

FAITH AND THE MALAWIAN SOCIETY

By

Tobias B Jere

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P.O. BOX 40049, KANENGO, LILONGWE 4, MALAWI.

TEL. 265- 1-715632, Fax 265-1-716138

e-mail: cfsc@malawi.net

Web site: www.cfscmalawi.org

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The Participation of the Church in the 2009 General Elections

1. Introduction

Malawi as a multi ethno-religious state has been peaceful and free in its own right to the extent that it is generally known as the “*Warm Heart of Africa.*” Following its history, the ethno-religious differences were somewhat suppressed so that people identified themselves only as Malawians during the one party rule. At this time this ethno-religious identity did not have an obvious influence on politics because of the then regime which did not allow and give space for people to grow ethnically and religiously. During this period one unfortunate religious group known as the Jehova’s Witness was expelled from the country because its faith practices contravened or threatened the then Dr. Kamuzu Banda government. It was not until 1994 when Malawians through a referendum voted and opted for a change of government from the one party rule to the multi party system of government. The referendum vote gave birth to the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections which, for the first time, showed how the ethnic differences had been lurking underneath waiting to surface. However, the referendum on multiparty politics did not present a challenge for people in terms of aligning themselves ethnically or religiously since the only issue at stake was to change the status quo - autocratic system of government.

Since the referendum, Malawi’s politics have been very dynamic. Its first General Elections in 1994 marked a new era and a roadmap to the taste of democracy and its challenges. Malawian society became very excited about this achievement where all people were called to participate in the process of democratization and development. The people’s voices from the referendum momentum continued to guide this process. The first term in office by the first multiparty era president, Bakili Muluzi, was generally perceived to be successful. Though most people did not understand the principles of democracy, the new dispensation offered them an opportunity to contribute to the nation’s development in their own way. However, this enthusiasm did not take long to fade away before things started to change for the worse towards the beginning of the second term of office, apparently because there was gross misuse of the newly founded freedoms and resources.

During the second multi party General Elections in 1999 people had explored other possibilities of aligning themselves and the ethno-religious affiliation took centre stage and shaped the political agenda. Precisely, in the run up to these elections, the ethno-religious factor bordered on regional lines and it featured highly in political campaigns so much so that people in the northern region of Malawi demonstrated and vented their frustration on people from the southern region where a Muslim president won the polls.

The 2004 General Elections saw the growing rift between ethno-religious groups which greatly influenced the voting patterns. One would say that these elections were region-based where people voted for candidates because they came from their regions. In the

buildup to these elections the then state president, Bakili Muluzi attempted to secure a third or an open bid which was foiled by the pressure from faith communities. As an immediate remedy, he handpicked the incumbent president who had his own party to be the presidential candidate. The elections went in favour of the United Democratic Front (UDF) though substantially the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the Mgwirizano Coalition allegedly claimed victory over the polls. It did take long before the President Bingu quit the UDF party and formed his own political party. Having campaigned vigorously for Bingu, the UDF party felt cheated and they are still aggrieved to this day at his development.

Today, Malawi faces its 4th General Elections on the 19th of May 2009 which are most historic. The Malawi Electoral Commission has confirmed seven presidential candidates and about one thousand aspiring members of parliament both women and men. At both levels, some candidates are party affiliates while others are independents. For the first time in the history of Malawi, we have a woman presidential candidate whose running mate is also a woman and another woman running mate from the current ruling party.¹ The forthcoming elections are historic and will closely be contested by all but chiefly by the three major political parties: **The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the United Democratic Front (UDF)**. The buildup to this event has shown that these elections carry the potential for possible conflicts. The reasons for this development are rooted in the history of these political parties as analyzed below.

1.1 The Aftermath of the 2004 General Elections

The unresolved 2004 claim that the Malawi Congress Party and the Mgwirizano Coalition had won the elections but that the UDF party rigged the electoral process and eventually emerged winner. Though technically the complainant presented the case before the courts it was turned down because of the 48-hour rule, but substantially the public felt that the MCP had a valid case at hand. Based on this case study, all contesting parties are trying to ensure that the elections are not rigged this year. This can be seen from each party's campaign mode.

1.2 The Third Term Bid By Muluzi

The failure by the former president to secure a third term or open term of office compelled him to choose Bingu as presidential candidate from outside the UDF ranks. The general perception at the time was that Bingu was largely seen as someone whom Muluzi could control and still rule from behind. Contrary to this arrangement, Bingu defected from the UDF to form his own political party and this development still haunts the UDF party's leadership and its supporters. There is growing awareness that the former president's insistence to come back to power is primarily to remove the

¹ The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) currently at the helm of government was formed by the incumbent President Bingu after he had left the United Democratic Front (UDF), a party that sponsored him into power during the 2004 elections. Substantially and logically it is not supposed to be called the "ruling party" because it was formed after another party had already claimed victory over the elections. It is still a hot debate on Malawi's political landscape.

incumbent president from office. Today, the UDF's alliance with MCP is again because the Malawi Electoral Commission rejected Muluzi's candidature for the UDF party, indicating that he had already served two consecutive terms of office.

1.3 Loss of Confidence in the Judiciary

The weakening trust and loss of confidence in the judiciary system has been a major cause of concern. It is only the 1994 poll results that were not disputed in a court of law. But the rest of the elections have been referred to courts for attention and redress. Since all the cases so far handled by the courts have been in the favour of government and unfair to the opposition, it is likely that those aggrieved this time may not go to the courts but seek other means of redress such as *not recognizing government, conflicting with government* and also push for a *government of national unity* as modeled by Kenya and Zimbabwe.

1.4 The lack of implementation of section 65

The failure to implement section 65 of the Malawi Constitution is a potentially cause of tension between political parties and their followers. It was expected to follow that after the Supreme Court's ruling on the validity of this number, the Speaker of the National Assembly should have acted on those who had crossed the floor. The Section says, "*The Speaker shall declare vacant the seat of any member of the National Assembly who was, at the time of his or her election, a member of one political party represented in the National Assembly, other than by that member alone but who has voluntarily ceased to be a member of that party or has joined another political party represented in the National Assembly, or has joined any other political party, or association or organization whose objectives or activities are political in nature.*" This section targeted a number of MPs who crossed the floor by also defecting from the UDF party that sponsored them into the National Assembly to the newly formed DPP of Dr. Bingu. Following the provision for court injunctions, this section has not been implemented and this situation foretells the same reality should any of the major parties win with a minority government.

1.5 Ethnicity and Regionalism

The widening gap on the ethno-religious and regional divide propelled by top political leadership remains a challenge for all Malawians. The Malawi nation is increasingly becoming a place where people have identified themselves ethnically, religiously or regionally. The ethno-religious and regional alliances have threatened the very foundation and fabrics of a country that is supposed to remain as one nation. Some church institutions² have unfortunately also taken sides with certain political parties to the

² The Nkhoma/Livingstonia Synod Conflict of the Church of Central African Presyterian, CCAP over boundary issues has been very much part of the public's daily concern. It is believed that the Nkhoma synod is pro opposition and the Livingstonia one is pro government. To deal with this rivalry, the Nkhoma synod has been drumming up support for MCP in order to indirectly get rid of the DPP government that supports the Livingstonia synod.

extent that the church conflicts have become a source of conflict between political parties.

2.0 The Church's Contribution to Peaceful, Fair and Free Elections.

It is appalling to state that generally elections have never been free and fair in most of African countries, why? There is so much greed for power; as one would tend to believe that the only way to succession in any leadership is through death. Following this concern, the Church in Malawi has been involved in a number of election-related activities as outlined below:

2.1 The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace

During this year's Lenten period, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), one of the Civil Society Organizations accredited by the Malawi Electoral Commission to conduct civic and voter education produced a letter called "**CHOOSING LIFE, Preparation for 2009 Elections**" whose objective is to sensitize the voters on quality leadership. CCJP works through its wider structures that exist in Malawi because all the administrative districts are covered by its seven diocesan offices.

2.1.1 Monitoring voter registration

Through its structures, the commission mobilized eligible voters to go and register their names at the registration centres. This exercise involved checking the number of people registered across the country.

Because of this contribution, the Malawi Electoral Commission officially recorded 5.9 million people who had registered a figure relatively high as compared to last General Election which registered 5.7 million people. By region, the Southern region registered 2,639,783 followed by the Central and Northern regions at 2,463,703 and 827, 7777 respectively.

The Commission also monitored the 50-50 campaign programme adopted by SADC heads of state and government meeting by the Malawi government in 1997. The objective of this campaign is to increase the participation of women in decision making positions and politics. Through the ministry of Women and Child Development, this assignment is coordinated by the NGO Gender Coordinating Network. The commission's involvement ensures women's support by Civil Society Organisations at various leadership levels.

Successes

This year's voter registration has been successful because there are more people who registered than in 2004 and the previous elections. There has been an increase in the number of women aspiring for key positions.

Challenges of this exercise

While striving to be non partisan, the perception of different political parties with regard to the way the commission conducted its activities remained a major challenge.

The frequent breakdowns of voter registration materials such as cameras, the change of dates, delayed funding for voter and civic education, the distribution of materials to

various centres and people registering more than once were some of the challenges the commission faced.

2.2 The Church and Society Programme of the CCAP Church

The CCAP Church and Society Programme has produced a letter that analyses quality and visionary leadership. It has been read in different congregations to empower the voters.

2.3 The Religious Mother Bodies National Conference

The Religious mother bodies - **Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM), the Malawi Council of Churches (MCC), the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM), Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) Quadriya Muslim Association of Malawi (QMAM)** organized a national conference whose objective was to assess their contribution and how they could prepare themselves to meaningfully contribute to the free, fair and peaceful elections. They have also organized another conference on the same agenda to be held from 4th – 7th May 2009.

Related to the above, different faith communities have been holding prayers in readiness for the elections. These include the youth of the Evangelical Association of Malawi and Malawi Council of Churches.

2.4 The Centre For Social Concern' Contribution to the Elections

The Centre For Social Concern in collaboration in various faith communities has significantly contributed to the forthcoming elections - *free, fair, and peaceful elections*. In its Inter Religious Dialogue programme that seeks to promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence among different religious communities, the Centre facilitated the adoption of the Code of Conduct for the faith leaders, traditional leaders and political party leaders initially in one of the administrative districts in the southern region of Malawi – Mangochi. This district is one of the hot spots for religious and political conflicts. There has been a generalization that people in this district belong to same ethnic group, religion and political party. The different stakeholders have started feeling and enjoying the fruits of this activity even before the actual polling day. This code of conduct has been rolled out to other places such as Lilongwe district where the centre has also carried out the same reflection with faith communities and other leaders named above. (*see appendix 1, Mangochi Code of Conduct*)

Appendix 1.

MANGOCHI DISTRICT PEACE COMMITTEMENT

Code of Conduct for Peace building among Ethnic Groups, Faith Communities and Political Parties in Mangochi District

PREAMBLE

Our shared will and desire to contribute to peace building efforts in Mangochi District

We, as different people in the Mangochi Interfaith Project and other organizations representing ethnic groups, faith communities and political parties would like to contribute and promote peace building efforts in order to prevent any form of violence in our district before, during and after the forthcoming elections.

As representatives of the group mentioned above, we would like to demonstrate our commitment by upholding the key values and principles of tolerance, respect for diversity and love for peace. We recognize that in upholding these values we will advance the common good of the people of Mangochi and acknowledge our responsibility to love our neighbour, family and God.

Therefore, this code of conduct does not in any way nullify any previous peace building initiatives established in goodwill prior it. However, it will focus on what people perceive as issues that often cause conflicts in the district.

VALUES

1. The guiding principle for the code of conduct is **INCLUSIVENESS**, meaning that membership should include everyone involved in the district
2. All ethnic groups, faith communities and political parties should commit themselves to the Code of Conduct, to ensure equal and accurate representation.
3. Dialogue between ethnic groups, faith communities and political parties is encouraged at all levels to ensure the swift prevention and resolution of conflicts in the district.
4. Leaders of ethnic groups, faith communities and political parties are encouraged to lead by example in preventing any form of violence.

PROCEDURE FOR CODE OF CONDUCT

The procedure for the intended code of conduct to be adopted by all ethnic groups, faith communities and political parties in Mangochi will include the following groups committing themselves:

A. COMMITMENT OF FAITH COMMUNITIES

We, members of the faith community, are constantly reminded of our responsibility through our Holy Books to serve the people both as spiritual and social beings. In this respect we believe it to be necessary that, apart from offering spiritual support to them, we also support them with their social needs and aspirations. We also recognise that we are obliged to ensure that the people of Mangochi enjoy their God given rights and freedoms without any hindrance. Because of our obligation we have often commented on political, social and economic developments in our district. The objective of our involvement is to ensure that every human being is given the dignity and peace they deserve. Therefore, as faith communities of Mangochi District, we commit ourselves:

1. To maintain a neutral stance in the implementation of our various programmes. As faith communities we should not intervene in the political affairs by way of indicating to people the preferred political parties or candidates, using words with hidden meanings. Instead, as an interfaith group we should strive to bring peace among different political parties;
2. To avoid using inflammatory or provocative language during our sermons. Instead we should take the opportunity to constantly preach messages of love, peace and unity to members of our communities and live by what we preach. This will make people of different affiliations trust us;
3. To not align ourselves with any political party or parties. We should avoid in all ways to promote the interests of political parties through words, actions or non-verbal communication. Further to this, we should avoid taking bribes which is one of the methods people use to entice others to promote their agendas or goals;
4. To shed light on issues involving any political party in the district without any malice, fear or favour, and in an objective and constructive manner that will generally be seen as in the interest of district-building and democracy consolidation;
5. To refrain from dividing the people of Mangochi on the basis of religion, tribe, region, or any other social or political factor by way of practising discrimination and preaching or acting in a manner that will promote division on the basis of these factors. We should see to it that national issues with negative elements should not influence our local scene in the district;

6. To monitor our religious youth, always encouraging them to use dialogue and not violence when disagreements arise among ethnic groups, faith communities and political parties in Mangochi before, during and after the elections;
7. To not get involved in a media war with Government or any political party, and to strive to resolve any differences that may arise through dialogue. As members of an interfaith grouping, we should use certain radio stations such Radio Dzimwe, Radio Islam, Radio Maria to broadcast the necessary and neutral information to our listeners. To achieve this, there is need to create deliberate programmes that will require airtime and other necessities;
8. To encourage the media to be constantly neutral in their coverage on political news items. They should apply a faith dimension which entails that any communication should bring justice to all groups of people;
9. To advance the involvement and participation of women in civic education on matters to do with mitigation of conflicts. This agenda reminds and highlights the fact that women and children are often the victims of violent conflict situations;
10. To ensure that the information which we have at hand is given to all among our religious congregation.

B. COMMITMENT OF ETHNIC GROUPS (traditional leaders)

We, the traditional leaders of Mangochi District play a very significant role in democratic dispensation of Malawi today. Knowing that democracy is about pluralism, today we perform our duties among people who belong to different political parties, religions, tribes and many other distinguishing factors. This makes our position today to be more challenging than before. We find ourselves caught between our loyalty towards the government of the day and our neutral status, especially in times of elections. In order to effectively serve our people impartially, to avoid bringing divisions among them and to contribute towards the consolidation of peace in Mangochi District, we humbly urge our politicians not to hold party meetings without following existing agreements. As leaders of ethnic groups we commit ourselves:

11. To stop promoting the interests and values of any political party through words, actions or non-verbal communication, but rather to act as builders of unity, peace and reconciliation among the people;
12. To permit all political parties to hold political party meetings or any other political event in our areas, provided that the appropriate authorities are officially notified;

13. To stop dividing the people of our areas on the basis of religion, tribe, region, or any other social or political factors, by way of practising discrimination and preaching or acting in a manner that will promote division on the basis of these factors;
14. To refrain from receiving any bribes including those bribes aimed at making us compromise our neutral stance as ethnic leaders of the district;
15. To resist the temptation of being used in advancing the political interests and values of any political party.

C. COMMITMENT OF POLITICAL PARTIES

We, the political parties recognize the outstanding role we play towards the consolidation of democracy in Mangochi District. We are obliged to provide the platform where people who share similar political views and opinions meet to advance their common interests. We are called to promote the participation of people in political activities by encouraging especially women to vote; and we conduct public meetings and civic education, thereby bringing awareness to people with regard to political issues. We see our duty in the political arena that makes us an important tool to promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence among the people of Mangochi. To ensure that we contribute to the consolidation of a tolerant political climate we commit ourselves:

16. To encourage and preach messages of tolerance and the true meaning and importance of having different political parties. Further to this, political parties should engage in civic education on the meaning of politics as applied in the Chichewa language “**Ndale**”;
17. To refrain from commenting or explaining other political parties agendas and manifestos. In this regard, all political parties shall stick to their agendas or manifestos and communicate them to their people in their own fashion without insulting or putting down other parties;
18. To ensure that all political parties enjoy equal rights to announce the dates, places, and durations of their public meetings, rallies, marches, or any other public events, provided that they follow the existing procedures;
19. To refrain from holding any political event at a place too close to where another party has already arranged to hold a meeting on the same date and at the same time;
20. To refrain from preaching hate messages at community gatherings and funerals. All political parties should ensure that the message is relevant to the occasion and not taking advantage of it;

21. To stop inciting violence in any way and, in particular, to stop using all language that is calculated or likely to incite violence or hatred at any political meeting or through the print media or pamphlets or any anonymous or open information. Instead we should engage in dialogue as a means to resolve any dispute that may ensue, and to stop using all forms of violence or intimidation as a means for resolving conflicts;
22. To cooperate fully with the Police in investigating alleged cases of violence and in the apprehension of individuals reasonably suspected of being perpetrators of violence. It is expected that the police shall also take a neutral stance in dealing with all these cases;
23. To prevent our members from carrying or displaying weapons when attending political meetings, rallies or such other functions. Usually the presence of such implements are often associated with inciting violence, intimidating, threatening, killing or injuring other people with different beliefs, words, writings or actions;
24. To respect symbols, writings and slogans of other political parties which contribute to their objectives of the political welfare;
25. To stop compelling by force, threats, bribes or promises, any person to attend, participate, contribute or join any political party against his or her will, or to resign from or make false allegations about another party or party official(s);
26. To never interfere with any official or representative of any other political party, or with any party's message to contact or address any individual or group of persons;
27. To stop using public resources to promote the interests of any political party or parties;
28. To recognize the authority of the Malawi Electoral Commission as the legal body to conduct national elections and to use proper channels in challenging its decisions if need be;
29. To support adequate female representation within our party structures and advance their involvement and participation in civic education.

Conclusion

30. We all are called to enforce the compliance of this document among ourselves and to publicly and repeatedly condemn ethno-religious and political violence in our district. To ensure this commitment within our groups, we shall design proper mechanisms on how non-compliance of this agreement can be dealt with.

SIGNATURES:

1. Mangochi District Commissioner

Name _____ Sign _____ Date _____

2. Representative for Muslims

Name _____ Sign _____ Date _____

3. Representative for Christians

Name _____ Sign _____ Date _____

4. Representative of all political parties in the district

Name _____ Sign _____ Date _____

