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'A DIFFICULT YEAR FOR US IN MANY RESPECTS':
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AN EXERCISE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN HISTORY

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"A DIFFICULT YEAR FOR US IN MANY RESPECTS": PRESSURE FOR CHANGE AND GOVERNMENT REACTION IN MALAWI IN 1992: AN EXERCISE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN HISTORY*

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INTRODUCTION

For Malawians 1992 was surely a year that they will never forget. Suddenly, their small country, which had often been regarded as an island of political stability in a turbulent region, won the attention of the international media as its government and ruling elite tried to control a series of apparently unprecedented events including public criticism by the major christian churches, industrial action, serious urban riots, student demonstrations, armed robberies and the emergence of new domestic political groupings set upon challenging the traditional supremacy of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). As the government initially appeared to reel from one crisis to another it soon became clear to most observers that whatever happened in the future a watershed had been reached in the country's history. Indeed, one leading opponent of the MCP declared during the year that Malawi had "reached a dead-end; the country is at the crossroads of her destiny".1

That the regime in Lilongwe had in fact lost touch with the aspirations and sympathies of its own people came as something of a surprise to many commentators outside the country since much of the reporting about Malawi prior to 1992 in the West had tended to emphasise Malawi's sound economic performance and general air of good governance. Malawi, it was claimed, had done "notably better" than many other African states.2 In 1989, for example, the Americans agreed to cancel debts that Malawi had incurred because, according to the deputy director of the US Agency for International Development, the country "is looked upon as a leader in sub-Saharan Africa"

and "one of the top countries in Africa in its commitment to the IMF-backed structural adjustment programmes and its re-establishment of overall economic growth".3 In fact, 1989 had been a good year for Malawi. The minister of finance, Louis Chimango, was able to present an expansionist budget because of an improved performance by the economy in 1988 while the immediate prospects looked promising since in June at an international donors conference around $555 million was pledged over the next two years.4 In addition, President Banda had the satisfaction of receiving a series of influential visitors including the then Prime Minister of Britain, Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, the archbishop of canterbury, and the president of Tanzania while he also boasted to the world that his country had produced more maize than ever before in recent times.5 For Banda and his regime, however, 1989 was a turning-point in their fortunes even though they did not immediately realise it as such since it saw the first signs of the collapse of the former Soviet empire. As the Cold War slowly came to an end so one of the crucial foundations of Banda's rule, the West's support for his regime as a bastion against communism in the southern African region, rapidly became something of an anachronism.

Banda's foreign policy had always been determined by what one observer of Africa's dictators has called the "idiosyncratic variable"6; in other words, Malawi's external relations were frequently conducted according to the personal whims of its leader. Thus, Banda involved his country in territorial disputes with both Tanzania and Zambia while he also seems never to have lost sight of his ambitions for a "Greater Malawi" including part of Mozambique.7 At the same time his government had enjoyed close ties with South Africa since the early 1970s in direct contravention of the prevailing mood throughout most of the rest of independent Africa while Malawi was one of the "dominoes" Kissinger hoped would not fall into the communist net after Washington's humiliation in Vietnam.8 The Banda government, therefore, was a useful ally

for the West in the midst of the dangerously socialist "Front Line" states of southern Africa.

The extension of the Cold War to Africa lead to the emergence in the United States and certain European capitals of a distorted image of Malawi. In reality, of course, much of the material that was published on the country was designed to portray Malawi as a loyal and worthy friend of the western democracies. As one Malawian has commented: "the strategic calculations of the Cold War and the obfuscations of totalitarianism wrought by the West's demonisation of socialism could not... coincide with our understanding of human rights".9 Added to this deliberate obfuscation of the truth was an appalling degree of ignorance concerning all things Malawian that often emerged within the western media causing the most basic of errors to creep into the works of even so-called African specialists.10

Margaret Thatcher's "bizarre" visit to Malawi in 1989 was an excellent example of the way in which the establishment in the United Kingdom offered Banda the international respectability for which he had always craved. The visit was fairly widely covered in a largely positive fashion in the British press which tended to view the entire affair as a reward for Malawi's faithfulness to her former colonial masters.11 What is more, Banda had always been able to call upon influential and respected friends in Britain. Firstly, there were those members of the Church of Scotland (which had enjoyed close ties with Malawi for many years due to the activities of David Livingstone and a whole host of subsequent missionaries) and others who allowed their memories of him as a courageous African nationalist and distinguished medical doctor to blind them to the fact that he had pursued authoritarian and increasingly oppressive policies once in power in Malawi.12 Secondly, the Malawian leader also had close links with certain powerful individuals within the British business and

media world. For example, in June 1991 when The Observer printed an extremely critical article on the Banda regime the editor of the paper was forced to write "one of the most comprehensive apologies in recent [British] newspaper history". 13 The reason for Banda's apparently amazing control over such an important English periodical lay in the fact that the owner, Tiny Rowlands, had substantial business interests in Malawi. Not surprisingly, therefore, the editor was also compelled to include in the paper a piece entitled "Malawi: `Oasis of Achievement' in desert of the Third World".14

In reality, of course, Malawi had never been the success story that its advocates, of whatever persuasion, made it out to be. Since full independence was granted in 1964 the country had been dominated by one man, President Hastings Kamuzu Banda. He returned to what was then Nyasaland in 1958 at the request of the nationalist leaders within the country who believed that if they were to succeed in their struggle against British colonial rule "a kind of hero to be hero-worshipped" was necessary.15 Banda appeared to be the ideal man to fit the bill since he was the leading Malawian of his generation. Moreover, he soon displayed an impressive grasp of political oratory so that the MCP, with Banda as its undisputed leader, easily won elections in 1961.16 However, Banda soon clashed with the more radical members of his party leading to what has become known as the "cabinet crisis" not long after independence. In effect, this marked a crucial turning-point in the development of the new country for Banda was able to hold on to power in spite of the activities of his critics, thereby demonstrating his authority and allowing him at the same time to gradually stamp his own personality upon the infant state. The result was a sort of feudal, African dictatorship which countenanced very little open political debate and crushed any potential opposition often with a certain degree of brutality.17

The question of the Banda regime's brutality needs to be considered, however, in the context of the ethnic diversity of what was, after all, an artificial and virtually economically unviable colonial creation brought together within tiny, arbitrary boundaries. Given such harsh realities it was probably inevitable that any post colonial government would have started to operate along increasingly authoritarian lines in its quest to establish national unity. With possibly eight to ten different language groups and sub-groups Malawi presented a major challenge to any government. Moreover, such ethnic diversity was intensified by regionalism since the Tumbukas and affiliated language groups constituted the majority in the north while the Chewas were the predominant group in the centre and the Yaos, who were traditionally muslims, dominated in the south. The situation was still further complicated by the respective concentrations of the population with about half residing in the south, roughly a third living in the centre and only about ten percent or so present in the north. In addition, the colonial government had exploited the south for cheap labour with the result that it remained comparatively underdeveloped which had also been the fate of the north although the success of christian missions there meant that a disproportionate number of northerners had access to education compared to both the centre and the south of the country.18 Not surprisingly, therefore, the potential for regional and ethnic tension was always, and indeed still remains, a very significant factor in Malawian society.

As Banda grew older he became increasingly detached from his people and, consequently, ever more vulnerable to manipulation by those around him. It was under these circumstances that Cecilia Kadzamira, who attained the title of Official Hostess to the officially unmarried Banda, and John Tembo, her uncle, rose to positions of immense power and were able to fill many top government posts with their relatives. With the creation of the Banda-Tembo-

Kadzamira triumvirate the government's policies reflected a gradually greater degree of "Chewa parochialism" - since all three came from the centre of Malawi - involving Chichewa being prescribed as the national language, the implicit use of regional quotas in the civil service and a determined emphasis upon the development of the Central Region at the expense of the rest of the country.19 Naturally, deliberate attempts to favour the Chewa antagonised the other ethnic groups in the country and helped to intensify the already existing forces for division and regionalism at work within the nation. Perhaps inevitably, as a result, the mechanism of a one party-state, which had been introduced along with a republican constitution and life-presidency for Banda in order to ensure the regime's power base, became more and more oppressive.

Economically Malawi reflected Banda's basic belief that his country should be governed by an educated elite who would guide its affairs. Thus, he and certain of his lieutenants owned most of the major businesses and agricultural estates while 85 percent of the population continued to work on the land, many as subsistence farmers.20 In the agricultural sector emphasis had been given to the operation of large estates which enabled Malawi to achieve a grain surplus in the mid 1980s and to score some apparently impressive successes in the areas of tea, tobacco and sugar cultivation.21 However, one reason for these encouraging performances was the extremely low wages offered to the Malawian estate workers. In addition, the vast majority of the population saw little, if any, of the profits created by these estates for as the World Bank reported in 1989 Malawi remained one of the six poorest nations in the world with a very high infant mortality rate, considerable malnutrition and a worryingly low literacy rate.22

The Malawian economy, therefore, was constructed around the enrichment of a tiny elite while the rural peasantry saw few improvements in their basic standard of living after independence. Moreover, during the 1980s strains upon the economy such as the fuel crisis, a decline in domestic economic expenditure, irregular weather conditions and the civil war in Mozambique (which disrupted Malawi's communications to the coast and also caused the influx of over a million refugees into an already crowded country) all combined to place further pressure upon the meagre standard of living of the majority of the population.23 Meanwhile, those in positions of power and influence continued to enjoy lives of great wealth and privilege. In such a harsh and stratified social environment tension began to build up and this often manifested itself in small scale food riots and minor disturbances in urban areas during the 1980's.

By the 1990s the Banda regime was facing a series of problems which appeared to be insoluble. Firstly, the president himself was now probably in his nineties and, in fact, seems to have suffered a stroke in 1990.24 Since the ruling clique (dominated by Tembo who was frequently reported as being the effective ruler of the country by sources outside Malawi since Banda's age, it was argued, must have prevented him from participation in much of the regular work of government) depended upon the president in order to legitimise their authority his deteriorating health was clearly a real source of concern. Secondly, as the Cold War faded into the past so external pressure upon the government intensified in the form of open criticism of Malawi's record on human rights. Such criticism surfaced at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Harare in 1991; a fact which was noticed with some enthusiasm by exiled Malawian opponents to Banda's regime.25 At the same time potential donor countries were already starting to lose patience with Malawi's failure to seriously tackle its poor record on human rights and only the sudden

release of political detainees temporarily staved off a significant reduction in aid, although in November of 1991 the European Community agreed to set strict political and human rights conditions for aid recipients in the future.26 External pressure of this kind forced the government to suggest it might consider the possibility of a multi-party system; but there never appeared to be any real interest in such a scheme within the ruling hierarchy.27 Even so, the dismissal of the secretary to the president and cabinet, the senior civil servant in the country, during 1991 followed by Banda's decision to reshuffle his entire cabinet suggested that the pressure was starting to be felt within the heart of the ruling establishment in Malawi.28

Meanwhile, there were signs from August 1991 onwards that Malawi would not always be the easy country to govern that it had been in the past. Instances of armed banditry started to occur in the Mulanje district and around Mwanza. Buses were shot up and shops looted as Malawians with automatic rifles went on the rampage. Speculation was intense in the country concerning the precise causes of these attacks with some arguing that they were merely the result of the general air of anarchy across the border in Mozambique while others remained convinced that Malawian rebels were involved.29 There seemed, too, to be a connection between these attacks and the numerous refugee camps throughout Malawi which spelt trouble for a small country with a limited security apparatus that had always tended to operate in the past on the assumption that almost no Malawians owned firearms.

THE PASTORAL LETTER AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: JANUARY - MAY 1992

In spite of the pressures that were clearly building up upon the Malawian

government 1992 seemed to start peacefully enough. In January the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) earmarked 33 million US dollars for the care of the Mozambican refugees in the country. Moreover, although the president called upon his people to pray for more rain as drought began to bite in February he still declared his annual crop inspection tour a success and only brought it to an end on 9 March.30

However, both inside and outside Malawi opposition to the Banda government was gaining in confidence. The Law Society of Malawi had been active for some time in discussing the legal rights of the individual citizen and was becoming a group to be reckoned with partly because of its contacts in the UK and the support of the American Embassy in Lilongwe.31 In addition, anonymous letters started to be circulated inside the country often through the clandestine use of fax and photocopy machines. One of these, sent to all government ministries and institutions in February, effectively outlined the popular dislike of John Tembo, who had become the minister of state. Tembo, it was claimed, had made himself chairman of eleven major organisations while continuously "struggling and scheming for power".32 A second letter declared that the Banda regime was "making new martyrs every day" and had allowed the country to fall into serious difficulties because of the activities of Tembo and Kadzamira.33 The strong element of condemnation of these two powerful individuals in the anonymous epistles reflected the general concern that with Banda possibly near to death Tembo might be able to establish himself as the next president; a prospect almost universally feared throughout Malawi and one which undoubtedly added a degree of urgency to the various movements for change that were already underway below the surface of Malawian society.

It was from the Roman Catholic Church, however, that the first public criticism of the regime inside the country finally came when its bishops

issued a Pastoral Letter in March. In fact, when in 1989 all teachers from the north of Malawi who were working in the Southern or Central Regions of the country were suddenly ordered to return to their home areas without even being given the chance to harvest the crops they had grown for that year church leaders "very nearly spoke out" in outrage at such an apparently unjust measure.34 That nothing was heard from the churches in 1989 showed the considerable fear which still existed within the country of pursuing any kind of critical stance towards the government since most Malawians believed that to do so might well mean their detention or death.35 In addition, years of propaganda extolling the authority of the president and his almost divine right to rule, which had frequently been heard in many churches throughout the land, made any public statement of concern about the policies of the Banda clique personally very difficult for many christian officials.

In spite of the general uneasiness of the country's church leaders as regards a public confrontation with the government the situation had nonetheless begun to change within the Roman Catholic Church since the Pope's visit in 1989. John Paul had made references to human rights "as being integral to the Gospel" while in the country and, it would seem, had urged the Malawian bishops to face up to their responsibilities and tackle the major social issues which concerned the members of their congregations.36 This direct exhortation from their spiritual leader and the Catholic Church's tradition of issuing Pastoral Letters touching upon social and political issues in developing countries were both undoubtedly crucial factors in prompting the bishops to act as they finally did in 1992 after a period of indecision and anxiety as to the consequences of such action.37 Moreover, the Pope's personal interest, as a Pole, in the dramatic events in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 and his belief that the Roman Catholic Church had made "an important, even decisive, contribution" to the peaceful collapse of

communism there by its "commitment to defend and promote human rights" also impressed the Malawian bishops.38 Finally, during 1991 the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA) held a conference at St Peter's Major Seminary in Zomba. The theme of the conference, which was attended by a number of influential Roman Catholics working and teaching in Malawi as well as delegates from other denominations within the country and throughout the region, was "Pastors for the third millennium". In the opening address the Rt. Rev. Dr. P.A.Kalilombe emphasized the need for pastors "to have an adequate understanding of the political situation of our nations today" so that they could help their congregations "to find an appropriate political system which guarantees freedom, dignity, participation, and coresponsibility".39 What was needed, Dr Kalilombe argued, was a class of church leadership" that is prophetic, disinterested and yet courageous enough to be able to speak up for justice, freedom and dignity, even if it has to share in the suffering of the people because of its ministry".40 These words influenced the general course of the conference because in its concluding statement a call was issued for ministers to study politics and economics and, at the same time, expect to "exercise a prophetic ministry and by word and lifestyle promote social justice".41 Such a statement cannot but have stimulated further discussion within the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi concerning the overall political and economic situation and strengthened the hand of those calling for action.

However, it would be misleading to seek for the origins of the Pastoral Letter solely amongst the Catholic Church's upper hierarchy for as one bishop admitted himself when commenting upon the genesis of the letter: "I did not write the letter; it was written a long time ago on the hearts of the people".42 In a very real sense, therefore, the letter should be read as a reflection of what many Malawian Catholics had been saying to their priests

privately for years. Nor was such interaction between clergy and laity confined to the Catholic Church's for a similar process could be identified within the other denominations "at the grass roots parish level"43 and even inside the country's major secular institutions. It is only with an understanding of the nature and extent of this continuous discourse at the most fundamental level of Malawian society that one is able to understand the enormous popularity of the Pastoral Letter.

The available evidence would seem to suggest that the bishops finally decided to go ahead and make a public statement about the problems facing Malawi in January of 1992.44 Once the decision had been taken events moved fairly swiftly for the Pastoral Letter itself was issued in March for the season of Lent under the title Living Our Faith. The full text of the letter was expected to be read out in every Catholic Church throughout Malawi on 8 March although rumours of the letter's existence and its contents were already circulating prior to this.45 The leadership of the MCP later criticised the bishops for not engaging in dialogue with the government before issuing their letter but in July of 1993 Archbishop James Chiona of Blantyre Archdiocese stated that he and his fellow bishops "had tried all they could" to talk with the government and had even requested an audience with the president but unfortunately their efforts "bore no fruit", thereby forcing them to write the letter.46

The text of the letter itself was truly remarkable. In very respectful terms it recognized many of the achievements of the Malawi Congress Party before going on to call upon the entire nation to face up to the real problems within the country including "a growing gap between the rich and the poor with regard to expectation, living standards and development", "a grossly overcrowded", understaffed and underfunded education system, an inadequate health service

and the denial of freedom of expression and association.47 However, it also included a passage which cut to the very heart of the system of social control that Banda and his deputies had used to run the country virtually since independence:

> "For too long we have refused to see that, besides the praiseworthy achievements of the last decades our country still suffers from many evils . . . People will not be surprised to hear of these things; they know them. They will only be grateful that their true needs are recognised and that efforts are made to answer them. Feeding them with slogans and half-truths - or untruths! - only increases their cynicism and their mistrust of government representatives".48

In a few words the insistent propaganda produced by the regime, which had always claimed that the MCP had "delivered the goods" and had become over the years a smokescreen behind which everyone could hide their reservations about the government's mistakes and excesses, was swept away by a clear statement of reality. Without a doubt the Pastoral Letter was "a moment of truth" for the entire nation.49

The impact of the Pastoral Letter cannot really be over-emphasised because it simply was so dramatic. For one thing it potentially undermined the government's position amongst a significant proportion of the population because 16,000 copies of the letter were originally printed and distributed for the edification of at least 1.5 million Catholics.50 What is more, Catholic Churches were to be found in Malawi in both the urban and rural areas with the result that even in the villages from where Banda had traditionally drawn much of his support the people heard that their government was far from perfect.

That the bishops had struck a chord in the nation's psyche soon became evident for the letter was widely greeted "with clapping and ululation" when the priests read it out.51 In Zomba, for example, at a Baptist Church prayer meeting in a university house people started to almost weep with joy as they read through a copy of the letter together.52 Indeed, everyone tried to get hold of the full text of the letter so that within days photocopied versions were easily obtainable and being widely circulated. Suddenly Malawians started to talk much more freely about their country and its government and serious discussions took place concerning the contents of the letter in probably most offices in the land.

Initially the ruling authorities appeared undecided as to what to do. However, when the political leaders did finally take action they failed to realise, at least at first, the extent to which the bishops had won the sympathy of so many Malawians. Firstly, the Malawi News declared the letter to be "poisonous and seditious" while the government made it illegal to possess a copy.53 Hundreds of people were arrested because they were suspected of having copies of the letter and a number of reports have subsequently surfaced of the very poor conditions in the prisons where these people were detained and of the torture that was inflicted upon some of them.54 The printing press where the letter was printed in Balaka was fire-bombed, possibly by members of the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), the government's most powerful para-military force.55 Meanwhile, the bishops, themselves, faced the resentment and wrath of a party virtually totally unprepared for any public criticism of this nature. At first they were merely summoned to Kanjedza Police Station where they were "requested" to explain why they had written the letter. In fact, this compulsory explanation became an interrogation which lasted about eight hours as the bishops were forced to defend the text line by line.56 It would appear, however, that senior members

of the MCP were not satisfied with this interrogation and at a meeting on 10 March in Lilongwe certain party officials, including Wadson Deleza, the powerful Minister without Portfolio, made death threats against the bishops. Unfortunately for the MCP the meeting was recorded by the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and the relevant tapes were subsequently smuggled out of the country and later broadcast on Channel Africa in South Africa.57 This alerted the international community to the fact that the bishops' lives might be in danger and it has been argued that the "immediate and forceful international outcry, particularly from churches"58 did make it difficult for the Malawi government to harm the bishops although rumours were rife in the country that they had all been imprisoned when, in reality, they were kept under a sort of house arrest.59 Nonetheless, the government did manage to exact a certain degree of revenge by expelling one of the bishops, John Roche, along with another influential Irish Catholic in Malawi, Fr. O'Malley.60

The government's harsh reaction to the Pastoral Letter sparked off demonstrations at Chancellor College in Zomba, the main campus of the University of Malawi. There was some precedent for this since the students had demonstrated in a very restrained manner in 1989 while some of their number had been detained in 1983 and academic staff purged as early as the mid 1970's.61 Nonetheless, the university had never been closed in the past because of serious student unrest and there appeared no prospect of such action in 1992 prior to the Pastoral Letter and the government's response. However, the Catholic students at the college were enraged by the veiled threats that were starting to be issued against the bishops. Consequently, on Sunday 15 March they organised a march to the Catholic Cathedral in Zomba in order to show solidarity with the bishops' cause. According to those who witnessed it staff at the main hospital in Zomba came out to cheer on the students. On the return from the cathedral the police decided to arrest a

number of the students which led to a hastily-convened meeting of most of the student body at which it was decided to demonstrate on a larger scale the following day and even march up to the president's official residence in Zomba. On 16 March teaching was impossible as angry students tore up exam papers and started to mass on the access road to Chancellor College chanting cries of "multi-party" whilst building temporary barricades. Meanwhile, a small detachment of the Police Mobile Force (PMF), the government's elite internal security unit, had taken up a position further down the road thereby blocking the students' route to State House. It seemed that there might be a serious confrontation until the college principal arrived in a car and quite sensibly agreed to close the college a week early. After this the students quickly dispersed and the tension was dissipated.62

Unfortunately for the authorities this was only the beginning of a series of events that they seemed increasingly incapable of coping with. Their first mistake was to try and keep the other main constituent college of the university, the Polytechnic, open. By closing Chancellor College the government put about a thousand or so students on the roads and some of them went straight to the Polytechnic in Blantyre to encourage their colleagues to begin demonstrating as well. Moreover, since the Polytechnic is near the centre of Malawi's largest city this was potentially a more serious problem for Tembo and his lieutenants than the trouble in Zomba. Predictably, therefore, when the students from the Polytechnic started to stone cars on the main road and even vandalise a nearby general store the subsequent police reaction was far less restrained than it had been in Zomba. This time a much larger contingent of the PMF moved in to crush the riot. Sadly, the police do not seem to have been correctly briefed as to the precise nature of the general situation with the result that they made a sweep around the back of the hostels using tear gas to flush out all the students and then some of the

catering staff who had not been involved in the demonstrations which had taken place in front of the main entrance of the Polytechnic. By all accounts the police were very rough with anyone whom they caught and about 70 or so people found themselves in prison that evening although most of them were later released.63 In the following weeks the police began the process of hunting down the ring leaders of these incidents at both Chancellor College and the Polytechnic while trouble also erupted at Bunda College of Agriculture, another of the university's constituent colleges just outside Lilongwe, where a power cut one evening allowed the students to stone some of the buildings. Meanwhile, although many students began to fear for their safety the authorities still allowed the annual national conference of the Student Christian Organisation of Malawi to go ahead in the capital over the Easter weekend suggesting that the MCP was not nearly as systematic in its programme of detentions as it was sometimes made out to be.64

Meanwhile, the Pastoral Letter had a significant impact upon the Malawian opposition parties outside the country. The exiled opponents to Banda had been active for years but were divided into different groups and enjoyed little real support within Malawi.65 However, the growing frustration of the donor community with the government in Lilongwe encouraged fresh developments amongst some of the leading exiled Malawians so that in July of 1991 the United Front for Multiparty Democracy (UFMD) was formed in Zambia while in December the group published an appeal in Southern Africa Economic and Political Monthly.66 In fact, a major meeting of "dissidents", as the Banda regime always described its external opponents, had been planned as early as December 1991 to take place on 20 March 1992 before the Pastoral Letter had even been heard of.67 The dramatic events of March inside the country, however, added a far greater degree of significance to this gathering of over 60 Malawian opponents of the MCP at the Intercontinental Hotel in Lusaka for

what was called the "Prospects for Democracy in Malawi" seminar. The location of the meeting in Zambia was no coincidence since the new government of Chiluba was most sympathetic to the deliberations of these men.68 New life had been breathed into the opposition to Banda, therefore, and this was to have important consequences in the coming months.

Although press reports at the time concerning the seminar in Lusaka were largely positive and stressed the common purpose of the participants in their quest to topple the Malawian government later accounts of the conference have revealed that there was in reality a considerable amount of disagreement between the delegates. Apparently, the divisions that emerged concerned the best strategy to be employed in opposing the MCP with one group advocating an "inside war" while the other emphasised the need to put external pressure upon the Lilongwe regime. In addition to this disagreement concerning strategy a struggle for power seems to have arisen over the future leadership of the UFMD probably exacerbated by personality clashes and ethnic differences.69

At the centre of this conflict was Chakufwa Chihana, a long term opponent of the MCP, who had been invited to the seminar along with a number of other sympathetic Malawians still resident in their own country.70 Chihana had clashed with the MCP as early as 1962 as a trade union leader since he claimed that the party was exploiting the urban proletariat.71 He had followed this act of defiance by leading the last official strike in the country in 1963.72 During the 1970s Chihana was detained for seven years by the government which provided him with excellent qualifications to help launch a new phase of direct confrontation with the ruling party should he wish to do so in the wake of the bishops' efforts.73 Moreover, Chihana was the secretary general of the Southern African Trades Union Coordination Council, whose offices were in Lilongwe, and a figure of some substance although it would be true to say that

the majority of Malawians knew little about him at the start of 1992.

In Lusaka Chihana seems to have championed the policy of internal opposition to the MCP and it is possible that some delegates became confused as efforts were made to combine this approach with the option of external pressure. Whatever the precise nature of the various discussions and debates it does appear that Chihana was asked by the UFMD leaders on 23 March if he would agree to be the UFMD's representative inside Malawi. However, according to certain sources within the Malawian press Chihana rejected this offer preferring not to be directly linked to the UFMD.74 He now decided, it would seem, to follow his own policy of direct confrontation with the Banda clique backed by some of the delegates of the Lusaka meeting who agreed with his views - but not by the leadership of the UFMD.75

On April 6 he arrived at Kamuzu International Airport, with the intention of reading out a prepared statement outlining the excesses of the government and the need for real democracy, only for the Malawian security forces to bundle him into a waiting car and take him off to a fresh spell of detention. However, Chihana had done his ground work well since he had announced over the BBC World Service before his return to Malawi that he intended to confront the government with a call for serious reforms and as a result his dramatic arrest was covered by the international media which promptly condemned it in the strongest terms possible. Chihana's deliberate stage-managed defiance of the MCP government was important for two basic reasons. Firstly, it kept up the momentum for change within Malawi that had been started by the Pastoral Letter. Secondly, it provided western donors with an excellent pretext for suspending aid to the country; in effect, Chihana's arrest was the "trip wire" for the West's final rejection of the MCP and its ancient leader.75 Chihana was to remain a problem for the government that it appeared unable to solve

since whether he continued to be detained, was put on trial, or was simply released his role as a focus for much of the discontent with the regime both inside and outside the country was embarrassing politically.

Meanwhile the general situation inside Malawi continued to deteriorate during the rest of the month of April. The government found it necessary to devalue the kwacha by fifteen percent which was a sign of the strain upon the economy. More seriously for the authorities, however, was the pressure that had been building up for pay rises as a result of the Pastoral Letter's condemnation of the extremely low wages paid by the government and the leading private companies. Feeling the need for some kind of action in order to seize the initiative from its critics, therefore, the government took the disastrous decision to offer large pay rises but weighted them in such a way that higher officials benefitted far more than everyone else.76 At Chancellor College this decision angered the Clerical, Technical and Support (CTS) staff who only received a salary increase of as little as twenty percent while the academic staff took home fifty percent or more. In an unprecedented move the CTS workers went on strike in protest and brought the college to a halt. The students, who had not long returned from their extended Easter vacation and had been forced to sign an undertaking promising not to cause any further trouble, supported the cause of the CTS employees and started to do some limited damage to the college in frustration at the failure of the authorities to provide them with regular food while the strike lasted since CTS staff were refusing to run the canteen. Once more the PMF was moved into position to seal off campus but this time when the government acted it did so in overwhelming force. PMF reinforcements were rushed from Blantyre in large numbers and on 28 April intimidation was used to order the students to leave campus and return to their homes. In the face of such a dramatic and threatening display of force the CTS workers agreed to end their strike.77

Nor did the students in Blantyre follow the lead of their colleagues in Zomba as they had done previously since their experiences of PMF violence in March caused them, not surprisingly, to stay out of trouble this time. Nonetheless, it was clear that a new era in the relations between the government and its workforce had been reached whilst the paralysis of the university authorities in the face of the strike reflected the inability of the ruling elite to handle the new conditions prevailing in the country.

By the beginning of May considerable social tension had built up within the country although the MCP appeared unaware of the seriousness of this. On 4 May about 3,000 workers at the David Whitehead textile factory in Blantyre stopped their machines and moved outside to demonstrate for better wages. The police soon dispersed them but they massed again on the following day so that the factory had to be closed. On Wednesday 6 May the workers marched towards the city centre picking up as they went along other members of the urban workforce who were also calling for higher wages. The demonstrating workers attracted unemployed youths and some students and together they all confronted the security forces. When violence erupted between the police and the marchers all law and order in Blantyre and Limbe dissolved in an explosion of looting and vandalism that shocked the entire nation. Barricades were constructed across main roads using flag poles while great piles of stones were collected to hurl at the police or any approaching vehicles. The rioters paid particular attention to shops owned by Banda and Kadzamira thereby proving that most violent unrest in Malawi now had a very definite political element to it. Moreover, the police's inexperience in dealing with such a situation caused them to lose control of the centre of Blantyre and it was only when the PMF started using live ammunition and shooting looters that order was restored though at the cost of up to roughly 40 people shot dead.78 When the clearing up finally started after the rioters had dispersed the

extent of the damage became clear with certain parts of Blantyre full of broken glass and discarded stones but patrolled by units of armed police who were also deployed in Zomba although no trouble occurred there.79

The rioting soon spread to Lilongwe where Chihana was due to appear at the High Court to be charged with sedition. A large crowd gathered outside the court chanting that they wanted to see the "brave man" and when the authorities failed to produce Chihana people went on the rampage in a similar fashion to the rioters in Blantyre. On 8 May trouble erupted in Kanengo, a northern suburb of Lilongwe, but by the afternoon the police had restored order to the capital.80 Even so, this sudden spate of urban riots shocked the establishment and caused the country's only daily newspaper to ask its readers: "What is happening?"81 Moreover, the president felt it necessary to make a sort of emergency broadcast to the nation in which he called upon his people to "express their grievances peacefully and to uphold the peace and calm, law and order that has been the hallmark of the Malawi nation".82 The government seemed to be losing its grip upon the country and when the numbers at the annual Kamuzu Day celebrations on 14 May, the official "birthday" of the president, were only about 2,000 (most of whom were school children brought in by the MCP in buses) opposition groups claimed that they were finally winning the support inside the country which they needed if they were going to overthrow the Banda-Tembo-Kadzamira ruling clique.83 Nor could the MCP escape the ever mounting pressure upon it by turning to foreign affairs for relief since from 11 to 13 May the most important aid donors met in Paris and decided, partly due to the fierce lobbying of UFMD members, to block all new aid to Malawi until "substantive progress" was made by the government on the observance of human rights.84 Although the donor countries agreed to continue humanitarian aid and provide for the Mozambican refugees inside Malawi this was a serious blow to Banda and Tembo in a year when the economy,

already heavily dependent upon foreign aid, was struggling because of the drought that had hit much of southern Africa in 1992.

THE EMERGENCE OF OPPOSITION GROUPS INSIDE THE COUNTRY: JUNE-DECEMBER 1992

As the government struggled to maintain its hold over the country some commentators began to cast their eyes upon the army. There was a certain degree of speculation at the time that if Tembo could not impose himself and restore normality then "a *coup d'etat* by the military is a scenario that looms on the horizon".85 There were some legitimate reasons for the extent of this speculation. For one thing, reports reached the outside world that at the end of April 27 senior and middle ranking army officers met the president and told him that they would not be prepared to undertake policing duties against citizens calling for democratic reforms.86 In addition, when the students had first marched in Zomba in March a number of eyewitnesses claimed to have seen army personnel encouraging the young demonstrators while troops appear to have refused to intervene in the earliest disturbances in Blantyre.87 What is more, there was a tradition of tension between the army and certain elements within the establishment caused partly by Tembo's desire to expand first the MYP and then the police as alternative military forces to rival the army. These moves had been successfully blocked by the army commander, Lieutenant-General Melvin Khanga, who had managed to win Banda's confidence, although anger against the Tembo faction was intensified within the military by the army's deployment from 1987 onwards in Mozambique to protect the Ncala railway line which naturally involved them in clashes with Renamo, the guerrilla force fighting the government in Maputo, even though it was an open secret that leading members of the Banda regime, including elements within the MYP and the police, actively supported the Mozambican rebels.88

The Malawi Army was still only a relatively small force by 1992 of roughly 7,000 men divided into three infantry battalions and one support battalion.89 However, it continued to maintain an air of efficiency and, above all, was popular with the public to such an extent, in fact, that when troops were seen in Blantyre during the riots the people cheered.90 It had been the army's determination to largely keep out of politics that made it so popular because in 1992 it was still seen by many Malawians as the one institution independent of the MCP and therefore capable of standing up to Tembo. However, a degree of uncertainty hung over the future direction of the army in April and May since Khanga was not well and was clearly coming to the end of his tenure of command. Given the generally volatile situation in the country this led to a whole series of rumours that the general had actually been abducted and tortured by Tembo in order to assure the loyalty of the army. The full truth surrounding these rumours is difficult to ascertain although it is possible that Tembo did try to put pressure upon Khanga to back the regime. Indeed, it has been claimed that in February 1992 Banda formally asked Khanga to support a Tembo take over of the government but that Khanga rejected the idea saying that it would have to be ratified by the full military council. According to this line of reasoning Khanga's retirement as army commander on 12 June was not due, as officially announced, to ill health but rather to his stubborn resistance to Tembo's political machinations.91 So great had the speculation become over the condition of the general and the feelings of his troops that Banda felt it necessary to make a special broadcast in July explaining that Khanga was genuinely ill and made a point of emphasising the need for "mutual respect and a spirit of partnership between soldiers and civilians".92 Meanwhile, the official media tried to largely ignore the passing of the country's senior soldier although one magazine attempted to redress the balance with a small appreciation.93

Khanga's replacement at the top of the army was his deputy, Isaac Johane, who came from Mchinji district near the border with Zambia. Reports in the western media speculated that he would be even more hostile to Tembo than his predecessor.94 Certainly Johane enjoyed an enviable reputation in Malawi as a strong man who had led the army in successful operations against Renamo after some initial disasters and rumours about his fearless confrontations with Tembo were legion. However, Johane had only had a very limited education and it would seem that he did not wish to become embroiled in politics with which he probably felt extremely uneasy. Moreover, even if Johane had wanted to take action inside the country in the second half of 1992 he would have faced the opposition of the head of Intelligence, General Liyabunya, who was a Tembo man and had been implicated in the elimination of Malawian political exiles abroad. Indeed, it has been suggested that the delay between Khanga's departure and Johane's appointment, which worried many at the time, may have been due to Tembo's attempts to get Liyabunya made army commander instead of Johane. What is more, the Banda regime, and more recently Tembo himself, had made sure that the army had been well looked after. Consequently, the senior officers probably realised that they might stand to lose a great deal if the political system in the country changed dramatically and suddenly. In addition, many of the rumours circulating concerning Johane's independence were largely false for in reality some of his officers and men felt that he was too close to the ruling elite.95 In effect, he was probably unduly influenced by Liyabunya and Major General Manyozo, who was also linked to Tembo and was later to be accused, along with Liyabunya, of diverting sophisticated weaponry from army stores to the MYP.96 Whatever the precise nature of the various machinations within the army events during 1992 appeared to demonstrate that there was no unified leadership calling for specific action. Clearly some middle ranking officers were unhappy with the government but they were not prepared to act without support from their superiors, which

was not forthcoming. Nonetheless, the army played an important negative role in the events of 1992 because Tambo knew that every action he took would be carefully scrutinised by the soldiers. As a result, the military undoubtedly helped to restrain the MCP; in effect, the army became a sort of passive opposition group.97

With the army only a passive spectator the largely loyal police and MYP were able to move against those elements whom the government identified as responsible for the disturbances in the country. Thus, the students found themselves facing an extended absence from classes and the necessity of having to re-apply for admission if they wished to return to university. These tactics enabled the authorities to identify those individuals whom they believed were ring leaders in the demonstrations. At Chancellor College this lead to a stormy meeting between the academic staff and the college administration when some lecturers voiced their concern that students would be prevented from returning to the university for purely political reasons. Subsequently, some 60 academic staff signed a petition calling for the authorities to readmit all students without exception.98 Meanwhile the students had largely been cowed by the display of force used to disperse them in April and at least four of them fled to Zambia in June where they were granted political asylum.99 When Chancellor College reopened for the final year students only in July all remained quiet; as was the case when the rest of the students finally made it back to the academic world in September, although the drought soon disrupted college life by forcing a further closure due to water shortages in Zomba.100 The full ramifications of the student troubles earlier in the year could not be entirely brushed under the carpet by the government, however, for those students who were refused admission decided to challenge the ruling by taking the university to court, much to the embarrassment of the vice chancellor.101

In the aftermath of the riots and the suspension of international aid the government tried to follow a dual track policy of giving the impression of being ready to initiate reform while coming down hard upon potential opponents. Thus, for example, 17 detainees were released in June and July; but simultaneously hundreds of office workers with access to photocopiers, computers, typewriters and fax machines found themselves arrested by the police as the authorities attempted to halt the dissemination of material hostile to the MCP and its leadership.102 In fact, Banda had offered concessions immediately after the riots in a move designed to diffuse national tension; these had included the ending of the compulsory purchase of MCP membership cards if one wished to use a bus or shop in the public markets. However, these reforms were presented to the people along with a ringing endorsement of Tembo and Kadzamira which tended to suggest that the reforms had little significance so far as the authorities were concerned.103

It became clear from June onwards that the MCP had recovered from the initial shock of the Pastoral Letter, the student action and the riots and was now trying to re-establish itself using its well-known tactics of propaganda, misinformation and concealed intimidation. A well organised national celebration for Independence Day on 5 July, for example, enabled the government to declare that the noise of the crowd had shamed the "dissidents".104 National elections in June were also used by the regime to vindicate their rule even though the turn out was possibly as little as only ten percent since the people realised that the process of voting remained largely meaningless given the government's tendency to appoint those MPs who were not actually re-elected. At the same time the unpredictable manner in which the establishment dealt with Chihana probably undermined the confidence of some of the opposition leaders for after being released on bail on 11 July

the now internationally famous champion of democracy in Malawi was detained once more only three days later.105 Chihana was subsequently released on bail for a second time on 8 September; but his trial did not finally begin until November.106 Also in September a joint delegation of Scottish, English and Malawian lawyers issued a report on human rights in Malawi after considering evidence and travelling around the country. The final version of their findings confirmed that the MCP still maintained a strong hold over the population because, as the lawyers had discovered, the most common emotion encountered in their travels "from villages to government officials, was fear".107 Banda and Tembo, therefore, were fighting back and remained determined to hold on to power. But this retaliation by the MCP was in the face of an ever-deteriorating economic situation as a result of the suspension of aid. By the middle of June a further devaluation of the kwacha of over 20 percent took place followed by a freeze on all foreign currency since the banks simply did not have any. The government was hanging on by the skin of its teeth in purely economic terms; but the western donors then offered Banda a lifeline in the form of a bridging loan which allowed the authorities to prevent the total collapse of the economy.108 Nonetheless, 1992 was "a nightmare year" for the Malawian economy with inflation reaching 22.7 percent while rioting in urban areas and sporadic and often unexplained fires cost the insurance industry over 10 million kwacha.109 Moreover, the suspension of aid in May meant that the government lost over 270 million kwacha at a time when the drought was causing severe hardship and the large pay increases were draining the national reserves.110 The overall effect of all these factors was "the biggest annual decline (seven percent) in the output of goods and services (real GDP) since independence".111 The strain upon the entire economic infrastructure of the country was intense and undoubtedly partly explains the often apparently illogical and even at times bizarre actions of the ruling party which must have had to operate in a virtual state of crisis

for much of 1992 given the serious economic position of the country.

The focus of opposition to the government shifted back to the churches in June when leaders of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), the second largest christian denomination in the country after the Catholics 112, along with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Church of Scotland sent a letter to the president on 2 June which was dramatically entitled "The Nation of Malawi in Crisis: The Church's Concern". Such a move by the Protestant churches both inside and outside the country was not a total surprise for the Pastoral Letter had stimulated them to question their long and none too distinguished support of Banda. For instance, Aaron Longwe, a CCAP minister, had already been detained for preaching a sermon that very obviously showed his support for the contents of the Pastoral Letter while the Church of Scotland had officially declared in May that it was wholeheartedly behind the Malawian churches in their struggle for justice and had even refuted over the BBC Banda's claim to be an elder in the church.113 However, the June letter was something new since it raised a whole range of issues, like the Pastoral Letter before it, and so kept alive the call for change within the country which had been in danger of stagnating in the face of the government's drive to restore its authority. The text of the letter itself noted the concessions already offered by Banda and acknowledged the problems caused by the drought. On the other hand, it pointed out that the president needed to appoint "a broadly-based Commission which will enjoy the confidence of all the people of Malawi" to make specific proposals concerning "structural reform" of the political system, a review of the judiciary and the just distribution of income. If this was not enough the letter went on to call upon the government to end detention without trial, release or try fairly all political detainees, reform the prison service and allow freedom of expression.114 The letter was widely circulated throughout Malawi and on 9

June a petition signed by 57 ministers of the Livingstonia Synod of the CCAP was issued as a declaration of support for the letter and its contents.115 Unfortunately, the CCAP was divided along regional and ethnic lines since although Livingstonia in the north and Blantyre in the south endorsed the need for political reform Nkhoma Synod in the Central Region stubbornly refused to criticise the government with the result that later in the year the entire synod was expelled from the CCAP. Aside from this regional split inside the CCAP, which reflected the very nature of Malawi more than anything else, the letter of 2 June was crucial to the developing opposition movement since it restored the momentum for change and helped to further undermine the government's ideological position, especially in the light of the silence of the Catholic bishops after the issuing of the Pastoral Letter; a development caused, perhaps, by the regime's continuing tactics of intimidation.116

Livingstonia Synod now became a power house for national change for in August it set up a committee to campaign openly for a referendum to be held in Malawi on whether a multi-party political system should be introduced into the country.117 The new committee's brief included organising peaceful demonstrations to campaign for a referendum and supporting the rights of the individual through the distribution of literature and political education. Some of its members were men of impressive sincerity having at the same time the necessary determination and courage to push ahead with their objectives. Nor were their efforts to be wasted. The letter of 2 June had not been entirely overlooked by the government for on 10 June the president announced that Tembo would be prepared to meet Presbyterian ministers to discuss reform although when this offer was taken up by certain clergymen they were told that such a meeting was no longer necessary.118 However, the external pressure upon the Banda regime had continued late in July when representatives of the Council of Churches for Britain visited Malawi and encouraged dialogue between

the churches and the government.119 As a result of these events the reform party in the CCAP had decided to approach like-minded Malawians throughout the country in an effort to build a consensus and create the "broadly-based" committee that the open letter of June had recommended. Thus, the Presbyterians were joined by representatives of the Muslim community, the business fraternity, the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Christian Council of Malawi, which had issued its own document in support of the Pastoral Letter and the CCAP epistle on 26 August 120, the Law Society of Malawi and the Ecumenical Council of Malawi. At the end of August these various bodies addressed a joint memorandum to Banda repeating the call for "a broad based Commission ...to deal with all the issues currently facing us" and stressing the need for dialogue between the government and such a body.121 Ultimately, this group of community leaders constituted themselves into the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) in September. The PAC saw itself as a vehicle through which issues could be raised with the government and meaningful dialogue conducted in the interests of the nation. In addition, it operated as an umbrella organisation from which other opposition groups could emerge in the future.122 Significantly, it was the first independent political pressure group to be openly formed in Malawi since the one-party state had been imposed.

Secular politicians were not prepared to let church leaders take all the limelight for long and also in September a new political organisation calling itself the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) emerged. Since the national constitution did not permit any political parties other than the MCP AFORD had to describe itself as a pressure group although everyone realised it was nothing less than a new party in its infancy.123 Of course AFORD did not emerge out of a vacuum. In fact, its infrastructure had been in existence for about a year or so and it was later alleged that Chihana had put the final

pieces in place at the Lusaka conference in March.124 AFORD was basically Chihana's party; he was its chairman and right from the start he dominated it to perhaps rather an unhealthy, but probably inevitable, extent which possibly hindered the development of other leaders within the organisation. More worrying still was the degree to which Chihana remained so closely in touch with the western powers so that John Major, the British Prime Minister, for example, actually faxed him the contents of one of Banda's letters asking for additional financial assistance and requested Chihana's comments so that Downing Street could formulate its policy towards Malawi. Nonetheless, Chihana stood out as the only leader with enough moral authority to challenge Banda. One major drawback with AFORD, however, was that it drew almost all of its support from the north of the country. Thus, it could not claim, initially at least, to represent any kind of national consensus.125

Events in Malawi continued to move "at lightning speed" and although the MCP annual convention in September traditionally endorsed the one-party system such a declaration already appeared anachronistic even before the formation of yet another political body in October. This new political group was the United Democratic Front (UDF), some of whose members had been part of the PAC.126 The leader of the UDF was Vakili Muluzi who had been a leading MCP official in the past and even a minister in the Banda government at one point. Another senior member of the new organisation was Edward Bwanali, a former regional MCP chairman and also a cabinet minister at one time. Both these men tended to be regarded at first as untrustworthy by the average Malawian because of their former political allegiances which seemed to suggest that they were opportunists. The UDF also suffered from a severe credibility problem if it wished to present itself to the Malawian people as a national party since most of its members came from the south of the country and many were muslims.127 Significantly, therefore, the new political groupings that

had emerged tended to reflect the traditional regional and ethnic divisions within Malawian society.

Although the opposition to the MCP and its ailing leader appeared to have regained the initiative by the beginning of October Banda and his deputies were far from beaten. On 18 October Banda stole a march on his opponents by announcing that there would be a referendum on the future of the one-party system in Malawi, though he made no mention of the possible date of such a referendum. He claimed that MCP officials had urged him to hold a referendum so that they could show "publicly and convincingly that their districts have rejected the multi-party system of government genuinely".128 This surprising declaration came only the day before the first meeting between the President's Committee on Dialogue (PCD), the body formed by the government to engage in discussions with its critics, and the PAC thereby relegating the discussion at the meeting to matters only pertaining to the future referendum for which the PAC delegates could not possibly have been fully prepared. However, AFORD immediately welcomed the news subject to certain conditions, including the need for an independent referendum commission and the monitoring of the actual voting by the United Nations (UN) or some such international body, as did one of the Malawian opposition parties in the United States.129

Naturally, future meetings of the PAC and the PCD were subsequently overshadowed in the country by speculation concerning the coming referendum which began to reach fever pitch, especially in the pages of some of the new papers and magazines that had started to be published as the government liberalised its attitudes to the media somewhat.130 In fact, prior to the developments sparked off by the Pastoral Letter journalism and the relaying of news to the wider public had been controlled almost exclusively by the authorities through the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation and two newspapers,

The Daily Times and The Malawi News. In 1991 a new paper, The Financial Post, had been launched but it only began to tackle really sensitive political issues after March 1992.131 However, during the turbulent months following the Catholic bishops' defiant public criticism of the MCP government a whole host of new daily, weekly and monthly periodicals appeared on the streets until by 1993 it was estimated that something like 21 newspapers were in circulation.132 Suddenly, from having to face one single, pedantic, official version of events Malawians were swamped with alternatives as they sought to express themselves in print and debate and describe what was happening in their country.

Meanwhile, the PAC cancelled its second meeting with the PCD scheduled for 22 October out of respect for the veteran Malawian politician, Orton Chirwa, who died in Zomba prison. His funeral on 1 November was attended by an estimated 40,000 people including Chihana. This gathering in the north of Malawi gave an added boost to the pro-democracy movement in the country.133 Further meetings with the PCD on 11 and 12 of November tackled the topics of violence and harassment against individuals and a joint statement was agreed upon.134 Sadly, MCP officials continued to make intimidatory speeches and attacks against supporters of the Chihana faction were not uncommon. For example, Mr Msampha Murado, Chairman of the MCP in Lilongwe District, reportedly threatened the lives of people promoting multi-party democracy in the country and declared that there was a death squad (*chiswe*) at MCP headquarters ready for such people.135 The PAC, however, was unable to compete with the intense interest generated by the arrival of a United Nations Technical Team which reached the country in the middle of the month at the request of the government and stayed for just under a week in order to compile a report on the implementation of the proposed referendum in Malawi. The subsequent recommendations of the UN Team were soon published and largely dwelt upon

technicalities such as the need for rigorous voter registration and properly designed ballot boxes. Moreover, though the report did touch upon the obvious necessity for an atmosphere unmarred by violence and intimidation it made no mention of the existing laws of detention that made such an atmosphere very difficult to attain in Malawi.136 Critics soon seized upon these shortcomings in the report and argued that it allowed the MCP the best chance it could get of winning the referendum by conducting it in an environment favourable to the existing regime. As a result, calls were issued by opposition groups outside the country to boycott the referendum but these fell on deaf ears in the PAC.137

The behaviour of the MCP throughout the month of December certainly seemed to suggest that it had decided to take up the challenge of the referendum and use all the advantages at its disposal to strengthen its position. In fact, December saw the MCP campaigning for the coming vote in earnest while as early as the beginning of November the Christian Council had written to the president expressing their concern that the MCP had already "started campaigning for votes before the people are adequately educated on why they have to vote and how".138 Nonetheless, calls were issued by government officials for the strengthening of the party while the people were warned throughout the country not to listen to the advocates of multi-party democracy.139 Even the president got in on the act and "dismissed as lies, dissidents' claims that the majority of Malawians were no longer behind him".140 This kind of aggressive campaigning forced the UDF to complain about the blatant injustices of such behaviour when the pressure groups were not allowed to campaign. Of course, the MCP denied that it was campaigning at all but merely carrying out its regular activities. There were few observers, however, who took such a claim seriously.141

Clearly, the opposition was at a serious disadvantage and it was suggested that the different groups should unite in order to offset this and avoid the experience of the opposition in Kenya where disunity significantly weakened it.142 Meanwhile, although Chihana's wife received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in November on behalf of her husband the government still sentenced him to two years in prison on 14 December, although following a reduction in his sentence to nine months in March 1993 the defiant opponent of the Banda regime was finally released on 12 June.143

However, more sinister developments were already underway in Malawi. From October onwards armed robberies had started to occur. These had been virtually unheard of in the country previous to this except for the odd incident near the border with Mozambique connected with civil war there.144 As the year came to an end a spate of such incidents took place throughout the country so that one newspaper columnist could write of "shops being plundered, cars being highjacked at gunpoint, bank robberies more akin to novels than reality and so on".145 The obvious explanation for these events was that the new peace accord in Mozambique meant that a lot of guns were suddenly available for idle Malawian hands. However, there were rumours that some of these attacks had been arranged by MCP officials in order to discredit the increasing atmosphere of openness within the country and so prevent the implementation of reforms necessary for real democracy. These rumours were later followed up by stories in the independent press of MYP troops taking part in armed robberies.146 In addition, when the Malawi Army finally moved against the MYP in December 1993 and forcibly disarmed this para-military force fresh allegations emerged of huge secret stores of firearms and ammunition, assassination lists and documents containing plans to destabilise the country.147 Information also began to circulate, meanwhile, that Tembo had been using police helicopters to bring arms into Malawi from Mozambique

across Lake Chilwa.148 In spite of all the events of 1992, therefore the ailing Banda regime was still determined to hold onto power for as long as possible regardless of the consequences for the nation.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE EVENTS OF 1992

There can be little doubt that the distribution of the Pastoral Letter by the Catholic bishops was the single most important factor in setting in motion the remarkable events of 1992 in Malawi. Secondly, the end of the Cold War meant that Banda could not count upon support from the West but on the contrary faced an increasingly hostile group of donor countries intent upon forcing their own agenda upon Malawi. While we are probably still too close to the events of 1992 to be able to gauge the full extent and importance of foreign manipulation in Malawi during the year it is nonetheless clear that this was also a factor which should not be overlooked. Evidence of foreign intervention in some of the crucial developments of the year is not hard to find. The Lusaka seminar in March, for example, was funded by a German organization, the Frederich Albert Foundation.149 The students, what is more, were certainly manipulated by foreign governments and opposition groups. The American Embassy in Lilongwe reportedly encouraged some students to demonstrate and even offered them scholarships overseas should things become unpleasant for them in Malawi while one embassy staff member was seen on campus in Zomba around the time of the unrest.150 Indeed, Malawi has always been a country that has attracted a considerable number of "visitors" and expatriates over the years, partly because of Banda's idiosyncratic foreign policy, some of whose working hours have been spent in clandestine actions which might be described as spying in more sensational publications.151 Moreover, the opposition groups in Lusaka made no secret of their wish to see

the students take further action after the first demonstrations.152 Even the BBC decided to take part in the goading of the student body for Mike Hall made a somewhat irresponsible broadcast on the World Service in April saying that everyone was waiting for the Chancellor College students to return from their extended vacation so that they could continue the struggle against the Banda regime. Nonetheless, having said all of this there can be no doubt that much of the student action in March and again in April bore all the hallmarks of genuine and spontaneous reactions to perceived injustices.

External intervention of varying kinds certainly did take place in Malawi throughout 1992, therefore, but this cannot explain the unprecedented reaction to the Pastoral Letter. The nation simply did not feel the same after 8 March. The most basic reason for this can only be that the Pastoral Letter undermined for the first time all the years of MCP propaganda that had been showered upon the population. Although most people had always realised that much of this propaganda was simply untrue they had come to accept it, along with the general state of affairs, as the way things were. The 8 March 1992 transformed all of this by offering the possibility that change was both necessary and morally imperative and that this could be said in public. In other words, the Catholic bishops' action gave birth to "a new political culture" in Malawi which had about it "a romantic quality" precisely because it was both so novel and, at the same time, quite unexpected.153

The chief failing of the Banda regime was its imposition upon the country of an increasingly stifling "culture of fear and paralysis...and of self-righteousness".154 Banda smothered the nation with his own idiosyncratic ideas and authoritarian trappings. Although he talked of ending "tribalism" in the country he nonetheless championed the Chewa, which was resented by the other ethnic groups inside the country, and, as a result, he failed to create

the necessary national cohesion. With Chichewa established as the national language other dialects such as Tumbuka, which had featured in MBC programmes in the early days of the Banda government, naturally suffered.155 As Banda grew older he gradually became ever more a creature of habit while his deputies, in the hope of trying to win his approval, sought to arrange public functions in precisely the same manner each year. Thus, so-called "traditional dances" degenerated into one simple dance that became the only acceptable entertainment at public functions. Dances such as *Chopa, Mwingti, Chintali* and *Beni* were gradually discouraged at rallies in favour of "uninformed *Mbumbas*" - hundreds of women barely dancing at all as they praised their president.156

Since most of the leading intellectuals and politicians were imprisoned or forced into exile this deadening culture was never adequately challenged ideologically. All the time, meanwhile, Banda constantly kept on talking about his achievements during the 1950's in his speeches. Whether it was actually Banda's goal the result of these particular policies was to arrest the entire nation's social and cultural development. In effect, it was as if Malawian history had stopped in 1964. With considerable irony, although this was almost certainly not intentional, the Deputy Minister of External Affairs admitted as much when he declared in a speech in parliament in April 1993 while defending his government's record against intentional criticism, that "All we have done is to run the country the way we were taught by the British".157

The whole country was tied down and constricted, therefore, by this artificial culture of aggressive conservatism. The extent of this restrictive conservatism could even include eating habits so that Malawians living along the shore of Lake Malawi were told by their president that they should refrain

from consuming cassava porridge (*kondowole*) in order to fall into line with the majority of the population.158 Not surprisingly, such determined efforts to establish total social uniformity deadened indigenous cultural development within many of the different regions of the country while also failing to build the sort of national identity that a more subtle policy might have achieved.159 Sadly, but probably inevitably, the culture of the nation virtually ground to a halt with the result that Malawi did not even manage to develop its own brand of popular music as did, for example, Zambia or certain East African countries.160 Indeed, the apparently sudden emergence of so many new journals and papers after March 1992 should be seen partly as a minor creative outburst after years of cultural and intellectual restraint. This argument can be sustained by the appearance of a new school of poetry after March 1992 which concerned itself largely with the political and social problems facing Malawi.161 One of the anonymous letters circulated in 1992 accurately assessed the cultural malaise from which the nation had been suffering when it analysed the MCP's remembrance of those who died in the struggle for independence:

> "It is now twenty five years since Malawi achieved independence, and it is tempting to allow Martyrs' Day to become a ritual without thinking about its full meaning. Did the martyrs who died during the struggle do so simply to become fixed like statues, as part of a myth which no-one thinks about anymore? Or did they die for freedom which allows people to think for themselves and to make their own decisions, not just once, at independence, but all the time?"162

Naturally, of course, it was not possible to arrest the evolution of the entire country. Underneath the smothering official culture some change and development did take place. But it was nonetheless retarded by the prevailing orthodoxy so that society gave the impression of being almost stunted.

By 1992 there were already signs that the pressures upon the very fabric of the Banda sub-culture had increased. New social forces were at work that had gradually undermined the system of social control designed by the MCP to maintain its power base in the country. The population was growing at a meteoric rate leading to greater pressure for land and an ever increasing drift to the urban centres with the result that high density suburbs such as Ndirande in Blantyre had become potential tinder boxes of mass unrest and violence simply waiting to be set alight.163 At an even more fundamental level, however, the traditional foundations of authority within society had begun to collapse. The extended family, which in the past had frequently acted as a "cushion" in absorbing many of society's tensions, was clearly splintering under the pressure.164 Consequently, single parent families, orphans and street children became issues that required attention and intensified social disintegration.165 Serious indiscipline at schools, which the Pastoral Letter had touched upon, was a clear indication of the fragmentation of the family structure and a further source of turbulence throughout Malawi.166 On top of all this was the fear and uncertainty created by the rapid dissemination of the Aids virus which was assisted by the increasing sexual promiscuity of the population in the light of the weakening of the extended family.167 With roughly 46 percent of the population under the age of 15 it was hardly surprising that one Malawian politician spoke of the need "to do something about the time-bomb that our youths present today".168

The response of the nation to the Pastoral Letter and the riots and disturbances which followed it drew upon all these powerful social forces. There can be little doubt that some of these problems were the result of the MCP's incompetence and repressive authoritarianism; but, on the other hand,

many of them would probably have bedevilled any Malawian government by 1992. Banda's regime, bereft of ideas and creativity after so many years in power, simply was not properly in tune with most basic social developments in the country and lacked the framework to deal with them. When the explosion finally came the authorities were caught totally unprepared and initially reacted disastrously, apparently under the impression that the situation they faced was in no way novel and could be dealt with using their traditional methods of intimidation and misinformation. However, once the ruling elite realised that they faced a completely new political and social environment they began to display a degree of resilience, and some tactical skill, which, in retrospect, remains surprising. Perhaps, like the entire nation, the MCP also benefitted from the events after March 1992 ,even though, as the president himself admitted, 1992 had been "a difficult year for us in many respects".169

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* I worked at Chancellor College in Zomba from October 1989 until July 1992. In addition, I visited Malawi for nearly three weeks during December 1992 and January 1993. Since this article covers fairly recent events much of it is based upon information I gathered from Malawians whose identities I would rather not reveal at this stage. Where I have made use of such material in the text I have explained this in the references. I should simply like to add here how much I enjoyed my time in Malawi and how grateful I am to so many citizens of the country who showed me so much kindness. A version of this article was originally presented at a conference organised by the War Studies section of the History Department of the University of Zimbabwe in March 1993 in Nyanga and I am most grateful to my colleagues and students for their enlightening questions and comments. Finally, my thanks are due to the Rev Stewart Lane and Dr Anthony Woods in equal measure for helping me to understand Malawian history and culture and to the Rev. Dr. K. Ross for providing me with material on the role of the churches in the country in 1992. Unless indicated to the contrary in the text of the references all newspapers cited below were printed in Malawi.

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62) Much of the information here is drawn from my own experiences since I witnessed the entire affair at first hand. See also Woods, art cit, p 19.
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