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Agency and Incentives of Diasporic Political Influencers on Facebook Malawi

Deborah Nyangulu[1] and Albert Sharra[2]

Abstract

This article examines the agency and incentives that drive the activism of diasporic political influencers on "Facebook Malawi," an online imagined political community. In their seminal work on "social media dissidents" and "social media self-made activists" in the Global South, Matsilele and Sharra demonstrate that social media activists engage with different strategies to initiate movements, mobilize citizens, and create their brands in strong opposition to authoritarian regimes which repositions them as freedom fighters in the eyes of the masses and enemies of the state. Correspondingly, we frame diasporic political influencers as actors aided by digital technologies who engage in "long-distance nationalism" on Facebook against authoritarianism in the homeland. We deploy a qualitative mixed methods approach to analyze Facebook data of two diasporic political influencers, Onjezani Kenani and Manes Winnie Hale, who gave informed consent to use their Facebook data generated in 2018 and 2021, a period preceding and following the 2019 Malawi tripartite elections. A thematic analysis of 250 Facebook posts and interview data with the two influencers illustrates how they exercise their agency in their quest for a vision of a better Malawi while navigating a complex and ambivalent web of online and offline threats, incentives, and interests. Implicated in the political communication and mobilization of the two are different strategies that include verbal inventiveness, trolling, and exposing. The article also shows how the concept of long-distance nationalism needs to be adapted in studying diasporic political influencers.

Keywords

diaspora, social media influencers, political influencers, long-distance nationalism, Facebook, Malawi, imagined communities

Introduction

In August 2018, US-based nurse and social media commentator Manes Winnie Hale, popularly known on Facebook by her alias, Manice Abiti William Dawood,[1] was spotted on the campaign trail like any other fired-up supporter of the newly formed United Transformation Movement (UTM) which later rebranded to UTM ahead of the 2019 tripartite elections for president, parliamentarians, and ward representatives in Malawi. Little did the Malawian-born naturalized US citizen know that her short visit to her birth country to support the political campaign of her party of choice would culminate in nights in police custody. On August 21, while trying to catch a flight at Kamuzu International Airport, she was arrested for allegedly using social media to insult the then incumbent President Peter Mutharika (Pasungwi, 2018). Her arrest came days after Mutharika had warned his critics that he would descend like a "tonne of bricks" on anyone who criticized or ridiculed him (Moyo, 2018). He defended this decision by invoking Section 4 of the Protected Flag, Emblems and Names Act, a draconian one-party era hangover legislation which criminalizes insulting the Malawian head of state (Moyo, 2018). While Manes' arrest was swift and blocked her from catching her return flight to the United States, the social media response to news of her arrest was equally swift, with one of Manice's Facebook allies[2] setting up a "Free Manice Abiti William Dawood" Facebook page which in its first post demanded the immediate release of Manice and condemned the then ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for politicking.

In this short encounter with Manes, we already come across the conditions that make necessary the emergence of long-distance nationalism, that is, "nationalism which effectively spans the globe and which, by utilizing modern global communications networks, crosses ethno-national boundaries

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with unprecedented ease" (Skrbiš, 1999, p. xiii). To elaborate on Skrbiš' definition, these conditions include the availability of safe fast speed networked transportation, the presence of information communication technologies, attachment to a homeland, the ability to pass through national borders with ease either in virtual or physical space, and a shrinking sense of space and time which makes it possible for dispersed nationals to have a collective imagination to act on perceived shared national interests.

In this article, we take up the notion of long-distance nationalism to advance the concept of diasporic political influencers and join the growing number of scholars who are exploring the effects of diaspora actions on the political dynamics of the homeland (Bandele, 2008; Baser & Swain, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2010; Mutambasere, 2022). While these studies have focused on offline activities of diaspora communities and actors, we think through how the proliferation of social media platforms is increasingly making it possible for diasporic nationals to engage virtually in political activism of their home countries. This digitally mediated form of long-distance nationalism that leverages personal influence on one's online social network sites is becoming more and more entangled in a social field of political influence in which actors vie for clout, validation, recognition, or rewards. To put it succinctly, diasporic political influencers reside outside the homeland and exploit the digital affordances of long-distance nationalism in their clamor for political influence. We thus here focus on two diaspora-based Malawian social media influencers, Manes Winnie Hale and Onjezani Kenani, who engage in long-distance nationalism on what we identify as *Facebook Malawi*. We particularly selected Manes and Onjezani for the study because of their consistent political activism on Facebook, the high number of their followers, and the impact of their online activism which culminated in an arrest in the case of Manes. In the case of Onjezani, his online advocacy for nation-building culminated in him leading a private citizens campaign which raised over K207 million (US$243,500) COVID-19 response money. Facebook Malawi, a notion which we return to and elaborate below, designates a miniature nation hosted on the platform Facebook on which users imagine themselves as members of the Malawian nation-state and speaking and acting on its behalf, interests, and its people. It is on this online "imagined political community" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6) that diaspora-based social media influencers interested in the homeland find expression to an extent of mobilizing others online for a common cause.

Central in examining the diasporic political influencers is also the need to understand the Malawian context, the authoritarian propensities of the country's leaders, and how dissidents try to reinvent themselves in such an environment. A week before her arrest, Manes was one of the few people who publicly announced quitting the ruling DPP for UTM led by Mutharika's estranged vice president Saulos Klaus Chilima. She featured on a popular local television chat show, *Tikudziweni*, where she revealed that Mutharika is her uncle but criticized him as indecisive, failing to fulfill his 2014 campaign promises, and taking the country nowhere.[3] While her case may look unique, her arrest mirrors the authoritarianism that Malawian leaders adopt once they ascend to power, particularly how they try to silence critics and stifle the right to free speech. In 2011, two security guards and a fuel attendant were arrested for allegedly insulting President Bingu Wa Mutharika and wishing him dead (*Nyasa Times*, 2011). The following year, journalist Justice Mponda was arrested and charged with sedition for insulting President Joyce Banda and misinforming on the Malawi–Tanzania lake-border conflict (Kaonga, 2012). Also in 2021, a 20-year-old woman, Chisomo Makala, was arrested after sharing to a WhatsApp group a video clip which the state alleged was aimed at ridiculing President Lazarus Chakwera (Kondowe, 2021). While few of those who speak openly against ruling parties are arrested, many survive direct attacks, online and on the streets, proliferated by party cadres. For instance, in 2018, journalist and critic of Peter Mutharika, Idriss Ali Nassah, was accosted at a shopping center by DPP cadets who left him with a torn shirt (Misa Malawi, 2018). These cases show how seemingly banal acts like the sharing of a video clip on WhatsApp by an ordinary citizen and open criticism of government and its institutions can be interpreted as seditious and end one in jail. This confirms the hostile political environment in which activists and dissidents operate.

Significantly, there is a long history to such restricting of civic space in Malawi. Since the colonial and one-party regime, the state has resorted to violence to repress criticism. Any critical voice against government is labeled as dissidence and the perpetrators as dissidents or enemies of the state (Matsilele, 2019). The dissidents are abducted, arrested, killed, or banished into exile (Donge & Kees, 1998; Matsilele, 2019). Examples include writers Frank Chipasula, Jack Mapanje, and Attati Mpakati who were forced into exile by Malawi's founding president and dictator Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Sharra, 2023). Matsilele describes individuals who fight the government on social media as social media dissidents. Notably, dissident is a term used by those in power against those fighting it. However, one person's dissident can be another person's freedom fighter. Over the last decade, Malawian government has labeled organizations and individuals as dissidents or terrorists for protesting some of its decisions (Khamula, 2020). These include the Human Rights Defender Coalition (HRDC) and activists such as Billy Mayaya, Undule Mwakasungula, Charles Kajoloweka, and Timothy Mtambo. Understanding diasporic political influencers as operating in such an environment where they are prone to be classified as dissidents helps us to contextualize the concept of long-distance nationalism and to show how it is not equally generalizable across time and space.

The Changing Faces of Long-Distance Nationalism

The term long-distance nationalism is credited to Benedict Anderson (1992, 1994, 1998). Anderson generally views long-distance nationalism negatively and associates it with a chauvinism or a majorly unaccountable masculinist politics whose actors play national hero in the former second and third world while remaining marginalized in the metropolitan centers in which the long-distance nationalist has made his home (Anderson, 1994, pp. 326–327). For Anderson, the long-distance nationalist does not pay taxes to the home country targeted by his politics, does not answer to its judicial systems, and cannot vote because he is most likely not a citizen there but a citizen of the metropole. He further adds that the long-distance nationalist does not fear arrest, torture, or danger to his immediate family but is safely positioned in the first world from where he can send guns or propaganda. Paradoxically, Anderson recognizes that long-distance nationalism should not always be viewed as extremist and cites, for example, Filipinos who contributed to political struggles while in exile. He also acknowledges the impact that remittances from the diaspora have on home countries. However, Anderson falls short of fully exploring the implications of these paradoxes and how long-distance nationalism is rendered Janus-faced.

Some "Andersonian" assumptions regarding long-distant nationalists therefore fall flat when they are considered with regard to the two activists studied here. Manes and Onjezani challenge the assumption of long-distance nationalism and political struggle as mutually exclusive. Their long-distance nationalism is characterized by a serious form of activism for social change. Other Andersonian assumptions, for instance that long-distance nationalists are immune to political arrests, do not hold here as we have seen that Manes, as a transient diasporic citizen who visits Malawi at least once a year from her base in the United States, was arrested and subjected to political intimidation. While Anderson relates long-distance nationalism to exile, diasporic political influencers are not estranged from their homeland, and since the fall of most of one-party states and the dawn of democracy in Africa, their emigration is usually voluntary and not exilic. We also question assumptions of tax avoidance since most of these influencers belong to a professional class, are educated, and have jobs in the metropole. In fact, it is in the interest of the governments of their homelands to engage with these diaspora actors for various reasons, including the need for foreign direct investment and indirect taxation. Take, for instance, the Malawi Diaspora Engagement Policy (2017), which states as its goal "mainstreaming and empowering Malawians abroad to contribute to the socio-economic transformation of the country while at the same time meeting their wants, needs, and expectations in a lasting partnership" (p. ii). Mutambasere (2022) makes a related point in his study of Zimbabwean diaspora in the United Kingdom whom he notes are targeted by the homeland for their resources while ironically being denied the right to vote (p. 735).

Unsurprisingly, the Malawian diaspora is becoming a valued political constituency, not only for the sake of remittances that support kin and friends but also for direct financial support to political parties. In the 2019 election, the Malawi Electoral Commission, while acknowledging that it did not have the capacity to undertake out-of-country voting or extend voting rights to citizens in diaspora, still urged Malawians to come home to register and vote (Banda, 2018). Political commentators also urged Malawian citizens to start lobbying for voting rights after parliament amended the Citizenship Act in 2018 to allow for dual citizenship (Malawi 24, 2018). The idea of political participation as outlined here is different from that of Anderson. Here, we see engaged diasporic political influencers who face risks, operate in an environment that is paradoxically hostile to those who exercise their right to speak out, but at the same time recognize the role citizens in diaspora play in national development. Hence, Anderson needs to be read alongside Glick Schiller (2005) who defines long-distance nationalism "as a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home" (p. 570). Crucially, Glick Schiller identifies four different instances adopted by long-distance nationalists in relation to their homeland: (1) anticolonialism, (2) separatism, (3) regime change, and (4) participation. She offers a model that can be well adapted to the Malawian context with its focus on a nationalism developed in resistance (anticolonialism), participation, and agitating for regime change. Still, how do we think of long-distance nationalism in the context of proliferating social media and its affordances which enable different individuals to engage in acts of everyday nationalism?

Facebook Malawi as a Miniature Nation

To understand how Facebook operates as a miniature nation for the Malawian nation-state, it is to Benedict Anderson (1983) that one must again turn, but this time to his seminal *Imagined Communities*. *Imagined Communities* brought about a paradigmatic shift in the study of the origins of nations and nationalism, shifting focus from primordial explanations to understanding nations as "imagined" and therefore making it possible to understand how individuals who might not know nor see each other imagine themselves as belonging to the same community. The idea of imagination has become crucial to understanding the formation of nations and we understand Facebook Malawi as an online imagined political community akin to other online imagined communities which have also drawn the attention of scholars, examples of which include followership on the Twitter platform itself (Gruzd et al., 2011), Black Twitter (Clark, 2014), Arab identity on Facebook (Al-Rawi, 2018), Zimbabwean diaspora on Facebook groups (Mpofu et al.,

2022), and Russian emigrants on Instagram (Smoliarova & Bodrunova, 2021). Facebook Malawi is, in other words, a virtual public sphere dominated by Malawians and non-Malawians who have interests on Malawi. As Nancy Fraser (1990) argues, a public sphere is made up of a common public of people engaging in rational debate and counter-publics composed of individuals who feel their interests are not covered in the debate. We therefore do not see Manes and Onjezani as hosting platforms where univocal and unilinear discussions on national issues happen, but, as we shall show shortly, they host and orchestrate debates which serve different purposes, such as fighting particular regimes, mobilizing resources for needy people, promoting citizen participation, and building national heroes.

Equally crucial in understanding how national collective imagination occurs on Facebook is an understanding of the internet as a space that is increasingly becoming an extension of the nation-state. While the internet was initially celebrated as a borderless space capable of collapsing the enclosures afforded by the nation-state, scholars are noticing how the internet is increasingly becoming an extension of the nation-state with the state viewing it as a space which they can regulate and actively shape (Munn, 2020, pp. 1–4). Discussing digital nationalism, Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2020) identify three mechanisms in which digital technologies reproduce a national sense of belonging to the world, that is, through the architecture of internet domains, the bias of algorithms, and the formation of national digital ecosystems (p.331–333). Thus, we find internet architecture divided along national domain names, for example .de for Germany, .uk for United Kingdom, and .mw for Malawi with algorithmic bias reproducing national digital ecosystems. While internet platforms such as Facebook and Google are for all intents and purposes arguably transnational, Mihelj & Jimenez-Martinez note that states still remain as significant actors that delineate and regulate how these platforms operate. It is in such an overall internet architecture pre-determined as reducible to nation-states that the idea of Facebook Malawi operates, and which gives the state a sense of legitimacy to police what is happening on the internet in the same way as it would police its territory.

Facebook has quickly become a dominant social networking site in Malawi and Africa broadly capturing the lion's market share on the continent. Its connectivity has spread through the introduction of its controversial Free basics program which was branded as a philanthropic campaign to get the digitally unconnected, especially from the Global South, connected to the internet via Facebook (Nothias, 2020). According to the State of internet Freedom in Malawi 2020 report by ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA, 2018), about 2.5 million people in Malawi out of an approximate population of 19 million have access to the internet. Meager as this number is, the mobile operator, Telekom Networks Malawi (TNM, 2022, Data Management Team. Personal Communication), has seen a 40% growth in Facebook service subscribers since the introduction of Facebook free basics in 2014. These figures explain why Facebook has become a public sphere on which Malawian citizens or those who claim Malawi as a homeland find nationalistic expression. Both diasporic political influencers interviewed for this study confirmed that Facebook is their preferred platform for *public* political participation, with Onjezani saying he likes Facebook because of the comments section and can easily follow the discussions generated by his status updates while the block button function on the platform gives him the opportunity to shut out those who seek to distract him with "gratuitous insults." Manes too notes the popularity of Facebook in Malawi and says she uses it because she has more followers on this platform than on Instagram or Twitter.

Methodology

Data for this study were obtained in three ways. We used Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) to scrape data from Manice's Facebook page which operates under the name Manice Abiti William Dawood. Her presence on Facebook also includes two Facebook profiles which operate under the names Manice Abiti William Dawood and Manice Abiti William Dawood II. Her page had 25,634 followers as of March 2022, while her Manice Abiti William Dawood profile has 1,655 followers with the other profile having 429 friends. We also conducted social media ethnography on Onjezani Kenani's Facebook profile, manually documenting relevant posts because it is a personal profile unlike on a Facebook page which is by default public and open to web scraping by third-party applications. We used Facebook's filter tool to capture posts in the study period and Onjezani's profile had over 39K followers as of March 2022. Both researchers are Facebook friends with Onjezani and Manice and we consider ourselves members of Facebook Malawi, hence our study is conducted from an insider perspective. Our data were sampled from two different time frames—August to December 2018 and January to October 2021. In total, we collected and analyzed 250 posts. We began our analysis from August to December 20, 2018. This period is crucial because it was the campaign period when Malawi was preparing to hold tripartite elections in May 2019. August 21 is the date when Manice's page was created following her arrest. By investigating 4 months after this date, we were able to appreciate how the arrest affected posting on the page. Government dropped the charges against Manes on August 27 after the intervention of the American embassy in Malawi who demanded to know why their citizen had been arrested with the local press reporting the case as a diplomatic incident that had put Malawi–US relations on the edge (Sundu, 2018). The study period is also unique for Onjezani's profile as this is the time he unceasingly posted against the DPP government, which earned him credit as one of the soldiers who discredited the government through trolling online.

The 2021 data were also significant because it allowed us to have a snapshot of whether there is a consistency on the topics they post.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis focusing on posts promoting nationalism. We exported the data into an excel spreadsheet, read through the dataset, and manually coded the posts to generate common themes. We identified how the activists engage with nationalism and we elaborate on this in the findings and discussion below. This was complemented by in-depth interviews with both Manes and Onjezani. They responded to open-ended questions which solicited information on personal background, citizenship and immigration status, feelings of national belonging, incentives and motivations for activism, and social media use. This allowed us to gain more insight into issues from both activists' point of view and it allowed them the opportunity to elaborate their own stories. Manes' interview was conducted through a WhatsApp voice call which was recorded with her informed consent and later transcribed. Onjezani responded to a written questionnaire. The qualitative mixed methods approach as advanced by Hesse-Biber (2010) allowed us to have a convergence of information and deeper understanding of why diaspora-based Malawians engage in long-distance nationalism, including the agency and incentives that drive them.

Tracing Manes and Onjezani

Professionally, Manes is a registered nurse working in Maryland in the United States and Onjezani is a fiction writer and accountant. Both have spent most of their time in diaspora with Manes clocking 16 years in the United States and Onjezani alternating between offices in Switzerland and France for 12 years now. Unlike Manes, whose nationalism and political influencer brand have grown during the social media era, Onjezani's can be traced from his days as a newspaper columnist for *Nation on Sunday, Sunday Times*, and *Malawi News.* He used the columns to engage with Malawians on weekly basis and when social media started to take root in Malawi, he says: "I thought of taking a different route using emerging media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage Malawians on day-to-day basis." To draw a line between his personal life and political commentary, Onjezani created two Facebook accounts named Stanley Kenani and Onjezani Kenani, but now maintains the Onjezani Kenani account which was originally Stanley Onjezani Kenani for political commentary (Sharra & Matsilele, 2021, 116).

Manes says that with the dawn of social media, she realized she needed a Facebook account to fight for good governance and the plight of the marginalized in Malawi. She considers herself as the voice of the voiceless and the mouthpiece for those who fear to denounce state excesses on social media for fear of compromising their jobs or businesses. Although both Onjezani and Manes share several characteristics, Onjezani has over the years kept his political interests under wraps. Manes has appeared in public wearing UTM political party colors and states that she had political ambitions to contest as a parliamentary representative for her home village but has since given up on the dream because corruption and bad governance does not seem to relent. Interestingly, Manes identifies the United States as her first home because it is the place where she works, lives, and holds citizenship. Nonetheless she recognizes Malawi as her second home, the place of her birth and the place where she still has kin. Onjezani treats his time in diaspora as temporary sojourns but feels highly connected to the people back home. The persisting kinship ties, a feeling of belonging to Malawi, and a shared ethnic and linguistic heritage to Malawi explains why the two are engaging in long-distance nationalism; and in this study, we pay attention to their interests, particularly their quest for a better Malawi.

Findings and Discussions

In examining the agency and incentives that drive diasporic political influencers on Facebook Malawi, it has become clear that diasporic political influencers are not only reactionary but they also have agency to self-initiate and brand themselves as influencers who engage in activism. The way one self-initiates and brands depends on strategy, and this is what distinguishes one influencer from another. Sharra (2023) argues that some influencers, activists in particular, take advantage of their status, such as being a politician or celebrity, to self-initiate. Nonetheless, some individuals self-initiate from zero and become popular influencers standing with the majority of the people. Examples include Zimbabwe's Evan Mawarire who self-initiated as an activist at a time when he was only known as a pastor of a small gathering in Harare (Sharra, 2023). His protest video mobilized thousands of Zimbabweans at home and in diaspora to challenge the leadership of President Robert Mugabe. Thus, the long-distance nationalism by diasporic political influencers is not the extremist type such as that found among right-wing or sectarian groups fighting for liberalism or unaccountable self-autonomy. These diasporic influencers view themselves as engaging in struggle and acts of nation-building. It is therefore useful to trace their nationalism within a genealogy of African anti-colonial nationalism, through the period of "post-Independence disillusionment" when most African commentators started having mixed feelings toward failed nation-building projects and frustrated at rising levels of corruption (Wright, 2004). As Ken Lipenga Jr. (2019) argues, nationalism in Malawi remains fluid and needs to be related to an ever-changing political climate (pp.110–111).

Analyzing the posts of the two selected influencers, we identify several common themes that define their nationalism, including what motivates them to engage in long-distance nationalism. The central theme is that of a utopian

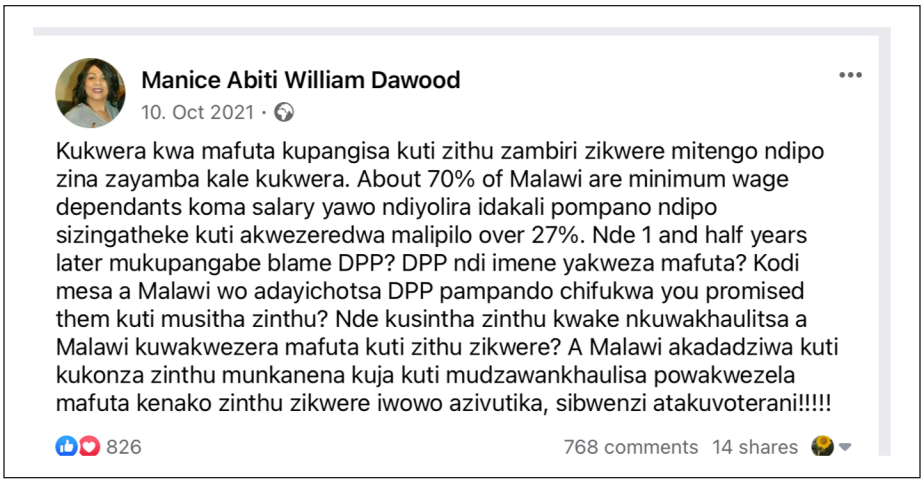


Figure 1. Manice warns new government to stop blaming previous government for continued economic mess.
Source: Manice Abiti William Dawood Facebook page, captured on 9 March 2022.

vision of a better Malawi characterized by good governance. We break this into three sub-themes namely: (1) frustration at elected government for failing to fulfill campaign promises, (2) how their living outside of Malawi has exposed them to a different way of doing politics, and (3) investment and contributing to national upliftment back home. We discuss each of these themes with sample posts from the two diasporic political influencers.

Frustration at Elected Government

The two influencers question most of the decisions made by the government and weigh these against campaign promises. Campaign promises shape societal expectations and it is this expectation that the influencers exploit to mobilize others to demand good governance and a better Malawi. The posts show how they creatively and sensitively write for poor Malawians while trying to build their brands. Both enjoy positioning themselves as the voice of the voiceless, and frequently use plural nouns and pronouns, such as "Malawians," "we," "our," or "us" to create a collective. Using inclusive language, these influencers position themselves well as spokespersons and their diasporic location reinforces an image of them as not directly affected by the problems at home but as only acting in the country's interests. In Figure 1, Manes speaks for Malawians and expresses her disappointment with government for failing to fulfill its campaign promises after a year in power.

The post reprimands the government for raising fuel prices including how this would have a spillover effect that would lead to increase in prices of commodities. It bemoans that about 70% of Malawians survive on the minimum wage and challenges the government to stop blaming its failures on the previous government. The post concludes by saying that if Malawians had known that their vote would be repaid by raising fuel prices, people would not have voted for them. Significantly, this post is written in Chichewa, which is the quasi-national language of Malawi. This shows that there is an element of ethnic nationalism which tries to make a linguistic connection to the homeland. Manes says she deliberately writes her posts in Chichewa when she wants people in the village to get the message and understand it. As someone who had political ambitions and wanted to contest as the member of parliament for her constituency, this ethnic and linguistic connection is telling. Manes also dispels the misconception that people in rural Malawi do not follow what happens on Facebook. While acknowledging the digital divide, she says there is still usually someone in the village who is literate and connected to the internet who relays Facebook messages to the community.

Onjezani also appreciates the power of language in political communication. In posts addressed directly to government officials, he uses English and uses Chichewa when targeting ordinary Malawians. Sometimes he also uses Chichewa to add humor to a national issue, and this attracts more comments to his posts. We also observe that at times both Manes and Onjezani stretch their watchdog role to the citizens by asking them to play their role as citizens. For instance, Onjezani has been posting in Chichewa the COVID-19 issues asking government and citizens to each play their role, another form of nationalism that promotes citizens' role in national building and takes advantage of his status as an influencer. The 2019 and 2020 elections were held at a time when corruption levels in government were said to have reached unimaginable levels. The opposition capitalized on this to discredit the incumbent government, and in the process made several promises to end corruption once voted into office. Nevertheless, when making their promises, they never anticipated a historic corruption scandal in which K6.2 billion (approx. US$7.2 million) of COVID-19 response money was abused under their watch during their first year in power. Sounding frustrated, Onjezani posted (Figure 2).

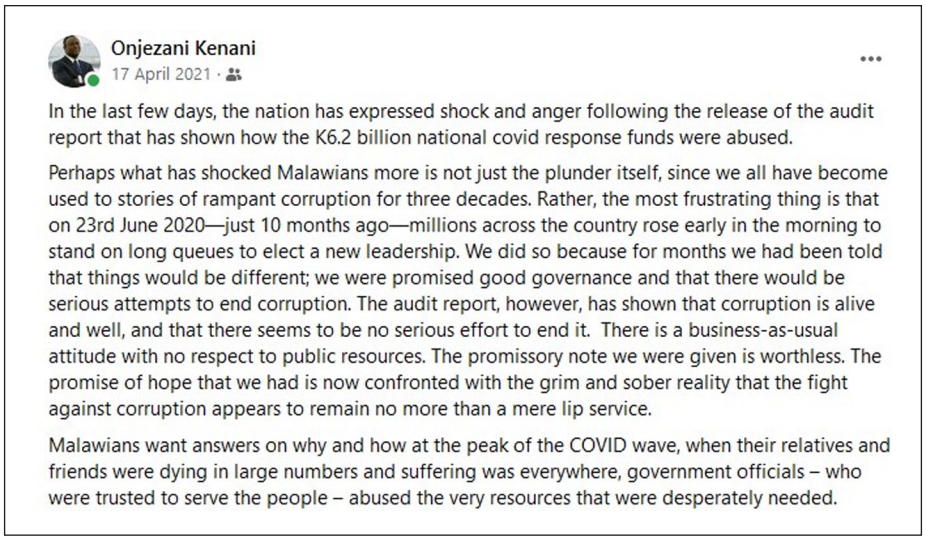


Figure 2. Onjezani bemoans unaddressed government corruption.
Source: Onjezani Kenani Facebook profile, captured 9 March 2022.

The post above is similar to Manice's in the sense that the newly elected government was not living up to its campaign promises. It is addressing those in authority, hence, the use of English. Also interesting is that this post is more contextual. The screenshot captures only a fraction of what Onjezani said in the 937-words post. Though frustrated, the way he signs off shows he still believes that the Chakwera-led government can do better. This is unlike Manes whose post sounds as if she had lost hope and is regretting:

> I hope the leadership will take this case as an opportunity to restore some confidence in our government. That confidence will be restored by demonstrating that culprits are punished and what they stole from the poor to enrich themselves is taken away from them and given back to the people. (Onjezani Kenani, Facebook post, April 17, 2021)

Inspired by Foreign Politics

This theme comes out strongly in most of the posts by both Manice and Onjezani. It seems the time they have been abroad has shown them the different ways politicians in other countries conduct their business. They write their posts in a way that leaves their followers wondering why Malawian politicians do the opposite. For instance, Manice used a meme of former Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel to express her frustration at how Malawian politicians, particularly presidents, conduct themselves as very important people who can barely be spotted in public places doing ordinary tasks, such as shopping.

Figure 3 shows how diasporic political influencers are inspired by the politics of the different countries that they reside in or visit. They post political figures or activities from other countries and compare with the kind of politics practiced in Malawi. Manes admits that one of the reasons why she started national political activism is because she was inspired and exposed to how politics is conducted in different countries. The two hashtags in the caption, #womanpower and #keepingitsimple, show that Manice thinks it is possible for women to hold top political positions and to keep politics simple without the spectacle that accompanies it in her homeland.

Onjezani has also been wondering on Facebook why every president in Malawi maintains a long presidential convoy which, apart from being too expensive for a small economy like Malawi's, affects traffic as motorists are asked to park along the road to allow the presidential motorcade to pass. He has argued several times that elsewhere presidents use a small motorcade that does not disrupt traffic as is the case in Malawi. During the 2019 and 2020 election campaigns, the trimming of the presidential convoy was one of the key transformations that Malawians were promised.

In an interview, Onjezani said,

> President Lazarus Chakwera promised Malawians that he was going to have a reduced motorcade. I have seen reduced motorcades for the President of South Africa and also of Botswana. Ten cars or less, and they manage. Why the razzmatazz in our country? Here in Switzerland, twelve years of living here and I've never seen the convoy of the President of Switzerland or of any of Swiss leaders, not a single day. The Swiss example is probably on the extreme side, but the South African and Botswana examples are certainly easy to replicate. (Onjezani Kenani, Fieldwork, 9 March 2022)

The experience with foreign politics has reshaped the way these influencers view politics. As they take government to task, they are trying to build a different perspective about politics among their followers and also those in power. It is important to highlight that while they think Malawi can

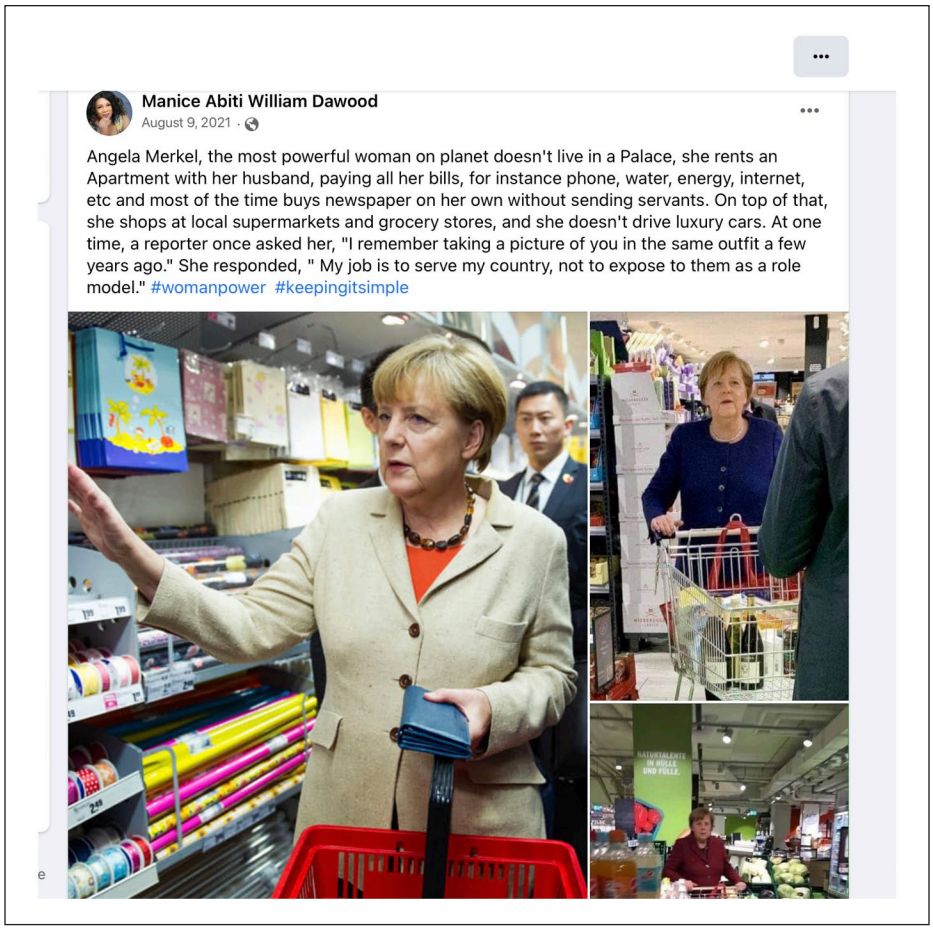


Figure 3. Manice tells local politicians to learn from Angela Merkel.
Source: Manice Abiti William Dawood Facebook page, captured on 10 January 2023.

achieve the best standard of politics, they want the country to start by meeting the basic conditions of good governance. For instance, Onjezani said,

> I may have left Malawi physically, but my mind never left. My mind is always home. I have lived in Europe for 12 years but every day I feel I am a stranger here; I never have any sense of belonging. The people are nice, the food is nice, life is a whole lot better, but this is not my home. I always think we can make Malawi reach this level staying for all these years without lacking electricity even for a single minute. I want the idea of Malawi to work. I want us to win the war against corruption. I want us to build roads that last, and to have children of the poor get a decent education so they can have a fair shot at life. (Onjezani Kenani, Fieldwork, 28 February 2022)

Investing Back Home

The theme on investing back home explains that diasporic political influencers keep ties with their home countries and contribute to the growth of the economy. Both Manes and Onjezani visit Malawi once in a while and they are also investing in the country.

Figure 4 shows the investments that Manes is making in Malawi. While this might seem like a post dealing with a private matter, it is interesting that Manice posted it to the public page. It is written in a mixture of English and Chichewa, and Manes said this is also a strategy which she uses to connect with a wide-ranging audience. In this case, while the townhouses are personal, she is showing her followers that she is investing in Malawi, and she is also showing that she is contributing to the economic development of the country and indirectly paying taxes through her projects. Interesting in this post is also how Manice feminizes and appropriates masculinity branding and praising herself as "mkango waukazi koma wazida zakumusiku zachimuna, that's my strength!!!" (*A lioness but with balls, that's my strength!!!*). As part of her political communication and attracting followers, Manice tends to use verbal profanities in her Facebook posts and refers to genitals. This strategy, which Naminata Diabate (2020) identifies as genital cursing in her book *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa*, dates back to precolonial times, and women have used it as a strategy to move into male-dominated political spaces or to punish their male adversaries.

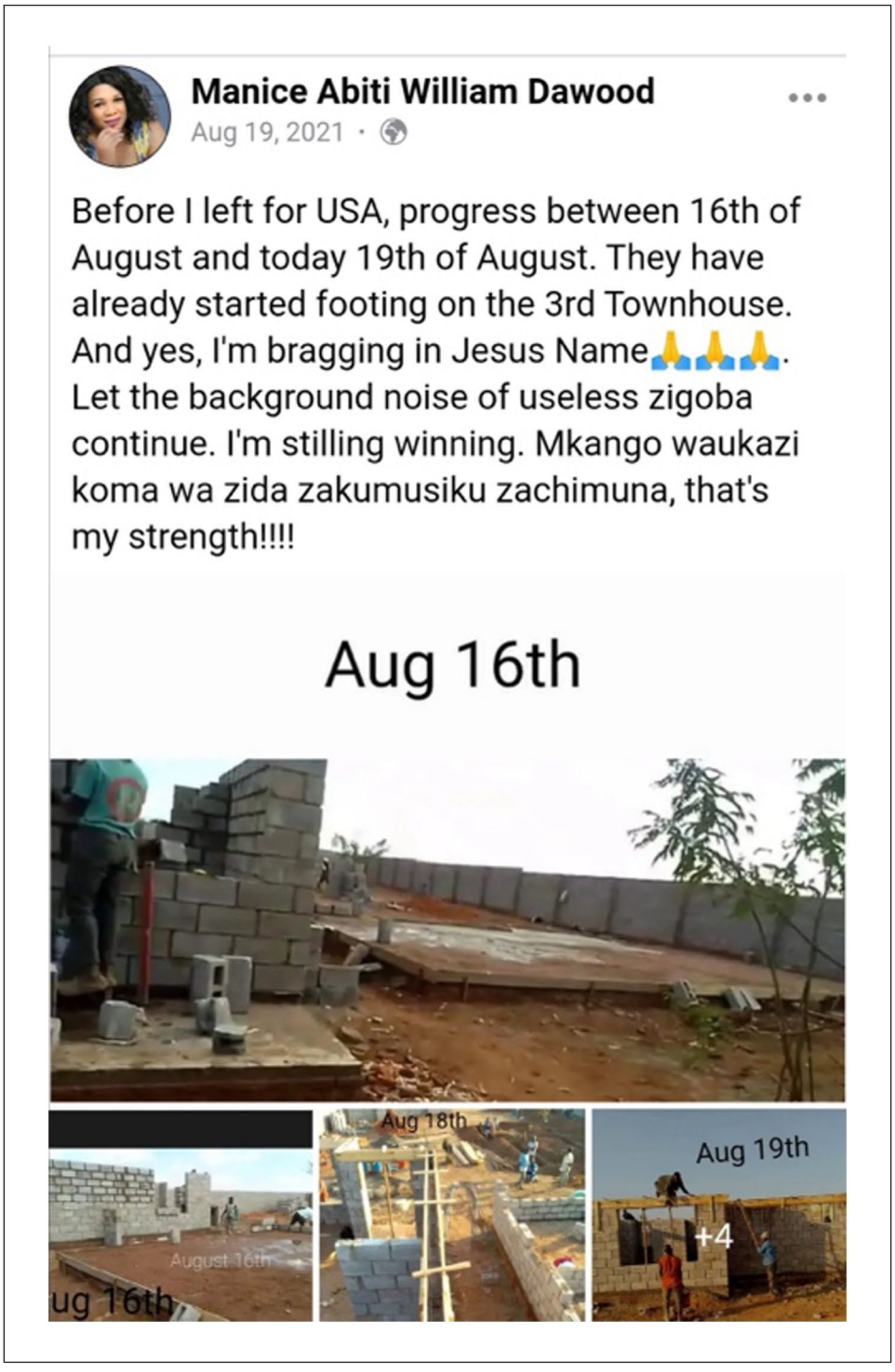


Figure 4. Manice says she is a woman/lioness with balls.
Source: Manice Abiti William Dawood Facebook Page, captured on 10 January 2023.

Onjezani barely posts his private life on Facebook, and this has kept Malawians blank on whether he owns properties back home. However, looking at the time he dedicates to fundraising initiatives for Malawi, it is evident that he believes in investing in the home country. Over the years, he has created a culture among Malawians to believe that they are part of the solutions to the problems in the country, another form of nationalism that foregrounds nation-building. For instance, when the whole world was on its knees with COVID-19, Onjezani mobilized a few like-minded

individuals for a fundraising initiative which raised over K207 million (US$243,500) for COVID-19 response. He has also raised funds for the upkeep and tuition of needy students in college and holds active bank accounts in Malawi:

> Day 45 update: We crossed the cut-off point on 28 February with the same K207 million total donations received as reported on Friday last week, plus the same K150.2 million total expenditure, and K53 million cash-in-hand. We would like to spend a maximum of K25 million on 30 patient monitors to be distributed to all the district hospitals and the four central hospitals [Queen Elizabeth, Kamuzu Central, Mzuzu and Zomba]. Patient monitors measure, record, distribute and display combinations of biometric values such as heart rate, blood pressure, temperature and more—to ensure a high level of quality patient care. . . For the remaining K28 million, we would like to hear your thoughts. . . (Onjezani Kenani, Facebook post, 2 March 2021)

Both Manes and Onjezani engage in long-distance nationalism to help in building their homeland. Their posts, particularly the trolling of political parties and exposés, have contributed to promoting accountability in government. They have built trustworthy political brands and a huge following, with some of their followers being the source of information on malpractices in government which they leak to them privately. Both participate in issues of national interest both online and offline:

> Some cabinet ministers and government officials call me informally to ask for my thoughts on issues. I also talk to leaders of religious institutions and others to share thoughts on national issues, or they ask me to share my thoughts on their various projects. I think the brand grew on its own. The more I spoke my thoughts honestly and forcefully the larger the following grew. I cannot say I have a strategy, except if I want to attack an unpopular decision, then I chip at the issue bit by bit, until I have the public's full attention and the officials who made the decision begin to feel the heat. Otherwise, I just share my thoughts on an issue and that's it. (Onjezani Kenani, Fieldwork, 28 February 2022)

Manes similarly says:

> I have people in authority who call me to give tips or express their frustrations at things that are going wrong in government. Sometimes when my post circulates in WhatsApp groups of parliamentarians or ministers, someone from the group will inform me that they are discussing my post. My main strategy is that I stand on truth. (Manes Winnie Hale, Fieldwork, 10 February 2022)

From this discussion, we see two influencers engaging in long-distance nationalism for the common good of the nation they call home, and this is inspired by the space they occupy in the society, what they have seen elsewhere, and the kind of Malawi they think is possible. They are mostly engaging in what Glick Schiller calls "regime change" and "participation" by holding to account those in power and mobilizing citizens to participate in political debate for a better Malawi.

Conclusion

This article sets out to investigate the agency and incentives that drives the activism of diasporic political influencers on *Facebook Malawi*, a concept which we expounded as designating an online imagined community. In engaging with Anderson's concept of long-distance nationalism as an explanatory tool, we found that the influencers examined here are motivated by nationalism and this nationalism is long-distance in two senses namely (1) its actors are not physically present in the homeland but in the diaspora, and (2) the actors practice their nationalism on social media platforms. While the participation is online, diasporic political influencers also negotiate different offline interests and engage in offline activities including temporary visits to the homeland to participate in political activities. This study has also shown that Anderson's concept of long-distance nationalism needs to be modified when it is applied to the Malawian context. The long-distance nationalism discussed here is inflected by the actors' strong feelings that they are engaging in activism to build a better Malawi and to recenter the needs of Malawian nationals who are otherwise marginalized from the nation by exploitative state power. It is therefore a nationalism grounded in resistance that falls in the genealogy of anticolonial nationalism, a genealogy which places Global South nations, in Homi Bhabha's words, as "born out of struggle with liberation—rather than liberalism" (Nyangulu, 2023). A diasporic location offers these political influencers a relatively safe space to speak out against abuses of state power although they are not entirely immune to political persecution. It also affords them exposure to different ways of doing politics, and with opportunities to invest in the upliftment of the homeland. In understanding the agency and incentives that motivate diasporic political influencers, it is important to consider different variables, such as self-positioning, their online and offline interests, kinship ties, political participation, philanthropic activities, their political influencer brand trustworthiness, and affordances offered by the social media platforms on which they operate. Future studies that incorporate followers' comments and a sentiment analysis of emoticons would help to shed light on how diasporic political influencers and their followers are in a reciprocal relationship of influence.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Her official name is Manes Winnie Hale and her Facebook alias is Manice Abiti William Dawood. We use the name Manes when referring to Manes the person and her Facebook alias Manice when referring to the Facebook personality and to her posts on Facebook.
2. Manes confirmed via WhatsApp communication that the page was set up by one of her allies while she was in police detention. The page's transparency section shows that the page changed its name from "Free Manice Abiti William Dawood" to "Manice Abiti William Dawood" on 30 May 2020 and was merged with the page Manice Abiti William Dawood on 9 July 2020.
3. The show can be viewed on the Times Media Group YouTube channel, https://youtu.be/n2S-6OW9law.

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