

Chapter 5

The Campaign

Given the background and nature of 30 years of Malawi politics, small wonder that the electoral campaign should have focused almost completely on the overriding question of change versus continuity. It was also a campaign based distinctly on personalities, rather than on issues. Notwithstanding the major victory won by democratic forces in June 1993, the Opposition was primarily driven by the conviction that a new Malawi could emerge only when the MCP and President Banda were removed from office. There therefore seemed little interest in the issues that have traditionally concerned voters in most democracies – employment, inflation, education, health and the like – even though all the major parties addressed such issues in their respective manifestoes.

We were present at several election rallies organised by each of the three major parties in different parts of the country. And even though much of the campaigning had already taken place by the time our teams were deployed, we were able to catch the full flavour of the campaign in its final days. It could be said that, on the whole, political campaigning in Malawi was rather restrained by international standards, perhaps not surprising in a country in which public demonstrations of any kind had long been confined to the ruling party. However, the major parties put up a robust show particularly in areas of respective strength – AFORD in the North, MCP in the Central Region and UDF in the South, with MCP and UDF also prominent in the regions not considered to be their strengths. Our teams attended UDF rallies in Mzuzu, Nkhota Kota and Zomba, and a mammoth one on the final day of the campaign in Blantyre. They were also present at MCP rallies in Zomba and Salima and an AFORD rally in Mzuzu.



From the beginning, supporters of various parties showed their colours... here an MCP supporter awaits the arrival of then President Banda in Blantyre



A UDF supporter proudly wears the party colours at a rally in Blantyre

Party flags, T-shirts and caps were common sights around the country and indeed became the ubiquitous symbols of the elections. The three major parties invested considerably in them and they literally added colour to the electoral environment. Each of the major parties became identified with specific colours – yellow for the UDF, red for the MCP and blue for AFORD. It was also remarkable how the T-shirts and caps vanished from public view in most areas on 15 May when the campaign officially ended! Where the attire and flags were not available, well known hand gestures sufficed – the clasped hands for the UDF, the ‘thumbs-up’ for the MCP and the ‘V for victory’ sign of AFORD.

We were deeply impressed by the atmosphere of congeniality and tolerance which marked the campaign. All parties observed the Code of Conduct issued by the Electoral Commission (*Annex XV*). While instances of violence were not unknown (see later in this chapter), these were clearly the exceptions to the rule. Familiar indeed was the sight of supporters of major parties lined up on the roadside shoulder to shoulder, wooing motorists, in an atmosphere completely free of tension or violence and indeed marked by remarkably good humour. Great tribute is due to the people of Malawi who, notwithstanding the strong feelings generated by three decades of one-party rule, remained true to their pacific nature and eschewed public displays of rancour. In doing so, they demonstrated a political culture that many electorates elsewhere would do well to emulate.

There was little to distinguish the manifestoes of the three major parties. The MCP sought to make capital of the fact that it had heeded the message from the referendum and genuinely embraced change; it also sought to point to socio-economic development which had taken place in Malawi since independence, promising that this would receive further impetus under a new government. UDF and AFORD laid particular emphasis on political and constitutional reform, and also advocated economic and social development, including a greater role for market forces and foreign investment.

There were a number of issues outside the various manifestoes which exercised the parties and the electorate in the weeks leading up to the elections, as they impinged on their perception of a level playing field. Some of these are discussed below.

Use of Government Resources

It is invariably a feature of all elections which mark a transition from one-party or military rule to multi-party politics, and indeed of elections in many mature democracies, that the Opposition accuses the incumbents of abuse of government resources. So it was in Malawi, and not without reason. While the advantages of incumbency constitute one of the immutable realities of electoral politics everywhere, no line could have been finer than that which had existed in Malawi since independence between ruling party and government. The Executive Committee of the MCP ranked higher in government protocol than the Cabinet. It was not unusual for party vehicles to be used by government officials, or vice versa. Junior local functionaries of the MCP wielded enormous power over civil servants. The MBC remained a powerful medium for the public projection of the Government and the ruling party.

However, the transitional mechanisms put in place in the wake of the referendum did much to undermine the MCP's ability to use the paraphernalia of state to its own advantage. For one thing, national decision-making passed into the hands of the NCC, with responsibility for monitoring implementation being vested in the NEC. For another, the Electoral Commission amply demonstrated its independence by coming down heavily on unfair practices by parties, ostensibly directed at the MCP in particular. Likewise, the MBC was significantly transformed in the pre-election period into a relatively neutral and objective instrument of publicity and civic education. The mushrooming of the print media added to the new-found restraints on the Government.

It should be added that notwithstanding the MCP's access to government resources, other major parties like the UDF matched the MCP for organisation, including at grassroots level, as well as for resources, banking on the support of the prosperous business community.



Nyau cult masked dancer... here used by the MCP for entertainment purposes

Intimidation, Harassment and Violence

On 17 April 1994, the Electoral Commission had issued an Interim Report (*Annex XVI*) in which, *inter alia*, it was alleged that MCP functionaries had been responsible for seizing and buying voter registration certificates in various districts in the Southern and Central Regions. While isolated incidents of similar malpractices on the part of other parties were also mentioned in the report, the finger of culpability pointed clearly at the MCP, with traditional leaders and MCP functionaries identified as the perpetrators. The Commission also cited instances of intimidation of Chiefs by the ruling party in order to make it difficult for Opposition parties to campaign in particular areas, as well as of intimidation by pro-MCP Chiefs of persons in their areas of influence. These reports had also found mention in the Interim Report of the JIOG of 18 April 1994 (*Annex XVII*).

In our conversations with its representatives, the MCP stoutly denied these charges and accused the Electoral Commission of bias. It claimed that very similar complaints made to the Commission by the MCP had been ignored. We sought to assess the veracity of the charges in the field. District Commissioners and the police gave us the impression that, by and large, Chiefs and Village Headmen had behaved in an unexceptionable and non-partisan manner. In some cases, they acknowledged that incidents had taken place but that their scale was small. We also gathered that the MCP was not the only party responsible for such misdemeanours.

Even incidents involving seizure of voter registration certificates were not devoid of their amusing aspects. In one instance related to us, allegedly in order to prove that it was possible to procure registration certificates, members of one of the Opposition parties disguised themselves as ruling party functionaries and persuaded a Branch Chairman of the MCP to part with his certificate. When the facts came to light, the registration certificate was restored to its rightful owner.

We also investigated allegations that the MCP was making objectionable use of the so-called Nyau cult, traditional masked dancers normally considered to be a cultural group but purported to be able to perform sorcery, strike fear in people's hearts, and even kill. We were told that the Nyau were largely confined to the Central Region, the MCP's strongest base, and used to intimidate Opposition supporters and disrupt Opposition rallies. The MCP strongly

denied the charge, which they said had not been proven. We saw the Nyau in action in Salima district, where their appearance at the end of an MCP rally was evidently for entertainment purposes. We are, however, unable to comment as to whether they were employed on other occasions with more sinister motives in mind.

Notwithstanding the peaceful nature of Malawians in general and of the campaign and poll in particular, there were instances of violence, including beatings, stoning of vehicles, attempts to disrupt meetings, and occasional assaults on individuals, etc. Such incidents were fortunately uncommon and, when they occurred, were not the monopoly of any one party; all major parties must accept their share of the blame.

The Malawi Young Pioneers

The violent disarming by the army in December 1993 of the MYP had seen the bulk of the Pioneers neutralised but remnants were said to have fled to Mozambique. Estimates of their number varied from less than 50 to about 2,500. The existence of these Pioneers at large was perceived by many as a Sword of Damocles through the early part of the campaign, the fear being that the Pioneers would return on or before polling day to create disruption and intimidate voters in areas controlled by the Opposition. By and large, this issue had diminished in importance by the eve of the elections. Some ex-MYP officers announced at a press conference that they were law-abiding people who wished to join hands with all Malawians in building a new society. In the event, the fears regarding the MYP did not materialise.

Refugees

Another concern voiced early in the campaign by the Opposition was the possibility of the large number of Mozambican refugees in Malawi – nearly one million in number – being used to cast votes illegally for the ruling party. This was yet another example of how minor apprehensions, based on misjudgment or misinformation, can often be transformed into obsessions. Some of us visited refugee concentrations (such as Chifunga Refugee Camp in Mwanza district) and saw no evidence of any desire on the part of the refugees to be involved with Malawian politics. As it happens, the repatriation of these refugees by UNHCR had already made significant headway when we arrived in Malawi. In the Nkhata Bay and Dedza areas we saw houses said to have been vacated by refugees recently returned to Mozambique.

Voting by the Security Forces

Reference has already been made in Chapter 3 to another issue which caused some controversy, namely the apparent reluctance by the authorities to allow the army and police to exercise their franchise. As pointed out, it required a ruling by the Electoral Commission to persuade the Minister of Defence and Inspector General of Police respectively to change their minds and even then, the Inspector General held out for a long time before agreeing to allow police personnel to vote “if they wished to do so”. The Government argued that voting by the uniformed forces on polling day would disrupt security arrangements. But the real reason may have been found in the reluctance of the authorities to allow what they perceived as politicisation of the armed forces. We also heard Opposition claims that the sympathies of these forces lay squarely with them. In the event, many in the army exercised their franchise. Most police personnel, however, appeared not to have registered despite being specially allowed to do so after the registration exercise had concluded.