated than the literature to date acknowledges, and the successful outcome of the transition is often taken for granted. To evaluate the relative role of each of these actors, this section examines domestic actions, both elite and popular, followed by an analysis of the role of Western donors.

### *Church Elite Defection*

The churches played a fundamental role in the transition, both in catalysing domestic opposition and initially organising opposition groups under the safety of their banner. On 8 March 1992, a pastoral letter was read simultaneously in all the Catholic churches across the country. The bishops' letter was the first public criticism, albeit indirect, of the regime's policies, calling for social and political reform, stating that it is not disloyal for Malawians to ask questions about matters that concern them. Sixteen thousand copies of the letter were distributed. Subsequently, it was widely copied, circulated, and discussed -- although, by necessity, guardedly. This was the first case of the defection of elites from Banda's regime since the killing of four dissenting political figures in 1983. The bishops were detained, threatened, and questioned for eight hours, but then released unharmed. The only non-Malawian signatory of the letter, Bishop John Roche, was deported to his native Ireland.

The churches wielded more influence than any other domestic actor. Still, the bishops' letter and the events that immediately followed were subject to much mythologising. Many published accounts, especially those by people associated with the churches, portrayed it as the origin of the democracy movement. A sense of sudden, fundamental, and irreversible change was widely expressed (*Africa Confidential* 22 May 1992; Article 19, 1993, 6; Chisiza 1992, 29; CIIR 1993, 2; Cullen 1994, 5; Newell 1995, 163; Ross 1995a, 30; Ross 1995b, 37; 1996, 39).

A few months after the Catholic bishops' letter, the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) was established as a Presbyterian initiative for national discussion. PAC members included most established religious organisations: the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, the Episcopal Conference (Catholics), the Anglican church, the Christian Council of Churches in Malawi (Protestants), and the Muslim Association, as well as newly formed "pressure groups" (proto-political parties), notably the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), and two professional organisations -- the Law Society and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. PAC first met with government officials in October 1992. They knew PAC would call for a referendum on the political system, and Banda seized the initiative and announced the day before the meeting that one would be held. Thus, PAC won its biggest demand before even making it, but Banda avoided losing face by casting it as his idea. He believed that a plebiscite would demonstrate to domestic and international critics how he and his party still enjoyed majority popular support. This account, in many ways, makes the churches and their subsequent PAC partners appear to the driving force behind the liberalisation.

Although the pastoral letter is overwhelmingly portrayed as a domestic matter only, its writing and timing owed much to the international dimension. In particular, during Pope John Paul II's visit to Malawi in 1989, he urged the bishops to be more concerned with social issues and human rights (Newell 1999, 207). He later called them to Rome, irritated by their continued silence, after which they began to draft the letter. The drafting committee was chaired by Irish

Bishop Roche, and another three of its seven members were foreigners (Cullen 1994, 36). Likewise, the other churches gained strength from the support and protection provided by their international membership.

### *Exiles and Local Political Activism*

The events surrounding the pastoral letter coincided with a more active campaign by Malawian exiles, encouraged by the donors' active pressure on Banda's regime. Until then, the exiles had been ideologically and organisationally divided and ineffectual, enjoying little support from inside Malawi or from Western governments. On 20-23 March 1992, in Lusaka, Zambia, they held a meeting of more than seventy-five exiles, planned before the pastoral letter. Trade unionist Chakufwa Chihana was mandated to return to Malawi to lead a domestic campaign for democracy and human rights, leading to the formation of the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD). As expected, Chihana was arrested on arrival in Lilongwe on 6 April 1992. The exiles hoped to capitalise on the political excitement aroused by the pastoral letter. Chihana's detention served as a catalyst for donor protests and provided an additional reason for them to suspend aid, which they did a month later, signalling their decisive break with Banda's regime (Newell 1995, 254-55). Chihana and a few other long-term detainees put a human face on the protest; they became powerful symbols for international and covert domestic pressure.

Western support for domestic pressure groups was grudging at first. Donors initially worried about who could succeed Banda and distrusted the exiles, seeing them mainly as "ineffectual left wing socialists" (Lwanda 1996, 55). Their support nonetheless grew, especially after the bishops' letter. Directly and indirectly, donors aided in the formation of moderate opposition groups and helped to protect them.<sup>2</sup> Political parties obtained funding from a variety of sources, mainly external. American, German, Scandinavian, and British trade unions made contributions, as did European and American private, religious, and non-governmental organisations. A few non-political domestic opponents of Banda's, such as the Law Society of Malawi, also benefited.

### *Popular Mobilisation*

On 15-16 March 1992, days after the reading of the pastoral letter, University of Malawi students in Zomba demonstrated in support of the bishops and for multipartyism. Their protests spread to Blantyre, and participants battled with the police. In early May 1992, a total of at least thirty-eight people died, after the police opened fire on protesters (Somerville 1992, 11). These shootings were reported in the *New York Times* just before the donors' Consultative Group meeting and might have influenced its outcome (see discussion below).

The role of Malawians rising up to demand change is often exaggerated (Ham 1992, 24; Venter 1993, 2; Woods 1992, 21). They tend to ignore the question of why people did not mobilise earlier. Some argue that a stagnating economy throughout the 1980s, exacerbated by severe drought in 1991-92 and the inflow of one million Mozambican refugees, belied Banda's claims that Malawi had prospered under MCP rule (Lwanda 1996, 14). Although the demonstrations certainly had a structural underpinning, this explanation is unconvincing, or at best incomplete, since

poverty had been dire all along. The demonstrations were, in fact, quite weak and not sustained. However, they were perceived as threatening. Fearing chaos, donors pushed for a political settlement before violence became uncontrollable even though such an outcome was actually very unlikely.<sup>3</sup>

### *Regime Mistakes*

Government miscalculations during a period of political liberalisation can often have far-reaching consequences (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 19). The MCP and Banda, in particular, made a number of errors of interpretation and judgement. For example, after the pastoral letter was issued, the government promptly declared it seditious and threatened to imprison those found in possession of it. In a cabinet meeting, senior ministers debated assassinating the bishops. The tapes of this meeting were smuggled out of the country and broadcast on South African radio and reported on the BBC World Service to much domestic and international uproar. This overreaction to the pastoral letter further aroused domestic and international opposition. The spontaneous popular protests that erupted were as surprising to the dissidents as they were to the government.

The regime failed to see the significance of the demonstrations. Although it could -- and did -- effectively repress them, as it always had, they signalled a growing dissatisfaction with Banda's rule. In addition, attendance dropped steadily at MCP rallies; turnout was significantly lower than ever before at the June 1992 MCP-controlled parliamentary elections, and a few people even threw rocks at Banda's car. The President also underestimated the importance of the military's refusal to defend the regime from internal opposition. When students protested in March 1992, junior army officers stationed nearby offered them encouragement, protecting them from the police (Amnesty International 1992, 11; Woods 1992, 19). The following month, senior and middle-ranking army officials met with the president and made clear that they would not be used for MCP partisan purposes or to repress Malawians calling for multipartyism (*Africa Confidential* 22 May 1992).

Moreover, the regime seriously overestimated its electoral appeal and ability to coerce support. The decision to hold a referendum was a major risk. Banda was most likely counting on the regime's repressive capacity and the party machinery, including the Malawi Young Pioneers (youth paramilitaries) and Women's League, as well as a relatively uninformed rural population. In contrast to Banda's myopia, journalists had no trouble predicting correctly that the MCP would lose the referendum (*Economist* 24 October 1992; *Africa Confidential* 6 November 1992). With its decision to permit the referendum, the MCP created for itself an irresolvable dilemma: a fraudulent victory would not satisfy donors, but a fair vote would reject continued MCP single-party rule.

Banda's advanced age and isolation, as well as his subordinates' fear of delivering bad news, led him to believe that he could actually win. Several accounts indicate that until the very end, he and others close to him were confident of victory.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Banda had been warned by his top civil servant as early as in 1991 that the end of the Cold War and the new realities of aid made Malawi vulnerable to foreign pressure.<sup>5</sup> Other MCP officials were not so sure Malawians would opt for the *status quo* but did not express their reservations publicly, or even privately, to Banda's inner circle. International scrutiny made it more difficult for the MCP to resort to its old tactics of propaganda, repression, and intimidation.

### *Changes in the International Environment*

With the end of the Cold War in 1989, the Western rationale for maintaining close relations with a brutal dictator in a small, poor African country became obsolete. International human rights organisations increasingly publicised the many horrors of the regime, notably the mistreatment of those voicing any form of opposition (for example, Africa Watch 1990). Donors responded by distancing themselves from regimes like Banda's; good governance and democratisation became their watchwords.

Nonetheless, they were slow to withdraw support. In 1990, at the same time as it protested the arbitrary detention of dissenters, the US government cancelled \$40 million in Malawian bilateral debt as a reward for economic reform. It also increased its military aid from \$1.4 million in 1989 to \$2.2 million per year for 1990 and 1991. Likewise, in 1989, the UK announced \$16 million in new balance-of-payments support and continued to provide police and military training (Africa Watch 1990, 97, 101-02). During the period from 1985 to 1992, total gross official development assistance (bilateral and multilateral) rose from \$133 million to \$405 million (OECD Online database, expressed in 2001 dollars). Although part of this increase was aid for Mozambican refugees, the overall trend was still to provide higher levels of funding. This increased support nonetheless carried a price. By the early 1990s, Malawi's aid dependency was extremely high. In 1992, foreign aid accounted for 31.5 percent of Malawi's GNP, almost triple the Sub-Saharan African average of 11.1 percent (UNDP 2000, 221-22), making Malawi particularly vulnerable to donor pressure.

### *Donors' Growing Dissatisfaction*

In 1991, international pressure began to mount. For instance, visiting West German parliamentarians publicly decried the human rights situation in Malawi, and the US ambassador attacked one-party rule at a private meeting with senior MCP officials. In an attempt to placate donors, the government released eighty-eight political prisoners. The Nordic countries were the first to cut their assistance, beginning in early 1991, although their share of total aid was relatively small. The British announced in July an \$8 million cut in Malawi's aid allocations. In December 1991, several European Community governments and the US summoned their local Malawian ambassadors to express their concern about human rights violations, often threatening to reduce aid if reforms were not immediately forthcoming.

Thus, by the time of the March 1992 pastoral letter, most Western governments were already turning on Banda. They subsequently increased their pressure, notably after the arrest of opposition leader Chakufwa Chihana in April. The US Embassy adopted, as was noted by a top Malawian official at the time, "the most serious position ever taken by the American Government towards Malawi."<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International designated Chihana a prisoner of conscience, and many trade unions across the world expressed their solidarity with him. Representatives of several international churches, including a papal envoy, visited the country to investigate and provide support to their local leaders, some of whom were thought to be in danger. Swayed in part by

reports by prominent human rights NGOs and influential newspapers in their home countries, Western donors decided to take stronger measures.

### *The Imposition of Political Conditionality*

At the donor Consultative Group meeting held in Paris on 11-13 May 1992, under the auspices of the World Bank, the Malawi government requested nearly \$800 million in balance-of-payments support. In a move that stunned the government, the donors suspended new aid until significant political reform had been implemented. Still, they maintained humanitarian aid, earmarked to feed Malawians during the ongoing drought and to assist the Mozambican refugees. The imposition of political conditionality was actively supported by a broad range of Malawian opposition activists, some of whom travelled to Paris to lobby in favour of aid sanctions. Although the pledges fell far short of government expectations, the flows of foreign aid were never actually interrupted in the short run. Total aid decreased by only twenty-seven percent in 1993 and about \$200 million in projects already underway or in the pipeline continued to be disbursed (Venter 1995, 161). Although donors suspended \$74 million in aid, at the Paris meeting a few weeks later, the World Bank lent the government \$199 million, an amount that had been increased at the last minute to make up for the suspended bilateral aid.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, severe economic problems were soon experienced. The scarcity of foreign exchange caused a shortage of key imported goods, fuelled inflation, and caused the economy to contract. By October, Banda apparently realised that donors were serious about political liberalisation and that aid sanctions would be extremely detrimental in the long run. He could repress internally, but probably not survive a loss of external support. Banda, therefore, suddenly reversed the MCP position and announced that a referendum would be held on the future of single-party rule.

### *Referendum and Elections*

After Banda announced the referendum in October 1992, he tried to have aid resumed. He made a few changes to detention laws and press freedom and attempted to coerce PAC, AFORD, and the UDF into signing a letter to donors that dialogue was proceeding, but they refused (*Southern African Economist*, December 1992-January 1993). The continued withholding of economic aid was the principal form of pressure on the government. After the referendum was announced, donors adopted more proactive measures in support of democratisation. The UN and the international community helped reduce the scope of MCP abuses by publicly exposing and censuring improper practices, ensuring the secrecy of the vote and making the playing field was less uneven (for instance, obtaining some opposition access to the government-run radio), and securing promises from the MCP to respect of the referendum and election results. Without this international pressure, the opposition would probably have boycotted the plebiscite and thus engendered further turmoil.

After losing the referendum, the government released more political prisoners, allowed exiles to return -- probably hoping they would fragment the opposition -- and repealed many oppressive provisions and laws. During the period between the referendum and the multiparty elections, Western donors became less active in pressing for further reform. In December 1993,

they agreed to restore aid, with the exception of Denmark. Many Malawians felt that this was premature, given that elections were scheduled only for May 1994 and the democratisation process was far from irreversible (*Southern African Political and Economic Monthly*, June 1993).

In the elections, donor support again helped ensure that the vote (if not the campaign) was relatively fair and that the government respected the results. Key to this endeavour was the funding of an independent Electoral Commission. As during the referendum campaign, there was a substantial amount of intimidation, mainly favouring the MCP. Nonetheless, international observers declared the actual polling to have been conducted relatively fairly. Presidential candidate Bakili Muluzi was declared the victor, and his party, the UDF, obtained a plurality in parliament. Banda and the MCP accepted the results and were reportedly willing to give up power only because they believed the donors would ensure that the rules of democracy would be respected -- allowing the MCP to win back power at a future date. After losing the elections, the MCP asked donors to play a watchdog role.<sup>8</sup>

## **Post-Transition Blues**

Although civil liberties have clearly improved since the end of the Banda dictatorship, multipartyism did not bring many other clear benefits. A stagnant economy and growing corruption provide little hope for improved material well-being, while few opportunities have opened up for Malawians to influence public policy. With many former members of Banda's regime in power, democratisation has failed to bring about the more radical transformation that many were seeking. As one Malawian observer complained, "Born-again politicians hijacked our revolution!"<sup>9</sup>

### *Bad Governance*

Highly concentrated presidential power, as well as the overall lack of accountability, transparency, and the rule of law, combine to put into serious doubt how democratic post-transition Malawi really is. Many constitutional provisions are not being respected by the executive or enforced by other branches. Although the judiciary does show some independence, the executive applies its rulings only selectively. Parliament is extremely weak, only reacting to the executive and setting no agenda of its own, while the political parties lack clear platforms and MPs do not effectively represent their constituencies. The UDF benefits from a weak parliament, particularly since it repeatedly failed to secure parliamentary majorities in any of the elections. Established checks and balances were not proving effective in holding the executive accountable, an unfortunate element of continuity with the Banda regime (Cammack 2004, 57-62; Meinhardt and Patel 2003).

In spite of the remarkable initial success of the transition, very little progress in democratisation occurred in the first few years of Muluzi's presidency. At the time, many aid donors and government supporters argued that temporary setbacks were to be expected in new democracies (Brown 2000, 19). This view proved to be overly optimistic. By the end of the UDF's second mandate, in 2003, additional fieldwork in Lilongwe found a general consensus that governance had further deteriorated. Freedom House has revised its categorisation of Malawi from

"free" between 1994 and 1998 to "partly free" since 1999, in large part to reflect the erosion of political rights (Freedom House 2004). Critical newspapers were harassed -- journalists beaten or arrested for merely reporting on popular opposition to UDF policies; opposition rallies were repressed by the police and the "Young Democrats" (the youth wing of the UDF); and critics of the government were subjected to intimidation and silenced. Even donor officials have been threatened and MPs physically attacked after criticising the government. As in Banda's days, the police are widely seen to be partisan and dissent is often treated as treason. The ruling party monopolises television and also controls the major radio stations.

The government's strong-handed tactics during the 1999 and 2004 election campaigns underlined an apparent lack of commitment to democratic values and practices. Although the 1999 elections were considered free and generally fair by international observers, the US Department of State (2004) noted "limited opposition access to media, problems in voter registration," the Electoral Commission's pro-ruling party bias, and the opposition's loss of all legal appeals of results (see also VonDoepp 2001, 234-35). The 2004 general elections were qualitatively worse than those held in 1999. Most international observers, including the Commonwealth, European Union, and African Union missions, agreed that the 2004 elections were reasonably free (on election day) but not fair, due to a playing field that patently favoured the ruling party. Ironically, in several people's opinion, the high point of democracy was the period of liberalisation from 1992 to 1994, before the actual transition, because there was more open debate and donor involvement.<sup>10</sup>

### *Donors*

After the success of the 1994 multiparty elections, donors shifted their focus back to the economy. Since then, they have rarely raised issues related to democratisation despite clear backsliding by the ruling party. They are much more interested in economic than political governance. Because Malawi's economic reforms leave as much to be desired as its political ones, donors support the government rather unenthusiastically. Often, attitudes vary according to the personality of the local donor representatives. For instance, in 1998, officials of the World Bank, the UK, and the IMF "pushed hard" for reform, but their successors took "a softer line."<sup>11</sup> Even favourably disposed donors' patience eventually ran out when faced with repeated squandering of aid monies. Donors, as a group, ended direct budget support in 2001, limiting their aid to easier to control project-by-project assistance. Denmark took the most extreme position in ending its aid program in 2002.

Donors often recognise that they can play a very important watchdog role, not only demanding accountability for the financial resources they provide, but more generally commenting on government failures to respect national laws and constitutional provisions. With the parliamentary opposition splintered and ineffective and civil society extremely weak, one Western aid official said of the donors collectively: "We are the checks and balances."<sup>12</sup> Yet they rarely choose to assume that responsibility around issues of democratization, except perhaps in 2002-03 when the UDF tried repeatedly, but failed, to overturn the two-term limit for the President in order to allow Muluzi to run again.

### *Political Parties*

Party politics in Malawi does little to further democratisation. The parties are merely vehicles for the competition for power among their leaders. Compromise does not seem to be institutionalised, nor is there much rallying around a vision of national development. Political parties (or, perhaps more accurately, their leaders) are Machiavellian in their changing alliances.

The ruling party actively contributed to the splitting of the two main opposition parties by favouring one faction over the other. It, in turn, lost many prominent members of its own over the succession issue. A few senior politicians deserted the UDF in 2002 and 2003 over Muluzi's efforts to secure another presidential term. The process accelerated in 2004 when Muluzi nominated an outsider, Bingu wa Mutharika, as the ruling party's presidential candidate.

Immediately after the 2004 elections, Gwanda Chakuamba and his Republican Party withdrew from the opposition Mgwirizano Coalition (which he headed) and renounced its legal case against the election results, which had given the UDF control of the presidency. Although he had earlier said he would never consider it, Chakuamba allied himself with the UDF, bringing the latter closer to a majority in Parliament. The configuration of political parties mutated further after Mutharika resigned from the UDF in February 2005. He formed his own party, the Democratic Progressive Party, hoping to rule in coalition with other defectors and several opposition parties. This created greater uncertainty in government and was followed by rumours of a UDF-led plan to have Mutharika impeached.

Some consider the 2004 elections of little import, regardless of electoral shenanigans, since the various parties shared the same kind of thinking and neopatrimonial politics and sought power primarily for their own benefit, rather than with a vision for improving living conditions in Malawi -- what may be called a democracy without democrats. Malawi's real chance for change might therefore lie with the elections due in 2009.<sup>13</sup> In the interim, new leaders might emerge from the various parties' parliamentary wings.

### *Civil Society*

Civil society played a secondary role in Malawi's transition to democracy. After the 1994 elections, it put little pressure on the government. Chirwa (2000, 103-04) speculates that this inaction was due to the successful achievement of regime change and that broader democratic reforms were more difficult to focus on; he argues that many leaders in civil society had joined the government or other political parties and points to the lack of financial and other resources to sustain their activities. Most Malawians appear sceptical about their own ability to influence government behaviour. A survey conducted in 1999 found that "the bulk of respondents say they would do nothing" if the government were to ban opposition parties, in large part because they believe their actions have no impact (Tsoka 2002, 29, 31). It was only when the churches organised a broad-based protest, as in 1992-94, that ordinary Malawians had an impact on democratisation. Since then, popular pressure for accountability and change has failed to achieve critical mass.

Nonetheless, one issue did provoke another church-led grand coalition: presidential term limits, a common provision in Africa's new democratic constitutions in the early 1990s. In Malawi, the two-term limit was seen as a way to prevent another "Life President" from emerging. During

the UDF's second mandate, it twice attempted to remove or extend the presidential term limit. In 2002, the bill to repeal the clause failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority in Parliament by a handful of votes. Again, in early 2003, the government failed to pass an amendment to allow Muluzi a third term.

It was the churches that led the widespread opposition to a third term -- the only successful campaign to oppose government actions in almost a decade. Since the action was defensive, the victory merely affirmed the *status quo*. This issue completely dominated the political scene for almost three years (2000-03), at the expense of other pressing issues. The prominence of the churches was more of a response to the vacuum in civil society than an expression of the strength their social concerns (Ross 2004, 105). NGOs in Malawi have a very narrow, urban base. They are not effective at mobilising people, especially in rural areas, and can be characterised as "event-driven and reactive" (Meinhardt and Patel 2003, 46). Their failures underlined the weak base of democratisation in Malawi.

## **Conclusion**

### *Explaining the Transition*

Why, after almost thirty years of highly personalised autocracy, did Banda's regime fall to a more liberal political system? Starting in 1990, a growing number of Western bilateral donors gradually withdrew their support and increasingly pressured for the respect of human rights and a move to greater pluralism, encouraged by the moral outrage of the international media and human rights organisations. This pressure incited exiled dissidents to organise more effectively in March 1992. After years of church collaboration with the regime, the Catholic bishops -- prompted by the Vatican -- led a defection of the religious elite, also in March 1992. Over the following months, other denominations followed and set up an umbrella group to pressure for democratisation, while donors jointly halted new development assistance. Two principal proto-political parties also emerged, AFORD and the UDF, and a number of uncoordinated anti-regime disturbances broke out.

All these actors jointly forced a political liberalisation, aided by regime errors and a worsening economic crisis, as well as the demonstration effect of democratisation across Africa and the world. As elsewhere, the international dimension played a crucial -- and under-emphasised -- role, notably in spurring the churches, exiles, and domestic activists to action and providing protection. In the end, it was most likely foreign donors' withdrawal of support that convinced Banda to allow the referendum. Of course, they were unlikely to succeed on their own; domestic actors were also essential. Nonetheless, the donors' use of political conditionality was key. After relatively free and fair elections, power was peacefully transferred to the victorious opposition party.

Any discussion of counterfactuals is, by necessity, speculative. However, one wonders what would have occurred if donors had not acted. It seems likely that the MCP would have suppressed any protests and held on to power for several more years. If a hardliner had succeeded Banda, he could possibly have extended one-party rule beyond Banda's lifetime (he died in

November 1997). The government's record indicated that it had few qualms about jailing or executing dissidents. Many countries in Africa and the rest of the developing world have survived much larger and more politicised demonstrations than the ones that took place in Malawi in 1992. Internal pressure might have provoked regime change eventually, but the role of the donors was critical to the one that did occur. Other international pressure was also important, including that of the Pope on the Catholic bishops, which prompted their pastoral letter.

Thus, despite some narratives (Ham 1992, 24; Venter 1993, 2; Woods 1992, 21) emphasising the role of popular protest, Malawi was not a case of "democratisation from below." Political liberalisation was, instead, "from above" (elite driven) and, reflecting the key role of Western aid, "from outside," a phenomenon insufficiently recognised in the democratisation literature. In particular, donors' intervention influenced the timing of political liberalisation and -- through continued close involvement -- helped to ensure that the outcome was a democratic one.

Those who played important roles in the previous regime are more likely to portray the donors as the driving force behind the multiparty movement.<sup>14</sup> If democracy is successfully portrayed as a foreign imposition, it is more likely to be discarded during difficult times. Thus, although inaccurate, the representation of the transition as mainly a domestic process might enhance chances of democratic survival. Domestic actors did play an important role, but it was more interactive with international actors than is commonly thought. For instance, donors provided support to local pro-democracy organisations; activists lobbied bilateral donors to maintain and even increase pressure on Banda's regime; and domestic pressure and isolated instances of violence in turn motivated donors to continue their efforts. Domestic and international actors thus reinforced each other's actions, prompting additional measures.

### *The Model Revisited*

Malawi's present opposition parties are deeply divided internally and unable to form stable alliances (in large part due to government machinations), while civil society organisations remain generally ineffective and very much on the defensive. The weakness of domestic forces, combined with donors' post-transition focus on economic reform and their reluctance to apply any further political conditionality, allowed the Muluzi government to adopt with relative impunity a number of practices reminiscent of the single-party era. Malawi is not such a model case of democratisation after all. Only when government actions prove exceedingly objectionable were domestic actors (with some donor support) able to join forces to block its plans, as shown by the UDF's failed efforts to lift the president's two-term limit. In the early 1990s, donors and domestic actors aspired to replace arbitrary government and personal rule with democratic governance and the rule of law. A decade later, it is less than clear that they have achieved that objective.

Western donors played a key role in Malawi's transition to democracy. During the transition process, the international community was widely seen as a guarantor of democracy, a third-party enforcer. The continuation of authoritarian practices following Banda's ouster demonstrates how they have failed in this role. Without credible checks and balances and political alternatives, not to mention economic growth and poverty alleviation, prospects for democracy in Malawi remain bleak. In the absence of domestic checks and balances, the international community plays a potentially important watchdog role, one that could be bolstered. Reinforcing

domestic mechanisms to restrain executive power is essential for further democratisation. The failure of democratisation to move beyond a contested electoral process, despite an initially successful transition, suggests that donors should have either kept democracy promotion a priority or left it to Malawians to take the lead from the beginning.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> By "transition," I mean "the interval between one political system and another" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 6). A transition begins "with the initial stirrings of a crisis under authoritarian rule that generate some form of political opening and greater respect for basic civil rights" (Mainwaring, O'Donnell and Valenzuela 1992, 2). The transition ends when new political elites assume power or, in rare cases, the old elites are newly legitimized. In Malawi, the transition began in 1992 and was completed in 1994 when Bakili Muluzi was inaugurated as president.

A transition can lead to a new authoritarian regime or to democracy. A transition to democracy takes place if a freely and fairly elected government assumes power and is able to govern without non-elected actors preventing it from doing so. By "democratization," I mean to describe the broader term that encompasses political liberalization, the transition to democracy, and the post-transition deepening and broadening of democracy. Thus, the democratization process in Malawi is still ongoing.

<sup>2</sup> Meinhardt and Patel (2003, 8) state that the UDF "was initiated with the assistance of at least two [European] expatriates," who benefited from access to uncensored news through "diplomatic channels." If true, this fact is rarely noted.

<sup>3</sup> Author interview with Bob Leverington, First Secretary (Aid), British High Commission, Lilongwe, 4 November 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Lovemore Green Munlo, Deputy Minister of External Affairs, to J.Z.U. Tembo, Minister of State in the President's Office, 4 June 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with Justin Malewezi, Vice-President of Malawi and Minister of Finance, Lilongwe, 5 February 1998. Malewezi was the Secretary to the President and Cabinet when he warned Banda. Two weeks later he was abruptly fired and went into hiding.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Lovemore Green Munlo, Deputy Minister of External Affairs, to J.Z.U. Tembo, Minister of State in the President's Office, 7 April 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Of that amount, \$120 million was in rapid-disbursing, balance-of-payments support and emergency drought relief (Venter 1995, 186). An internal OECD/DAC document (1995, 3) confirms that the World Bank released \$120 million in June 1992 to prevent economic collapse.

<sup>8</sup> Author interview with El-Mostafa Benlamlih, Deputy Resident Representative, United Nations Development Programme, Lilongwe, 11 November 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Author interview with Garton Kamchedzera, law lecturer, UNICEF official and playwright, Lilongwe, 10 December 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Author interviews with Michael Nyirenda, Project Officer, Project on Economic Governance, CIDA, Lilongwe, 9 July 2003, and Ollen Mwalubunju, Executive Director, Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, 11 July 2003. They appear to refer more to democratic rhetoric,

principles, and ideals than to the presence of democracy *per se*, since, at that point, the authoritarian regime was still in power.

<sup>11</sup> Author interview with Grant Hawes, Director, Malawi-Canada Program Support Unit, CIDA, Lilongwe, 9 July 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Confidential author interview with a Western aid official, Lilongwe, July 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with Michael Nevin, Political / Press and Public Affairs Officer, British High Commission, Lilongwe, 3 July 2003.

<sup>14</sup> For example, John Tembo, at the time MCP vice-president, called democracy "their [the donors'] child, even if it is deformed" (author interview, Lilongwe, 7 February 1998). Likewise, Louis Chimango, then MCP chairman for the Central Region and long-time finance minister under Banda, claimed the bishops were "pawns in a greater game," manipulated by "outsiders" (author interview, Lilongwe, 9 December 1997).

## Bibliography

- Africa Watch. 1990. *Where Silence Rules: The Suppression of Dissent in Malawi*. New York, Washington and London: Africa Watch.
- Amnesty International. 1992. "Malawi. March-July 1992: Mass Arrests of Suspected Government Opponents." London: Amnesty International.
- Article 19. 1993. *The Referendum in Malawi: Free Expression Denied*. London: Article 19.
- Brown, Stephen. 2000. "Malawi: The Trouble with Democracy." *Southern Africa Report* 15: 19-23.
- Cammack, Diana. 2004. "Poor Performing Countries: Malawi, 1980-2002." Background Paper 3, ODI Study on Poor Performing Countries. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Catholic Institute for International Relations. 1993. *Malawi: A Moment of Truth*. CIIR: London.
- Chirwa, Wiseman C. 2000. "Civil Society in Malawi's Democratic Transition." In *Malawi's Second Democratic Elections: Process, Problems and Prospects*, edited by Martin Ott, Kings M. Phiri and Nandini Patel. Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi.
- Chisiza, Yusuf. 1992. "Democracy Dominoes." *Africa Events*, July.
- Clapham, Christopher. 1996. *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cullen, Trevor. 1994. *Malawi: A Turning Point*. Edinburgh: Pentland.
- Decalo, Samuel. 1998. *The Stable Minority: Civilian Rule in Africa, 1960-1990*. Gainesville and London: Florida Academic Press.
- Freedom House. 2004. *Freedom in the World Country Ratings: 1972 through 2003* <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/allscore04.xls>> (accessed 19 April 2004).
- Ham, Melinda. 1992. "The Waiting Game." *Africa Report* 37 (July / August).
- Lwanda, John Lloyd Chipembere. 1996. *Promises, Power Politics and Poverty: Democratic Transition in Malawi*. Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba.
- Mainwaring, Scott, Guillermo O'Donnell and J. Samuel Valenzuela. 1992. "Introduction." In *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative*

- Perspective*, edited by Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell and J. Samuel Valenzuela. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press.
- Mchombo, Sam A. 1998. "Democratization in Malawi: Its Roots and Prospects." In *Democratization in Late Twentieth-Century Africa: Coping with Uncertainty*, edited by Jean-Germain Gros. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.
- Meinhardt, Heiko and Nandini Patel. 2003. "Malawi's Process of Democratic Transition: An Analysis of Political Developments between 1990 and 2003." Lilongwe: Konrad Adenauer Foundation.
- Newell, Jonathan. 1995. "A Moment of Truth? The Church and Political Change in Malawi, 1992." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 33: 243-62.
- . 1999. "A Difficult Year for Us in Many Respects': Pressure for Change and Government Reaction in Malawi in 1992." In *African Democracy in the Era of Globalisation*, edited by Jonathan Hyslop. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Nzunda, Matembo S. and Kenneth R. Ross. 1995a. "Introduction." In *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi, 1992-1994*, edited by Nzunda and Ross. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press.
- , eds. 1995b. *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi, 1992-1994*. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo and Philippe C. Schmitter. 1986. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- OECD/DAC 1995. "Country Level Donor Co-ordination Process on Governance and Democratisation: The Case of Malawi." Development Assistance Committee Ad Hoc Working Paper on Participatory Development and Good Governance.
- Ross, Kenneth R. 1995a. "The Renewal of the State by the Church: the Case of the Public Affairs Committee in Malawi." *Religion in Malawi* 5: 29-37.
- . 1995b. "Not Catalyst But Ferment: The Distinctive Contribution of the Churches to Political Reform in Malawi 1992-93." In *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi, 1992-1994*, edited by Nzunda and Ross. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press.
- . 1996. "The Transformation of Power in Malawi, 1992-95." *Ecumenical Review* 48 (January).
- . 2004. "Worrisome Trends': The Voice of the Churches in Malawi's Third Term Debate." *African Affairs* 103: 91-107.
- Somerville, Keith. 1992. "One Man Banda." *New African* (July).
- Tsoka, Maxton Grant. 2002. "Public Opinion and the Consolidation of Democracy in Malawi." Afrobarometer Paper No.16. Cape Town: Institute for Democracy in South Africa; Legon-Accra: Ghana Centre for Democratic Development; East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University.
- UNDP. 2000. *Human Development Report 2000*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- United States. Department of State. 2004. "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2003: Malawi," 25 February <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27737.htm>> (accessed 18 April 2004).
- van Donge, Jan Kees. 1995. "Kamuzu's Legacy: The Democratization of Malawi, Or Searching for the Rules of the Game in African Politics." *African Affairs* 94: 227-57.

- Venter, Denis. 1993. "Malawi's Referendum on Multi-Party Politics: Banda's Battle of Hastings?" *International Update* (January). Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.
- . 1995. "Malawi: The Transition to Multi-party Politics." In *Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by John A. Wiseman. London and New York: Routledge.
- VonDoepp, Peter. 2001. "The Survival of Malawi's Enfeebled Democracy." *Current History* 100: 232-37.
- Woods, Tony. 1992. "The High Costs of Obstinacy: Banda Hangs On." *Southern Africa Report* 8: 17-21.