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factionalism and external pressure.  
Coping with critical junctures**





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# **Malawi between internal factionalism and external pressure. Coping with critical junctures**

**Martin Ott**

## **1. Introduction**

In April 2012, the President of Malawi, Professor Dr. Ngwazi Bingu Wa Mutharika died. For some days the exact date of his death remained unclear, as there were conflicting versions of his death and the events surrounding it. I want to take a closer look at these critical events. They shed some light on the social and political culture of Malawi and provide us with some idea of the political challenges, which lie ahead for his successor.

As far as we know the late President suffered a heart attack on the 5th April in the statehouse in Lilongwe. The president's aids were sent into the town in search of medicine, but neither the Lilongwe Central Hospital nor other medical suppliers in Lilongwe could of course provide a life-saving medicine to give the President. Even the fact that the Presidents' spokesperson Hetherwick Ntaba was a medical doctor (who also served under President Kamuzu Banda) did not seem to help. It seems in his final hours even the most powerful man in the country shared the fate of so many of his fellow Malawians who die due to lack of appropriate care or medicines. It seems the President himself was a victim like so many of his people to serious flaws in the public health system, a system that steadily deteriorated during his terms of office primarily due to corruption and mismanagement of the central drug stores. "Provide essential drugs to all hospitals and clinics" was one of the 20 demands of the petition that civil society leaders handed over to district commissioners on 20th July 2011. But on this day, 19 Malawians were killed by the police during the demonstrations in Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mzuzu, Karonga and Zomba. The killings together with the President's warning "to smoke out all insolents" was a clear indication that on the good governance scale, Mutharika had reached rock bottom.

On 5th April 2012 the President—dead or alive we can't be 100% certain but probably dead – was flown to South Africa. For two days the assurances from government officials of his stable condition were undermined by reports of his death emerging from other sources. Meanwhile in Malawi a power struggle within government and the DDP party officials had already begun, over whether the Vice-President could and should succeed the President. Although the Malawi Constitution is clear on this issue (cf. Art 83 of the Malawi Constitution: "*Whenever there is a vacancy in the office of President, the First Vice-President shall assume that office for the remainder of the term and shall appoint another person to serve as First Vice-President for the remainder of the term*") some DDP officials were arguing that as Vice-President Joyce Banda "was not a member of the government party DPP" (of which she was expelled by President Mutharika only a year earlier) she was not in a position to take over the office of President. During this time, the role of top ministers remains both dubious and ambiguous. Apparently they tried to find a way to install the President's brother, Peter Mutharika and in doing so tried to force "constructive resignation" on to the Vice-President. Even the highest embodiment of the rule of law, the Chief Justice, seemed to be stalling by

refusing to swear in the Vice President on the grounds that he did not have his robe to hand. Here we have a first glimpse of different factions at work in the political culture of Malawi.

The Malawian army and some diplomats, mostly of western countries made it clear whom they supported. But also Malawi neighbours, esp. South Africa had signalled that they would not accept an unconstitutional presidency of Peter Mutharika. The army replaced the police in guarding the house of Joyce Banda (the Vice President) as the Inspector General of the police at that time was a loyalist to Bingu wa Mutharika. Western diplomats paid visits at Joyce Banda in her Lilongwe house in these crucial hours. You may remember that these two players (the army and Western diplomats) with no democratic mandate helped forge a “democratic” course: in 1993/94 when they made sure that Kamuzu Banda and the MCP lost public support and power, and in 2012 they helped to ensure that the constitutional provision was adhered to.

Finally, on the morning of 7th April 2012 the Malawi government officially announced the death of Dr Mutharika. After the army had flown the Chief Justice’s robe from Blantyre to Lilongwe, Dr Lovemore Munlo had no other excuses and swore in the Vice-President Joyce Banda as the 4th President of Malawi.<sup>1</sup> At the end the rule of the law prevailed. Luckily it was not the first time that in times when the adherence to the constitution was under sever attack, the rule of law prevailed in Malawi (e. g. Bakili Muluzi’s attempt to gain a third term in 2003 when—despite of heavy bribing of MPs – the ruling party failed to secure a two third majority in Parliament for a change of the constitution).

Dr Bingu wa Mutharika was first elected in 2004. During his first term he fared quite well: in 2008, Malawi had a 9% increase of GDP per capita and Mutharika was praised for his economic successes and showered with numerous awards.<sup>2</sup> In her opening address to the 2009 General Elections Evaluation Conference in June 2009, The Right Honourable Joyce Banda, the freshly elected Vice President of the Republic of Malawi, stated:

*His Excellency the President Ngwazi Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika has proved that with determination and focus on clear goals and objectives we can easily succeed. Indisputably, the President has brought a new lease of multiparty politics to Malawi where issues of regions, tribes, religion, resources, no longer determine politics. This is simply because Ngwazi Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika has offered the visionary leadership, guided the political and administrative system, and encouraged the people to believe in themselves. (...) Let me also underscore the sentiments expressed by the State President that the DPP-led Government will in no way take advantage of its majority seats in Parliament to abuse its powers or to question the legitimate separation of power that builds the backbone of any democratic system. Rather, we are geared towards using our majority to push for development agendas and to clear the backlog of laws that have to be passed in Parliament. We will work hard to implement the governance goals and strategies articulated in Malawi’s national development plan as anchored in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS).<sup>3</sup>*

Would Mutharika have stepped down in 2009, even the Mo Ibrahim prize for African leadership might have been within his grasp. This prize has been established—so reads the official criteria—“to recognise and

- 1 For more details on the events on 5 to 7 April 2012, cf. Heiko Meinhardt, Auch Totgesagte Sterben, in: *afrika süd* 3/2012, 8–11.
- 2 Among those rewards were: The “United Nations Special Millennium development Goal Award” (2010); the “COMESA Distinguished Award” (2010); the “Southern Africa Trust Drivers of Change Award” (2009); the “2009 Medal of Glory Awards”; the “Inaugural Food Agriculture and Natural resources Policy Analysis Network” and the “Danish Government Award of recognition for outstanding performances in promoting gender equality and women empowerment” (2008).
- 3 Banda, Joyce, Keynote address at the Election Evaluation Conference, 23.06.2009, in: Ott, Martin and Fidelis Edge Kanyongolo (eds.) (2010) *Democracy in Progress: Malawi’s 2009 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections* Zomba: Kachere Books, p. 11f.

celebrate excellence in African leadership, and to provide Laureates with the opportunity to pursue their commitment to the African continent once they have stepped down from office. It is awarded to a democratically elected former African Executive Head of State or Government who has left office in the previous three years; served her / his constitutionally mandated term; and demonstrated excellence in office“.

Yet, Dr Mutharika was never to receive this prestigious award. Only one year after the 2009 elections Joyce Banda found herself out of favour with the President: she was kicked out of the DDP, stripped of her privileges and barred from carrying out any official duties, and was continuously sidelined. In fact, Mutharika’s second term can best be summed up as one of poor governance, autocratic leadership style and economic disaster.<sup>4</sup>

Just for the record, from 2010 to 2012, three years in a row, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation failed to award any African leader. The foundation just could not find anyone who had fulfilled their selection criteria or with their own words. “We are not seeing the kind of visionary leadership that will help us to make the transition from our 20th century’s challenges to become dynamic 21st century players on a global stage”. Heavily criticised of being “anti-African”, Mo Ibrahim defended his actions: “Excellence is not a relative concept and we refuse to embrace a lower standard because we are an African institution“.<sup>5</sup> Apparently the Malawi case is not a singular one.

## 2. The first achievements of Joyce Banda

When Mutharika died, a sigh of relief was heard from all corners of society. Church leaders, civil society activists, the chiefs and donors could not hide their relief that the Mutharika chapter had finally come to an end. And yet he was widely applauded at the start of his tenure. So how do we explain this apparent transformation from golden boy to Mr bad guy? In fact, Kamuzu Banda and Bakili Muluzi also started as promising leaders and ended up as failing autocrats. So can we just lay the sole blame for failing leaders down to the leaders themselves? Individual personalities might alleviate or aggravate temporarily political and economic indicators, but I would argue that it is the systemic and structural problems of Malawi that are the real forces to contend with. With this in mind let us now look at the first eight months of Joyce Banda’s office and in particular to her dealing with the Mutharika legacy:

- The legislation that gave the executive the authority to ban publications that were deemed threatening the public interest was repealed;
- The law that limited the power of the courts to issue injunctions was also repealed;
- The anti-gay law was suspended pending revisions;
- The head of the national police was replaced, and the new Inspector General pledged to respect academic freedom;
- New electoral commissioners were appointed in full consultation with opposition parties—a practice eschewed by the late president;
- The functioning of civil society organisations (NGO board, new NICE board) in free and democratic way was re-established Space and a general policy to avoid nepotism at public appointments was declared;

4 Cf. Diana Cammack, Malawi’s settlement in crisis. *Africa Power and Politics Background Paper No 4*, November 2011, Published on behalf of the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP) by the Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, UK ([www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)); Daniel Wroe, Donors, Dependency, and Political Crisis in Malawi, in: *African Affairs*, 111 / 442 (2012), 135–144.

5 Mo Ibrahim, Don’t shy away from the truth about Africa, in: *The Times*, 19. 10. 2012, p. 34.

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- The environment for civil society groups has improved considerably with groups and activists no longer facing the threats and attacks that they incurred in the two years before Mutharika's death;
  - Relations with donors have warmed considerably, most clearly demonstrated with the normalisation of relations with Britain, the EU, the US and the IMF.

On policy level, President Banda endorsed the revised Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, the so called "Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II, 2011–2016":<sup>6</sup> This is an important document in order to normalize the relations with the IMF and to reopen its financial support. Therein nine priority areas of Malawi politics are identified: **(1)** Agriculture and Food Security; **(2)** Energy, Industrial Development, Mining and Tourism; **(3)** Transport, Infrastructure and Nsanje World Inland Port; **(4)** Education, Science and Technology; **(5)** Public Health, Sanitation, Malaria and HIV and AIDS Management; **(6)** Integrated Rural Development; **(7)** Green Belt Irrigation and Water Development; **(8)** Child Development, Youth Development and Empowerment; **(9)** Climate Change, Natural Resources and Environmental Management. The return of Goodall Gondwe, the former minister of finance under Bingu wa Mutharika and the mastermind behind the macroeconomic successes in Bingu's first term, into her cabinet in November 2012 as minister for economic planning is perceived as another positive step by the international community.

All encouraging stuff, but the first cracks in Joyce Banda's government can already be seen. The circumstances surrounding the retirement of Atupele Muluzi as Minister of Economic Planning has laid bare the internal power struggle in her "government of national unity". She asked the Vice-President Khumbo Kachali and Minister Uladi Mussa to apologise to Atupele Muluzi for publicly insulting his cabinet colleague. Is this the first indication of the antagonism between the President and Vice-President which has raised its ugly head [for the third time, after the Mutharika—Chilumpha and the Mutharika—Banda fall-outs] in Malawi's history? In its 100 days stocktaking in July 2012 civil society—although supportive and moderate in its tone—raised some critical questions such as the issue of the declaration of assets, the numerous and costly trips of the President outside the country<sup>7</sup> and the costly attendance of the whole cabinet during presidential functions.<sup>8</sup> On 14th November 2012 the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) met the President. Also moderate and supportive, the religious body raised concerns about the quality of leadership in public institutions, the implementation of Section 65 ("Crossing the floor") and the reintroduction of Section 64 ("Recall of MPs") of the Malawi constitution, the general problems of the economy, especially after the devaluation of the Kwacha and a warning "not to politicise charity".<sup>9</sup> Lately, there have been allegations of her son being bribed by the company mining uranium in Karonga, that is Paladin Energy Ltd. (which was also rumoured to have bribed the late President Mutharika extensively).<sup>10</sup>

So already it appears that Joyce Banda seems to be following in her predecessor's footsteps. I want to explain why this is the case by highlighting what I believe to be are the three major challenges that President Joyce Banda is facing.

6 Government of Malawi, Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II, 2011–2016, published on [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2012/cr12222.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2012/cr12222.pdf).

7 High expenses for government officials on trips outside the country include e. g. the President's husband's trip to London for the opening of the Olympic games in summer 2012. Richard Banda and his entourage of 15 checked in at Claridge's Hotel, the most glamorous hotel in London, for a period of 11 nights. Presidential suites at Claridge's Hotel cost up to 5000 Pounds a night. Cf. the reportage "Inside Claridge's" with a reference to Richard Banda's check in at Claridge's, on BBC 2, Monday, 17. 12. 2012, at 21.00. By the way, the Malawi Olympic team consisted of 3 athletes.

8 Separatum: *NGO's stocktaking Malawi President Joyce Banda's first 100 days in office*, by CHRR, CEDEP and PACE—NET, 17th July 17 2012, 13pp.

9 Cf. [www.nyasatimes.com/malawi/2012/11/15/pac-cautions-malawi-leader-on-ills-of-her-administration](http://www.nyasatimes.com/malawi/2012/11/15/pac-cautions-malawi-leader-on-ills-of-her-administration).

10 Joyce Banda Mining Corruption Scandal Revealed, in: Tukombo blogspot, 22. 11. 2012, <http://tukombo.blogspot.com/2012/11/joyce-banda-mining-corruption-scandal.html>, the allegations were dismissed by Paladin, in: [www.nyasatimes.com/malawi/2012/11/27/paladin-dismisses-malawi-corruption-charges-nawena-claims-without-foundation](http://www.nyasatimes.com/malawi/2012/11/27/paladin-dismisses-malawi-corruption-charges-nawena-claims-without-foundation).

### 3. Challenge 1: The management of power and of public administration

Among political scientists Malawi's political culture is described as one of "neopatrimonialism and institutionalism"<sup>11</sup>, where political "transition [is] without transformation", it is merely "a regime transition rather than a moral imperative and social process"<sup>12</sup>, in other words it is only a "democracy of chameleons."<sup>13</sup> Diana Cammack characterises Malawi's political culture as "the prevalence of patronage, clientelism, opportunism and corruption, and the centralising, authoritarian tendency of the executive. The relative weakness of civil society vis-à-vis the state, the narrowness of the 'public sphere's deference to hierarchy, and gender discrimination—these and other characteristics are always present and affect power relations and political behaviour".<sup>14</sup>

*Under patrimonialism, all power relations between ruler and ruled, political as well as administrative relations, are personal relations; there is no differentiation between the private and the public realm. However, under neo-patrimonialism the distinction between the private and the public exists and is accepted, and public reference can be made to this distinction. Thus, in reality there is a blurred separation of the formal and the informal, the public and semi-public, the government and the kinship spheres, resulting amongst others in the rapid change of loyalties and patterns of behaviours by citizens of neo-patrimonial societies. Transparent decisions as with regard to the implementation of development actions might have been taken in a highly participatory and successful planning workshop; the relevant documents mention the appropriate government ministries and the right checks and balances. And then: despite all these formally and legally binding mechanisms—the 'real' decisions about which bridges and streets are to build are done somewhere else—outside the agreed log frames and planning concepts. Rarely do development partners and donors understand the rationale behind such a change and tend to assume that corruption and mismanagement are the reasons. Although this might not be ruled out, very often a complex "patrimonial" rationale that satisfies specific needs of regional or ethnic denominations had triggered the "real" decision.<sup>15</sup>*

The events surrounding the death of Bingu wa Mutharika and the struggle over his successor provide good examples of the political dynamics within a neopatrimonial system. The attempt to install Peter Mutharika was against constitutional provisions, so were the motives behind this. Generally speaking, among Malawian politicians greed for power and money prevails over democratic principles, but at the same time politicians are clever enough to camouflage their motives by legal and apparently rational arguments. Switching elegantly between the formal and the informal discourse, between the front stage and

11 Cf. Blessings Chisinga, Malawi's Political Landscape 2004–2009, in: Ott, Martin and Fidelis Edge Kanyongolo (eds.) (2010) *Democracy in Progress: Malawi's 2009 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections* Zomba: Kachere Books, p. 115 ff.

12 Wiseman C. Chirwa, Civil Society in Malawi's Democratic Transition, in: M. Ott, K. Phiri & N. Patel (eds.): *Malawi's Second Democratic Elections*, Blantyre: CLAIM 2000 (Kachere Book, Nr. 10), p. 88.

13 Harri Englund, Introduction: The Culture of Chameleon Politics, in: Harri Englund (ed.), *A Democracy of Chameleons. Politics and Culture in the new Malawi*, Uppsala & Blantyre 2002, 11–24.

14 Diane Cammack, The Politics of Chameleons revisited: The burden of Malawi's political culture, in: Ott, Martin and Fidelis Edge Kanyongolo (eds.) (2010) *Democracy in Progress: Malawi's 2009 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections* Zomba: Kachere Books, p. 155.

15 "Accra and Beyond". Challenges for State Development in Sub-Saharan Africa for Development Cooperation, Paper of the GTZ Sector Network "Good Governance in Sub-Sahara Africa, separatum, November 2009, p. 4, for a detailed description of Malawi's neopatrimonial system, cf. *Drivers of Change and Development in Malawi*, by David Booth, Diana Cammack, Jane Harrigan, Edge Kanyongolo, Mike Mataure & Naomi Ngwira, London: Overseas Development Institute, January 2006, p. 24 ff.

the back stage (Erving Goffman) makes it very difficult to analyse, to control or even to criticise political manoeuvres. For example, when Bakili Muluzi wanted a third term in 2003, what were his true motives? A genuine wish to finish an unaccomplished development agenda or to prevent Malawi from a “crocodile that has not yet eaten” (i. e. a new leader who will want to benefit as quickly as possible from his / her position), or to increase his own power and wealth? After the third term bill failed in parliament, he decided to bring in Mutharika with the intention to remain in control from behind (“the president of the party prevails over the President of the country”). Bakili’s move to launch Mutharika with this agenda was one of the most fatal and undemocratic decisions in Malawi’s recent history. It lies at the bottom of so many problems that followed. To make things worse: What would be better for Malawi: the implementation of Section 65 and risking political chaos and general instability or eschewing this constitutional provision but keeping the government and country stable? Joyce Banda is faced with the dilemma that Malawi remains cornered between the demands of a modern state and the demands of a clientelistic society. Her recent remarks at Chatham House in May 2012, that “a strong commitment to constitutionalism continues to provide the basic framework for the growth of our democracy”<sup>16</sup> is a politically correct statement, but will it survive the pressures of political survival within a neopatrimonial context?

A scrutiny of the party membership of Banda’s cabinet reveals how fragile the balance of power is. Officially labelled a government of national unity there is a large number of ministers who served under Bingu wa Mutharika. Almost each minister has a history of several party memberships—in average 2 to 3 with UDF and DPP as primary memberships and a previous MCP membership not taken into account. Uladi Mussa, the Minister of Home Affairs, takes the lead with 4 memberships (UDF, DPP, MPP, PP). This is truly a collection of chameleons that she has gathered. With the elections coming up, we can be sure that the current affiliations of these politicians will not be their last ones. They are all “crocodiles” that have to be fed and more are lined up to join the pool.

It is no surprise that people question whether multiparty democracy serves the country well. For instance, Section 65 of the constitution was drawn up with the notion of a political party based on a western model. The reason for banning the crossing of the floor (i. e. changing political parties) is to stabilise a political system and to bind MPs to the will of the voters. Different from parliaments in the North where changing party membership is rather rare and exceptional among MPs, the issue is quite different in Malawi and other African countries! A “political party” is not a party in the “western” sense with an ideological orientation, a focus on specific political issues and transparent internal structures and procedures. In Africa, a party is but a club of supporters and beneficiaries of the Big Man (or woman) who is leading that party and has little to do with supporting a range of policies for the common good. Changing the membership of a political party is a change in loyalty towards a leader and very rarely a change in political convictions.

If Joyce Banda were now to invoke Section 65, the political landscape would be even more complicated and governing Malawi would be almost impossible. Joyce Banda as president of the country might prefer or might be forced to act non-constitutionally for the sake of common good. This is a real choice in a neo-patrimonial system: Does one have to be anti-constitutional in order to serve the common good? It might be the case and this is exactly what a neo-patrimonial system entails. In this context Joyce Banda has to manoeuvre. The rest of her term until 2014 is a campaign period and the rationale of all politicians is to remain in power, in whatever constellation, whether by nepotistic or democratic means. Much, maybe too much of her energy will be absorbed into creating networks, getting rid of rivals and unfaithful supporters without being able to heal or to reconcile the fragmentation of society. Will she be judged harshly if she refuses to invoke Section 65 because political stability and development values higher than faithfulness to the constitution?

16 <http://africanarguments.org/2012/11/08/malawi-reforming-constitution-and-law-by-hannah-gibson-africa-research-institute>.

It remains a key challenge for Joyce Banda to stabilize the political system in this context of a diversified conglomerate of ministers, members of parliament, civil servants and party loyalists. In addition, her performance will depend to a high degree on how much the political class and the civil service in Malawi are able to formulate and to implement policies. Today it is even more true what the authors of the “drivers of change study” for Malawi observed in the year 2006: “It seems that the style of decision-taking preferred by politicians has both disempowered and corrupted the civil service, progressively undermining the capacity to generate coherent, technically-grounded policy approaches”.<sup>17</sup> In addition, with the economic pressures as they are in Malawi, many professional and qualified people leave the country – ‘the unstoppable brain drain’. It is quite disillusioning to observe the lack of capacities in Malawi ministries and parastatals. The situation is no better in civil society and in the NGO sector. Due to Mutharika’s no holds barred campaign against public debate, civil society has not only been weakened and fragmented; it has lost a strategic orientation and it seems that it is up to the Public Affairs Committee and the churches to play their historical role in echoing the voice of the Malawi population between elections. But we should not forget that even churches and NGOs are not free from neo-patrimonial influences, their representatives knowing only too well ‘how to perform on the front stage’ while acting very differently ‘on the backstage’ or behind the scenes’.

#### 4. Challenge 2: The economy

In a country where 80 to 85 % of the labour force is within the informal sector one has to be cautious of any analysis of the macroeconomic figures. What exactly reveal do the figures showing an increase in GDP reveal? Subsistence farmers outside the formal sector in Malawi depend on three things: access to seeds, availability of fertilizer, and enough (but not too much) rainfall. Economic successes of Malawi presidents from Banda to Muluzi and Mutharika to Joyce Banda have always depended and continue to depend on whether they are able to manage the availability of seeds and fertilizer to the farming population for free or at affordable costs. If, in addition, God Chiuta sends appropriate rainfall both the farmers *and* government benefit from better harvests.

The devaluation of the Kwacha—as demanded by the IMF—has hit hard the population and the economy of Malawi. The Kwacha devaluated from 1 \$ US = 164 MK on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 to 1 \$ US = 320 MK on 27th November 2012, i. e. a devaluation of almost 100 %. The price for a minibus ride in Lilongwe is now at 200 MK, 1 kg of maize costs 80 MK, 1 kg of maize seeds is at 700 MK. One litre petrol is at 606,30 MK, one litre of diesel at 597,40 MK and one litre of paraffin—domestic is at 171 MK (all figures date 30. 11. 2012),<sup>18</sup> fuel shortages remain a feature of everyday life. The electricity bills have gone up by 63,52 % in the year 2012. Inflation rate has reached 29 % by December 2012. For Malawians life has become even more expensive. It is not difficult to imagine that these economic hardships create an explosive political climate. How long will Malawians bestow the benefit and the “credit” of the new office to Mrs Banda? People want to see an improvement of their lives and will become ever more impatient.

Grassroots analysis of consumer needs record not only increasing prices, but an increasing gap between income and expenditure of an ordinary Malawi household.<sup>19</sup> Macroeconomic figures are quite alarming: “According to Malawi’s Annual Debt Report released by the Debt and Aid Management Division of the Ministry of Finance, as of end June 2012, Malawi’s total public external and domestic debt stock

17 *Drivers of Change and Development in Malawi*, by David Booth, Diana Cammack, Jane Harrigan, Edge Kanyongolo, Mike Mataure & Naomi Ngwira, London: Overseas Development Institute, January 2006, p. 24 ff.

18 Press Release: Fuel Price Adjustment, by the Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority (MERA), in: [www.meramalawi.mw/?q=content/press-releasefuel-price-adjustment-0](http://www.meramalawi.mw/?q=content/press-releasefuel-price-adjustment-0).

19 Cf. the Basic needs basket survey of the Center for Social Concern in Lilongwe, in: [www.cfscmalawi.org/bnb.html](http://www.cfscmalawi.org/bnb.html).

amounted to MK524.8 billion (US\$ 1.926 billion), equivalent of 54% of GDP, compared to MK313.5 billion (US\$ 1.091.3 million) or 33.6% of GDP in the corresponding period in 2011. The report says total public debt grew by 67% in the year ending 30th June 2012 as compared to the previous year. This sharp increase in the proportion of public debt to GDP is mainly due to huge depreciation of the kwacha which significantly deflated the US\$ value of the country's GDP, says the report.<sup>20</sup> The latest IMF Mission in November 2012 had to admit to a slowing down of the economy. "The real GDP growth is estimated to have slowed from 4.3% in 2011 to 1.9% in 2012 mainly due to contraction in output from the agriculture and manufacturing sectors".<sup>21</sup>

Obviously, it is of the utmost importance to Joyce Banda to somehow tackle these problems and ease the burden to the population: But how? Agriculture provides one-third of GDP and more than 80% of export revenues (tea, coffee, cotton, tobacco) for export. The rural economy is still key to economic growth as Malawi has been slow to attract other investments. Only recently mineral exploitation has started to create revenues. Uranium mining has been in place for a couple of years in Karonga, in 2011 Malawi awarded oil exploration licenses to UK-based Surestream Petroleum to search for gas in Lake Malawi.<sup>22</sup> But the global demand for tobacco, the main earner has declined and prices have fallen even while the number of farmers growing it is increasing. Apart from the Chinese loan-based projects, investment in infrastructure has deteriorated. Generally, production and investment are jeopardised by on-going water shortages and power outages, unreliable road and rail networks, a weakly enforced regulatory environment (resulting in crime and corruption), and shortages of forex and fuel. The electrification rate in Malawi remains at 6% of all households, and for decades there is stagnation in the energy sector where key growth potential lies and where the impacts to deforestation natural degradation would be significant. The website of the International Finance Corporation ranks 'the ease of doing business' in a country for 185 countries. It ranks Malawi Nr. 157 in its 2013 prospectus, which is a fall of 6 places compared to the 2012 ranking.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that Joyce Banda's economic challenges are enormous: the difficulties to generate more revenue internally or forex are obvious. For the immediate future she will feel compelled to concentrate on the internal pre-electoral power struggles and that she will be not able to tackle the economic challenges. So it is realistic to predict that she will not be able to achieve mid- or long-term economic successes until the elections in 2014. The long-term systemic problems of Malawi form the core challenge to political governance. The concentration on shortsighted neo-patrimonial agendas ensures that the government remains unable to address the key challenges of the country. Against the gravity of these key challenges it is sad and a waste of time that some politicians and church leaders politicize irrelevant issues of whether to punish homosexuality and hype up a discussion about so called African values spiced up with resentments against the "decadent" west and its so-called neo-colonialistic attitudes.

## 5. Challenge 3: Managing international relations

Malawi, as are other African countries, is wooed by international powers. Alas, this permanent feature of Malawi politics has dramatically changed in recent years. After the end of the cold war where Malawi's alliance to the West had been curial for securing political and economic support, new alliances with African and Arabic nations were dominant under Muluzi's reign (1994–2004). Mutharika's turn from Taiwan to

20 [www.bnltimes.com/index.php/daily-times/headlines/business/12565-malawis-debt-hit-54-of-gdp](http://www.bnltimes.com/index.php/daily-times/headlines/business/12565-malawis-debt-hit-54-of-gdp).

21 IMF Mission Reaches Staff-Level Agreement with Malawi on ECF First Review, in: [www.modernghana.com/news/430316/1/imf-mission-reaches-staff-level-agreement-with-mal.html](http://www.modernghana.com/news/430316/1/imf-mission-reaches-staff-level-agreement-with-mal.html).

22 [www.surestream-petroleum.com/news.aspx?nid=50](http://www.surestream-petroleum.com/news.aspx?nid=50).

23 Cf. [www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreconomies/malawi](http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreconomies/malawi).

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Mainland China in 2008 was the most obvious and visible move that reflected another new orientation of Malawi's foreign policy following economic criteria. But foreign nations have their own interests in Malawi.<sup>24</sup> China continues to further develop its presence in country. Under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) several economic and cultural agreements were signed. In May 2010, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Li Zhaoxing visited Malawi and attended the inauguration ceremony of the Parliament Building which was built with China's assistance. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2012, the Chinese President Hu Jintao's special envoy & Minister of Civil Affairs, Li Ligu, met with the new President Joyce Banda in Malawi and affirmed the continued support of China after Mutharika's death. The Chitipa-Karonga road is finished, as are the new Parliament building and new conference centre in Lilongwe; the new stadium shall be built in Lilongwe soon. Small-scale Chinese business men and traders have made their entry into the local economy. The Chinese support to Malawi consists mostly of business driven loans with benefits to Chinese companies and Chinese labourers. Unfortunately there are no official figures available on the amount that the Chinese are ready to spend and to invest in Malawi.

After its suspension in 2011, the USA re-awarded the Millennium challenge account to Malawi: According to its own information it intends to spend a grant of \$ US 350.7 million "which shall provide approximately \$ US 2 billion in benefits to an estimated five million Malawians. By reducing power outages and technical losses, enhancing the sustainability and efficiency of hydropower generation, and improving service to electricity consumers, the compact intends to reduce energy costs to enterprises and households and improve productivity in the agriculture, manufacturing, and service sectors".<sup>25</sup> Joyce Banda was paid a visit by Hilary Clinton and she was granted a photo shoot with the Obamas, all signs how the Americans include Malawi in their regional African strategy. There is real competition between China and the US as with regard to their interests in Malawi. One of Banda's tasks will be to manoeuvre between the Skylla and Charybdis of these super powers and redefine the interests of the country—within the narrow limits of her sovereignty.

As for African foreign politics, Banda's decision not to host the AU summit has put Malawi in the Western donor countries' good books. The United States and Great Britain had it made it clear there would be "consequences" for donor-recipient countries that host International Criminal Court (ICC) twice inducted suspected war criminal Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir. The US Congress actually passed a law asking Washington to cut off aid to any country that entertains al-Bashir. We will have to see how Malawi's decision will impact its relations with other African governments (such as Zimbabwe and Rwanda) which are very outspoken against western donors and its regional and continental bodies. So far President Banda has made it clear where her interests and her preferences lie. Another challenge is posed by the border dispute with Tanzania—triggered by gas finds off Tanzania and Mozambique in Lake Malawi. Gas finds that have led to predictions that the region could become the third largest exporter of natural gas on the planet. The two countries have decided to approach the African Forum of Former Presidents which deals with conflict management and resolution in the SADC region. Tanzania and Malawi have assured a peaceful resolution to this conflict and that they would take their case to the International Court of Justice in case the mediation would fail. Compared to 20 years ago, Malawi has become more visible and important on the international scene. This requires more diplomatic strength, energy and skills than before. And it will increase the necessity to balance the various interests and pressures that Malawi will be exposed to. I know from a personal source how the former Minister of Finance Goodwell Gondwe has complained how Malawi has been taken to the cleaners by Paladin Limited over the Kayelekera Development Agreement (whose text remains still confidential—which has still not been made available to the public). Who in the

24 Cf. Philip Gieg, *Great Game um Afrika? Europa, China und die USA auf dem Schwarzen Kontinent*, Baden Baden: Nomos, 2012, 140pp.

25 [www.mcc.gov/pages/press/release/release-062112-boardmeeting](http://www.mcc.gov/pages/press/release/release-062112-boardmeeting).

Malawi government has the expertise of negotiating contracts with international companies? It is very worrying to see weak human capacity in Malawi exposed to a globalised environment of international laws and trade agreements.

The domain of international politics might provide Joyce Banda with the highest chances of success and recognition—against the more difficult and long-term challenges in the Malawi economy and the neo-patrimonial political system. It will be interesting to observe further how the political dynamics will unfold up to the election in 2014. So far only one serious contender might challenge Joyce Banda: Atupele Muluzi, the 34-year-old son of the previous President Bakili Muluzi. He was elected President of the UDF on 30th October 2012 and resigned as Minister of Economic Planning in Banda's cabinet a few days later. It is obvious that he is preparing for a higher office.

## 6. The wisdom of the people

Our short analysis of current Malawi politics stems from an academic interest. But there is another perspective towards politics in Malawi which is very often forgotten. I want to present very briefly three masks of the *Gule wamkulu*, the mask society at the heart of Chewa identity in Malawi. In these masks the Chewa invoke the ancestral world and the values which are impersonated in these masks. They provide us with a grass-roots and popular version of political analysis. I am happy that I can draw on the examples from the recently published book by Claude Boucher *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance*<sup>26</sup> which presents the results of his life-long research on *Gule wamkulu*.



Around the year 1991 a new mask appeared during the performances of the *Gule wamkulu* dancers in Central Malawi. It was called “Weresiki” and it has the features of both Sir Roy Welensky, the Prime Minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in the 50ies and of Dr. Kamuzu Banda.<sup>27</sup>

Weresiki is quite an unusual mask as it was only used during political rallies (and not during other rituals of the *Gule wamkulu*). Sir Welensky was the archenemy and the embodiment of the hated federation which Kamuzu Banda came to defeat. The mask shows all traits of power, but also conveys a sense of disappointment, dismay of being an outsider. The dancer behaves in a forgetful way and continuously leaves the dance floor with a drum. The choir sings “Let me go home ... but one day you will remember me”. These famous words by Welensky at the end of his service have been put into the mouth of Kamuzu Banda. For the Chewa, Kamuzu Banda has become Welensky, the former liberator has turned into the same type of oppressor he once fought against. The mask “Weresiki” reveals “that the word freedom had come to mean exploitation, slavery and marginalisation”. In popular perception the advent of the new regime has not seen a change in the attitude of its leader, to the contrary, the attitude has become the same as before; Kamuzu Banda has turned into a foreigner to his people. The mask reflects the feeling of the people that it is time for Banda to go as it was time for Welensky to go home 30 years earlier.

26 Claude Boucher (Chisale), *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance. Gule wamkulu: the great dance of the Chewa People of Malawi*, Mtakatika/Oxford 2012, 276 pp.

27 Mask „Weresike“, in: Claude Boucher (Chisale), *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance*, *ibid*, p. 82f.



Around the year 2002 another new mask of the Gule wamkulu emerged: “Dziko lafika pa mtendere”.<sup>28</sup> The literal translation means: “The country has reached peace”; but in the reversal rite culture of the Gule wamkulu and in the ironic pedagogy of the Chewa, the meaning is quite the opposite: “The country is in a mess”. The mask enters the arena assertive and militant, he is ostentatious and showy, but as the performance continues he loses his balance and waves his whisk in a last effort before collapsing. The colour of the mask is yellow and predicts the downfall of an important person in the UDF. It is without doubt President Muluzi whose political end was anticipated by the villagers already in 2002, halfway through his second term. When he returned from abroad and denied that there was hunger in Malawi despite the obvious opposite, the Chewa knew that he had lost his credibility as leader. The mask “Dziko lafika pa mtendere” addresses leaders who pretend that the

country lives in peace while ignoring the reality of their fellow Malawians.

In the year 2005, one year into Mutharika’s first term, a mask surfaced with pink skin and no tribal marks with the name “Abingu.”<sup>29</sup> The character appears content, self-assured and with dignity. He displays power, but then slows and kneels down. The males are singing “Abingu, Abingu, Abingu”, the women “Abingu, we have received some popcorn”. Abingu’s features are clearly ambiguous. While the men folk praise him, the women are more reserved and critical. During the period of famine in 2005 they received only popcorn and not *nsima*, so in the perception of the people, the president and the government have not done enough. Abingu portrays the duality of praise and scepticism on behalf of the people for the newly elected president—at a very early stage of his presidency.



The Gule wamkulu masks give us a glimpse of some grassroots democracy in contemporary Malawi. One should not underestimate the political nerve of the people and their understanding of good leadership and good governance. Alas, their voices and their needs are too often too far away from the centre of power in Lilongwe, in Beijing and in Washington. We must wait for the first mask of Gule wamkulu that will

portray President Joyce Banda. I, for one, am very curious to learn its features and symbolism. And I am sure it will tell us a lot about how her performance will have affected ordinary Malawians. A positive reception in the community of ancestral figures that the Gule wamkulu masks represent is the highest prize that rural Malawi can bestow on a leader: not quite the prestige of the Mo Ibrahim Award, but equally as important. We all should wish Joyce Banda would receive such a prize.

28 Mask „Dziko lafika pa mtendere“, *ibid*, p. 61.

29 Mask „Abingu“, *ibid*, p. 51.

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