

Democratisation under difficult conditions: The Case of Malawi

Speech by Dr. Augustine Magolowondo delivered at the 2008 Africa Day organised by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and Evert Vermeer Foundation

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me such a great pleasure to be here today. By some sheer luck, I happened to have attended last year's events of the Africa Day. I must admit that before that, I had literally no idea that some people out there take their time every year to reflect on Africa as a whole. I found this to be such a unique experience for at least for once, I found that Africa was presented and discussed beyond the negative adjectives that are often associated with this continent. You all know what often comes in the mind of many whenever the word Africa comes up: While kids will imagine of huge elephants, lions, snakes, buffaloes and the like, the intellectuals will visualise the "Dark Continent"; the "Shackled Continent", a continent where "Disorder is a Political Instrument", where "Politics of the Belly" find its space and home; a continent where the significant proportion of the "Bottom Billion" of the world are to be found. The list goes on and on.

These imaginations have formed *big titles of big books* authored by *big scholars* and published by *big publishing houses*. It is not my intention to enter into a discourse on these big titles and free for all imaginations. This is not because I am not able to enter into that kind of discourse. To the contrary, I would certainly love to do so. However, that will be going outside my terms of reference for this workshop and would not wish to disappoint my hosts, who until this hour, have given me such a fabulous reception, of which I am very grateful. I am certain that in future, we will have time to enter into this broad discussion.

I am here to talk about politics and political developments in Malawi. I know that at this point, not everyone in this room is aware of what and where Malawi is. I recall once I was asked by a graduate student of Geography from one of the reputable universities in one of

Holland's neighbouring countries as to whether Malawi was a new Capital City of Maputo! I was completely baffled by that high degree of a very limited geographical sophistication to the extent that these days, at forums like these, I no longer take it for granted that people will know what I am talking about. Thus, allow me to start with the basics: A free introduction to Malawi:

Malawi in brief

As a nation state, Malawi, then Nyasaland, was founded in 1891 when it was declared as British protectorate. It became the independent nation of Malawi in 1964. After three decades of one-party rule under President Hastings Kamuzu BANDA the country reintroduced multiparty system of government in 1994, following a referendum a year before during which Malawians decided to do away with an authoritarian one party system. The 1994 elections were won by the opposition United Democratic Front, UDF, the party which also won the 1999 and 2004 elections. Current President Bingu wa MUTHARIKA, who was elected in May 2004 after a failed attempt by the previous president, Bakili Muluzi, to amend the constitution to permit another term, struggled to assert his authority against his predecessor, resulting in Mutharika dumping the UDF and on whose ticket he was elected into office. He subsequently started his own party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). A significant number of politicians from mainly the UDF which hitherto was a ruling party joined the President's party relegating the UDF to the status of an opposition party without losing an election while the DPP became the ruling party without winning an election. In other countries, this development would have led to the holding of fresh elections. That has not been the case in Malawi. This 'unique' democratic experiment has remained a bone of contention leading at times to a complete stalemate in Parliament, where the opposition commands a majority. I will return to some of these developments later.

Coming back to the free introduction to Malawi: This country is to be found in the Southern part of Africa bordered by Tanzania to the North, Mozambique to the East, South and part of the West and Zambia to the West. It has a total area of 118,480 sq km of which 94,080 sq km is land while the rest, 24,400 sq km is taken up by water. Lake Malawi, the famous and most beautiful fresh water lake in the world, third largest in Africa, with over 300 species of fish, some only to be found there, takes up much of the said water mass. I have heard some

Dutch tourist who have been there saying that if you have not been to Lake Malawi, you have not travelled. Well, what can I say other than to say just AMEN! Americans easily describe the size of Malawi as being a country that is slightly smaller than Pennsylvania, any way, who cares?

In terms of demography, as of last year, it was estimated that Malawi has population of 13.5million with a life expectancy of 42.9 and a total fertility rate of 5.74 (meaning that on average, a fertile Malawi female has the chance of having 5.74 children!) It is also important to note that Malawi is a highly religious nation-state. According to the 1998 population census, 79.9% of Malawians were Christian, 12.8% Muslim, 3% belonged to "other" religions while 4.3% did not proclaim any religious orientation. Malawi is also a multi-ethnic society.

Malawi is often referred to as a landlocked country, although I tend to dispute that. It is true that we are not along any of the oceans of the world. However, the first missionaries to arrive in Malawi in the early 1860s did arrive on small boats and ships as they pushed themselves up the Zambezi into the Shire River and found themselves in the southern part of Malawi. I am happy that the current administration in Malawi is trying to revive this route so that we can be off the list of landlocked countries!

That aside, I should still say what you often hear or you may be familiar with. Malawi ranks among the world's least developed countries. The economy is predominately agricultural, with about 85% of the population living in rural areas. Agriculture accounts for about one-third of GDP and 80% of export revenues. The performance of the tobacco sector is key to short-term growth as tobacco accounts for more than half of exports. Thus, we are always worried with your anti-smoking campaigns which threaten our economic survival!

The economy depends on substantial inflows of economic assistance from the IMF, the World Bank, and individual donor nations, including The Netherlands. Thank you for that! In 2006, Malawi was approved for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) program. The government faces many challenges, including developing a market economy, improving educational facilities, facing up to environmental problems, dealing with the rapidly growing problem of HIV/AIDS, and satisfying foreign donors that fiscal discipline is being tightened.

It is in this context that I would like to discuss with you politics and political developments in Malawi, particularly as these relate to political parties.

Democratic Transition Under Difficult Conditions

To better understand politics in Malawi, it is important that we take a few steps backwards and look at where we are coming from politically. Allow me, therefore, talk about the democratisation process, although in brief.

As I have already alluded to, Malawi reintroduced multiparty system of government in 1993 and multiparty elections were held in 1994. I must admit that by all standards, this democratic transition was a clear test case of the relationship between democracy and economic development. If we follow the thinking and scholarship of modernisation theorists like Seymour Martin Lipset, who argued that let there be economic development first and democracy would follow, then there would not have been a democratic revolution in Malawi.

To be sure, this school of thought, that economic development will trigger a democratic transition was not without substance. Minxin Pei, of World Bank, recapitulated very well the central arguments of this kind of scholarship in his 1999 paper titled Economic Institutions, Democracy and Development:

In summary, it is argued that sustained economic development is supposed to lead to the emergence of democratic institutions and, eventually, democracy through a combination of factors produced by such development. To begin with, economic development is expected to transform social structure and create a large enough middle class as the social basis of democracy. Secondly, economic development may, as its by-product, lead to the emergence of new political values (such as enhanced sense of individuality, personal autonomy, and value of personal freedom and choice) that support democratic institutions and practices. Furthermore, a direct effect of economic development is the increase in the level of education. An educated citizenry is likely to be more knowledgeable about the political process and aware of their rights. Such a citizenry, it is believed, will be more vigilant in defending its rights and possesses more effective means of doing so. Successful development is also said to generate more economic wealth, which in turn will allow

private-sector actors to accumulate resources and enhance their independence from the state, thus strengthening civil society as a counterweight to the state. As successful development is also more likely to occur in an open economy, such development may, in the process, promote extensive social, cultural, and political linkages with the international community. These linkages act to facilitate the flow of information (which undermines authoritarian rule) and constrain (through various external pressures) autocratic rulers. Now, don't ask me as to whether I think that democracy will indeed follow soon in the fast growing China that still has questionable democratic credentials despite it being an economic giant. Neither should you seek my opinion as to whether I think it will just be a question of time that democracy will find its roots in oil rich dynasties of the Middle East like Saud Arabia, among others. Please, do not ask me as to what I think of North Korea, a country that is much richer than Malawi and yet it is not a democracy. Also I do not want to be asked, as to why democracy is in recession in Latin America and why Cuba has remained a communist country to date.

Using the case of Malawi, all I can say is that it is not automatic that economic development will lead to democratisation for judged against this background, Malawi's context of democratic transition may be regarded to have been unique in that at the time democratic reforms were initiated, conditions prevailing were simply 'unfavourable'. With a per capita Gross National Income (GNI) ranging between US\$190 and US\$240 in the years preceding the advent of the democratic transition, Malawi was one of the poorest countries in the world. Urbanisation was one of the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa. As I have already noted, more than 80% of the population live in rural areas, where they depend on rain fed smallholder subsistence farming. With such low levels of economic development, a predominantly rural peasantry, and coupled with high levels of illiteracy, there existed in Malawi a complete lack of socio-economic preconditions to kick-start the regime transition.

Now, I know that scholars like Almond and Verba and also those who have followed the thinking of Ronald Inglehart may as well argue that may be in Malawi, there was already some form of a civic culture that could have acted as a catalyst for the unprecedented political change of 1993/1994. Unfortunately the history of Malawi would prove them completely wrong for Malawi is marked by history of democratic deficit, which made

evolution of necessary political forces such as a vibrant civil society and civic culture extremely difficult. For 73 years, that is from 1891 to 1964, Malawi was a British protectorate whose indirect rule's administrative arrangement alienated the governed from those governing. The colonial administration therefore produced subjects and not citizens as the rulers were completely de-linked from the populace, who in turn had no effective avenues to participate in public affairs. The British did not, therefore, leave behind a democratic culture. The colonial era was succeeded by 30 years of a repressive dictatorial regime of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) led by Kamuzu Banda. That regime also left behind the kind of mindset that makes the elite not to be responsive to the governed and those governed do not feel powerful enough to hold their rulers accountable.

Thus, in a nutshell, historical and systemic conditions were inimical to the emergence of democracy in Malawi. Its democratic revolution therefore defied what conventional theories of the time could have predicted. It was probably democratic transitions like the ones taking place in poverty stricken countries like Malawi that led Amartya Sen to later argue, in his book "Development as Freedom" that democracy and political liberty are no longer the 'luxury that a poor country cannot afford' for this democracy comes with its own virtues that not only are as basic to poor people as they are to the rich, but also because democratic values, particularly political and civil rights have in effect an instrumental role in facilitating the much needed development. The kind of development that meets real needs of the people, not the kind of development that trickles from above but rather comes from the bottom, when the people have freely expressed their real needs. Indeed, the democratic agenda in Malawi was partly marketed on these grounds: that democracy will bring about economic miracles as the poor will become rich. I must say that this over-marketing of democracy has brought its own challenges as it has created some frustrations among the populace who remain poor despite being in a democracy.

So, if it was not economic development, and if a civic culture was significantly absent, what then was the main trigger of the democratic transition? In my view, the democratic transition in Malawi cannot be explained comprehensively without also taking into account one other important factor: the external dimension to which I now turn.

The International Dimension

I have argued elsewhere that in the context of Malawi, it is true that the “people needed change” and they were ready to play their part in facilitating that change. However, it is largely the ‘favourable’ international context, within which the domestic forces found themselves, that was decisive for the onset of the transition to democracy. Two forms of international influence are particularly worth noting: the ‘snowballing effects’ of the changing political climate at the global level symbolised by the end of the cold war and the policy shift in international development manifested in the emergence of political conditionalities. Let me say a few words about these two external factors in turn.

The End of the Cold War and its “Snowballing Effects”

There is no doubt, in my view, that unprecedented pro-democracy events that were taking place in former Eastern Europe in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev *glasnost* and *perestroika* had far reaching implications on political developments not only in that part of the world, but also in Africa. The failure of communism to deliver on its promises of social progress threw its African sympathisers off balance, giving pro-democracy advocates a competitive edge in their struggle by enhancing the ‘attractiveness’ of democracy. Furthermore, as formerly powerful authoritarian or communist regimes fell one after the other, Malawian democracy activists found new strengths as they strongly felt that it was, therefore, a question of time before Malawi could join this process.

The Policy Shift: Democracy as a Precondition for Development Assistance

The introduction of political conditionalities in international development assistance was also decisive in determining Malawi’s democratic transition.

In 1991, aid to Malawi, as it was the case also with several other countries, started being preconditioned on issues of good governance, rule of law, democracy and human rights. The climax came at the 1992 Paris Club where all donors present unanimously agreed to suspend all non-humanitarian aid to Malawi until the governance and human rights situation had improved. For a country, whose entire development budget and, to some extent, recurrent budget was donor dependent the impact of all these developments did

not take long to be felt. Fearing for serious economic, social and political crises, whose implications could be disastrous, the Banda regime conceded to instituting political reforms. This was marked by the 1993 referendum followed by 1994 multiparty elections.

Where do we stand?

Malawi's Democratisation Process: An Overview of Fundamental Underpinnings

Today, and against all odds, Malawi is a democracy. Her aspiration for a democracy and the form that it (democracy) should assume are reflected in various ways. They include the Constitution, government policies, emergence of political pluralism and specific measure that government has taken to consolidate the process. Let me make a few observations regarding the Constitution and the emergence of political pluralism, which brings us close to the core of our discussion.

The Malawi Constitution

The Constitution that was provisionally adopted in 1994 and came into force in 1995 provides the fundamental basis for Malawi's democracy as it contains the basic and fundamental democratic foundations including the following provisions:

- a) That legal and political authority is derived from the people of Malawi and such authority shall be exercised to serve and protect their (people's) interests;
- b) That powers of the State shall be exercised on trust, which has to be maintained through open, accountable and transparent government and informed democratic choice;
- c) That all human beings have an inherent dignity and worth. This entails that the State and all persons recognise and protect fundamental human rights;
- d) That there should be legal equality; and
- e) That all institutions and persons shall observe and uphold the Constitution and the rule of law.

Emergence of a Democratic and Plural Society

The advent of democracy has also seen an unprecedented emergence of other democratic institutions that are critical to the democratisation processes. They include civic organisations that are particularly concerned with questions of governance. This is evident

particularly in the evolution of the so-called human rights and/or governance NGOs which were non-existent (with the exception of the churches) before 1993. As of February 2003, there were 27 non-governmental organisations (NGO) in this sector registered with the Council for Non Governmental Organisations (CONGOMA). They view themselves as 'watch-dog' organisations that have to address questions of ensuring accountability, transparency, rule of law and responsiveness of government to the citizens.

Political Parties

Political pluralism has also been characteristic of Malawi's democracy. This is reflected in the numerous political parties that are now in existence. While only five political parties participated in the 1994 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections (PPE), in 1999 eleven political parties contested. In the third PPEs that took place on 20 May 2004, fifteen out of the 31 officially registered political parties took part.

In the case of Malawi, the foundations of political parties are well entrenched in the Constitution whereby as part of the bill of rights, it is provided that every person shall have the right to:

- a) form, join, to participate in the activities of and to recruit members for a political party
- b) campaign for a political party or cause;
- c) participate in a peaceful political activity intended to influence the composition and policies of the Government; and
- d) freely to make political choices.

The role of political parties

The importance of political parties in any democracy need not be overemphasised. We know that the complexities of modern societies have made direct democracy unattainable. Even Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's African deliberative democracy,-that of under the tree, where *people talk and talk until they reach a consensus*, (Erdmann, 2000) is not feasible as

there is no single tree under which the entire population of a given country could sit. Modern democracy, as Samuel Huntington observes, “is not simply democracy of the village, the tribe, or the city-state; it is democracy of the nation-state and its emergence is associated with the development of the nation-state” (Huntington, 1991:13). Thus, no matter how one defines today’s democracy, one thing is clear: such a democracy will not be direct, but rather representative. As such, contemporary democratic systems require intermediary actors between state and society as well as institutional mechanisms for the articulation and advocacy of diverse views and policy preferences. Although there are a number of intermediaries that claim to connect ‘the people’ to the state, it is increasingly becoming evident that that in essence, political parties have a fundamental and indispensable niche in contemporary democracies. Indeed, “So fundamental are political parties to the operation of modern politics that their role and significance are often taken for granted”. As a matter of fact, today’s democracy is inconceivable without them hence we talk of ‘multiparty democracy’.

Now, in a country like Malawi, politicians have a significant role as what they do determines the very destiny of not only the country as a whole, but also the future of democracy itself. The ordinary Malawian has high expectations of what politicians can and should do. As a matter of fact, if you are a Member of Parliament in Malawi, your role is more than that of making laws. Your constituents expect that you should also deal with their social problems like paying for school fees, attending weddings and funerals among other things. In fact you are more than a welfare officer.

Politicians do also have a developmental function. They help in mobilising their communities in self-help development projects like building school blocks, roads, health clinics, among others. It is actually these developmental functions, and not necessarily how they perform in Parliament that becomes their spring boards in campaigns. Thus, because of the context within which they operate, politicians in countries like Malawi become as important as developmental NGOs can be.

I should also say that Malawi has one of the most vibrant opposition political parties in southern Africa that has continuously kept the Government in check. Sometimes, because

of the problems that I have alluded to, they have gone to some extremes. However, because Government is aware of an effective and some times an excessive opposition, the net effect has been that the current administration has had to deliver in order for it to cultivate and sustain its legitimacy.

Challenges facing political parties

Much as we have political parties, which are indispensable if we are to talk about meaningful democracy in Malawi, these political parties face a number of challenges. I would like just to mention some.

Like in many other emerging democracies, political parties in Malawi lack strong ideological or programmatic foundations. Many are founded and heavily financed by an individual or group of individuals with the primary if not the only motive to capture power. Unfortunately, they have often shown that this capturing of state power and authority is largely to control state resources for their own benefits. These founders and/or financiers wield enormous political power that is further entrenched by clientism and patronage tendencies. In worst case scenarios, some parties are run as if they were personal fiefdoms and are devoid of anything that is akin to a membership based organization, as a political party is supposed to be.

Furthermore, while parties have supporters, it is difficult to identify actual party members beyond those who hold positions. In Malawi, after the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1993, no political party has party cards on the grounds that during the one party era, these cards were an instrument of exploitation and oppression as they were forcibly sold. As such there is completely no way that one could tell who a party member is. Some parties have tried to distribute T-shirts and party cloths, but in poverty stricken countries, who would refuse to have a free or highly subsidized cloth? Of course, I am aware that in some countries like Tanzania and Kenya, political parties do have party cards that are sold or given to their members. However, there are no mechanisms that would check duo or multiple membership. As a matter of fact, therefore, data on membership hardly exists in many instances or, where it exists, it is not as reliable. It is, therefore, not surprising that in a

survey on political parties in Malawi in 1998, the cumulative number of members that all political parties claimed to have was at 18,000,000 when the population in Malawi at that time was around 9,000,000.

In addition, most of the emerging democracies have very weak legal instruments governing the operations of political parties. For instance, political parties in Zambia are registered under the Societies Act that is ideally meant to govern operations of clubs and societies. The same is the case in Kenya, although there is now a law on political parties which is yet to be gazetted. The Malawian Political Parties Registration and Regulations Act is more of a law that deals with registration than regulation of parties. The absence of an effective legal framework governing political parties implies that there are no safeguards that would ensure that parties abide by what they profess or what they are meant to do.

What then is the future?

This seemingly 'hopeless' state of affairs should not dampen our hopes to the extent of concluding that all is but lost. Why am I sounding optimistic? There a number of reasons to that effect.

Firstly, and on a very lighter note, I am too young to lose hope and I am not the only one. Malawi is a youthful nation. Over 50% of the population are those under 45 years. I do believe that the future of Malawi lies in this young generation. It is the generation that has nothing to do with colonialism, other than reading that as part of history. It is also a generation that has nothing to do with dictatorship, other than to hear of stories of how terrible that system was. These young people know one thing: they know democracy and they cherish what it offers. As these young people permeate the political structures, there is hope that there will be change, albeit in a piecemeal.

Secondly, democracy needs friends. Those who have studied democratisation trends globally would agree with me that even among some of the now established democracies, 'paths' to democratisation have historically had an international dimension. This has, *inter alia*, included direct imposition of democracy after military defeat (for instance Germany and Japan), or direct external military intervention with the view of (re)installing a democratic government (as was the case in Grenada and Panama). Let me be quick to say

that I personally believe that you cannot and you should not import or export democracy. We have had enough of the Iraq experience. What is comforting and for me is good news is that there appears to be an emerging international consensus of supporting democracy through positive measures. I mean measures of directly providing aid for democracy as part of the official development assistance. Malawi is a beneficiary of such aid for democracy. More importantly, we have noted the realisation among the international community that aiding democracy abroad would not be complete if political parties are not part of the equation. My own institution, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy is in the fore front in Malawi as it is the case in other countries, to try to strengthen the institutional functioning of political parties. This is done through a number of ways which include the following:

- i. facilitating inter-party dialogue which has led to the establishment of Malawi Centre for Multiparty Democracy;
- ii. helping political parties to do a critical reflection on issues like voter apathy, which has led political parties to realise that their own conduct has contributed to the crisis of trust that the public has in politicians and hence political parties are working towards rebuilding of that lost trust;
- iii. supporting capacity development initiatives that should lead to political parties being run as 'professional' organisations with basic things like a strategic plan in place;
- iv. Helping political parties to open up to peer review and learn from each other as they also learn together through exchange visits, regional conferences, among other possibilities.
- v. Supporting measures that strengthen the culture of democracy within political parties.

These are some of the examples to demonstrate that there is reason for hope. I am not saying that we should be complacent. Not at all! To the contrary, I do realise and appreciate

that in the recent past, there have been some developments that are cause for an alarm. The developments in Kenya, following their December 2007 elections tell us that we should continue to search for solutions. Zimbabwe has been problematic for too long. Paul Biya in Cameroon has just made himself into another life president. Back home, we are grappling with the possibilities of a former President coming back into the political race. All what I want to say is that the job is not yet done. We have a long way, but we need to think positive. After all, no matter what we think of political parties, we cannot do without them. All we can do, therefore, is to invest our energies and resources in trying to help them work better as pillars of democracy. At this point, I rest my case.